



Episode 25—Disaster Assistance from USDA

September 13, 2021

Announcer:

The Alabama Crops Report Podcast, your trusted information source for Alabama agriculture.

Dr. Amanda Shear:

Hello everyone. And welcome to the Alabama Crops Report Podcast I'm Dr. Amanda Shear an extension Plant Pathologist.

Dr. Adam Rabonowitz:

And I'm Dr. Adam Rabinowitz, an extension Economist. I'll introduce our guests today. We actually have two guests with us from the USDA Farm Service Agency. The first is Shnequie Bowman-Greene. She is a chief Agricultural Program Specialist with FSA, and the second is Sydney Griffin, who is an Agricultural Program Specialist. Welcome Sydney and Shnequie.

Shnequie Bowman-Greene:

Glad to be here today. Thank you.

Sydney Griffin:

Thanks for having us.

Dr. Adam Rabonowitz:

Thank you for being here. We're really excited to have you here today because as we're approaching now, we're in September and we know that natural disasters in particular hurricanes and tropical storms, we're in the peak of that season. We start to think about what happens for our agricultural producers when those storms hit. It's certainly an unfortunate topic to have to be discussing, but we hope to bring some light today in terms of what producers need to do after a storm when thinking about assessment and recovery. So Shnequie and Sydney, tell us a little bit about what the role an FSA has when disasters affect agricultural crop production.

Shnequie Bowman-Greene:

When disaster affect agriculture, our role at FSA is to basically assess the damage. We have a software where the county office can load the damage assessments. They have to actually... As soon as that disaster, you go out and do an assessment, come back, load that information so that we can keep track of the damage that is out there. And software is actually called STORM. It's a Systematic Tracking Optimal Risk Management software for stores. And they load those loss assessment reports into that STORM software. And it basically track the disaster. And the major role, I guess, the purpose of tracking this is for disaster designation. So if we have one or more crops with the 30% or greater laws, FSA can forward that information up to the secretary of Ag and request for a secretary of designation.

Shnequie Bowman-Greene:

And that request can come from the governor, that request can come from a producer, a tribal member, an emergency member, or anyone agricultural member. Any committee such as those, they can come from anyone requesting for a secretary designation. And we get that information we gather our loss assessment, our reports from our county offices and our county emergency boards. And we fought that information up any county or any commodity with the 30% of greater loss, basically qualifies for a declaration, a secretary of designation declaration. And so that's Alabama... Well, not Alabama, but FSAs role. And when it comes to loss or disasters within the state, I think they play a major role when it comes to those disasters and gathering that information and getting that declaration declared for the state.

Dr. Adam Rabonowitz:

Absolutely, you mentioned the loss assessment reports. Can you tell our listeners a little bit about what goes into developing those and the type of information that needs to be gathered to file that report?

Shnequie Bowman-Greene:

That loss assessment report is basically what it says. It's an assessment of loss for that county and the county emergency board, or I would say even the county executive director and one of our local county offices can actually go out to that site that could be on a farm or anywhere that disaster has been declared in that county, or has basically hit in that county and they'll go out and they gather that disaster information. It could be the crop loss, it could be lost stock, it could be property loss and they'll load the start date of that disaster, the end date of that disaster, the areas of the county that it was affected.

Shnequie Bowman-Greene:

And basically... You know that they yield of planet acres and things like that versus the acres that was lost by a particular commodity. All that information is gathered on what we call a loss assessment report. And that report is then saved in that software so that we can pull that information and forward it to Washington DC. And that loss assessment report helps Washington, helps the deputy administrator farm program declare and helped with us getting those secretary designation declared. But basically we gathered that information and we load that information on those loss assessment reports.

Dr. Amanda Shear:

So just kind of staying on the topic of declaring a disaster declaration. I remember back from October, 2018 after hurricane Michael hit, and it devastated not only Florida and Georgia, but also Alabama. And I believe there was actually disaster declarations for Geneva, Houston, Henry, and mobile counties in Alabama. So when that happens, what programs become available to crop producers in those areas that they might find helpful to their recovery efforts?

Shnequie Bowman-Greene:

When that disaster hit, and we have a secretary of designation that's declared, it makes all the producers that are eligible in that county area and contiguous counties eligible for our emergency loans. We do have a lot of disaster programs that they qualify for and they don't even have to have a declaration for those programs such that our Emergency Conservation Program, we have Emergency Forest Restoration Program. We have other programs like our Tree Assistance Program and things like that. And we have what they call ad hoc programs and emergency [inaudible 00:09:04] programs.

Shnequie Bowman-Greene:

And I'll let Sydney discuss some of those ad hoc programs that once a declaration is declared, there are approvals available that they may qualify that is not an everyday program that FSA such as our Emergency Conservation or Emergency Forest Restoration Program. Once again, once that decoration is declared our emergency loans become available for those producers that had a loss of 30% or greater or damaged, or in that county. I would say if they're in that county, they're eligible. If they're in that county, that was declared a declaration, they're eligible. If they're contiguous in a contiguous county, they are eligible. All right Sydney, if you could just talk about some of the other disaster programs that you all cover in your division as well.

Sydney Griffin:

Thank you Shnequie. So one of the key points that I think everyone has addressed so far has been, that we're gathering the information and Shnequie started showing how the secretarial disaster declarations or these presidential disaster declarations, how they open up some programs. And Congress set aside some money, permanently funded, several disaster programs [inaudible 00:10:17], and the programs are permanent programs. Things like NAP, TAP, ELAP and we like our [inaudible 00:10:26]. So for those of you who aren't too familiar, NAP will be our Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program. We have a Livestock Indemnity Program

or LIP, the ELAP will be that Emergency Assistance for Livestock Honeybee and Farm-raised Fish Programs. We have TAP, which is our Trade Assistance Program. So some of those programs like Shnequie had already briefly touched on are permanently funded. So when hurricane Michael came through in 2018, there were some ad hoc disaster programs.

Sydney Griffin:

The one that our area was most able to benefit from would have been the WHIP+ Program and it wasn't ad hoc disaster program. I mean that the signup is not going on right now, but it helped with wildfires and hurricanes in the area. And so when we had these ad hoc disaster programs, the counties that had the secretarial disaster designations or declarations, they didn't have to provide any supporting documentation that the disaster event or the weather event, the hurricane actually occurred, or that it caused damage in their county. So that was a benefit.

Sydney Griffin:

Unfortunately, those counties that were contiguous and didn't have this primary disaster designation, those producers were required to provide some additional supporting documentation to the county committee satisfaction. And it's one of those cases where the signup was actually taking place after the event actually occurred. So with these ad hoc disaster programs, you never really know what is going to be coming down the pipeline. And so, like Shnequie was saying that's one of the benefits of FSA trying to record and document as much data as we can, when these disaster events occur. Because the more information we can provide to the deputy administrator form programs, the more likely we are to trigger some ad hoc disaster programs or be able to help counties and make payments for these different disaster events.

Dr. Adam Rabonowitz:

So that's really interesting. You mentioned NAP, and that's one of the programs that does require advanced sign up. And there's often the, depending on the cause of loss that 15 day reporting period that needs to occur similar to crop insurance through RMA. But then when you have some of these emergency programs, those may actually open up after the event or a [inaudible 00:13:06] WHIP+ where it's actually not even established until after the event occurs. And so what can our producers do in those cases where they may not know exactly what opportunities there are in the future to make sure that they have the proper documentation of their loss?

Sydney Griffin:

Sure. Right now, one of the tools that we have available to producers is found on our farmers.gov website. Okay. We have a disaster assistance discovery tool, and it provides some attic Lantz, fact sheets. So you could go in and actually choose which disaster event? Where you are physically located, state, county, and it'll kind of help you choose which type of programs or at least give you an idea of the programs that FSA has that might offer some benefits after you've suffered these weather events. But some of the information that you may need and as you brought up Adam, when it's after the fact like with our WIP plus program, one of the chief complaints or

concerns that our producers expressed in the agency is that oftentimes it's difficult to provide documentation because two years later, they may or may not, especially for a program that didn't exist, right.

Sydney Griffin:

They didn't know. So they didn't have a lot of information to provide in these contiguous counties. So some of the things that our county committees got together and discussed and decided would be helpful when making those types of determinations would be, if you have any photographic evidence, especially the photographs have date stamps, or if you're using your cell phones and they have that information stored with the dates and the times after the event. I mean, most of us are going to kind of go out and try to survey the damage as soon as we're able. So those photographs are definitely helpful, any comic to logical data. In other words, you need weather data that the producers have for that event. And when we're saying weather data, we're talking about things like reliable information. Usually it's pretty easily obtained. Some of the things that I recall seeing would be, I think there's some research NRCS research centers or extension centers that had documented rainfall for the area.

Sydney Griffin:

They did that on basically on a daily basis. So that information was pretty helpful for some producers. We're not talking about your personal rain gauge. I mean, if you're like me, you may have forgotten to pour it out. So things like looking at there's Noah, for the hurricane, weather report for your area, the national weather service has some documentation out there. Any of that reliable comments, ecological data, I think in our CS may even have some maps and some weather stations. If they could give you some information on, we had people who had Scouts that had gone out and check their fields after the disaster event. So those reports, that information was always helpful. NAP and RMA, I mean, if you already have crop insurance, you already had NAP, and you filed a report, then that of course was helpful, but maybe you didn't have coverage on your crop, but maybe your neighbor did.

Sydney Griffin:

So if you're aware of that and someone went out and inspected their production loss or their crop or their damage, then you know, someone that's right there besides you, and they've got some information where it was reported, or someone performed an inspection, then obviously you could provide that. There were some things where we were trying to look at, loss adjuster reports, maybe you didn't get an indemnity from your crop insurance agent, but somebody was actually out there and they looked at the damage, or maybe you didn't have any insurance and nobody else is right there next to you. So trying to make sure verify that crop was actually in the field at the time of the disaster event.

Sydney Griffin:

So there's some things like if we think about your sales receipts maybe, or delivery receipts, gen, or warehouse receipts reports like bail listings. Those things would show when your crop was out of the field. So it would help support whether or not the crop was still out there at the time of the disaster event. So anything that you could

think of. So that's going into hurricane season now and we've had Ida, I don't know what's going on with Larry right now, out in the Gulf, but anything you can think of to record you never know when we may have a program and it might become beneficial.

Dr. Adam Rabonowitz:

It really comes down to the fundamentals of record keeping. We often talk about that as economists from a financial standpoint, but even just about what actually has occurred after a storm, as you enter that recovery phase, keeping good records of what that impact was, can help open that availability to some of these programs. One other program I wanted to touch on real quick with Shnequie, she mentioned that the Emergency Conservation Program. And I think about the potential for debris removal with that program. And what should producers be thinking about it at the point that they may have that debris? Should they be contacting FSA before actually doing any type of cleanup?

Shnequie Bowman-Greene:

Yes, sir. That's the first thing they want to do before any debris removal or any fence and repairs. Now, of course, during an emergency and you have last thought, you may have to repair that fence and you may have to get what we call a waiver for starting to practice prior to your approval. But the first thing you want to do is contact your local FSA office, contact that FSA office, let them know that you have a disaster out there because we have what they call of course, FSA or a TSP a Technical Service Providers, such as NRCS or Alabama forestry. Of course, we want to do what they call a site visit first.

Shnequie Bowman-Greene:

Go out there and perform that site visit, go visit, do that assessment of that loss on that property and do what they call environmental assessment of that area, because if they perform that cleanup or start the cleanup of debris removal or fencing, or any of that grading and shaping, that qualifies up under ECP. If they start that practice prior to approval, they can't be denied. So I recommend that as soon as they notice damage to notify their local FSA office. Once again, take as many pictures as Sydney stated earlier as possible, but visit that FSA office before any debris removal, that way we can get out there and do that assessment and go from there and help our producers start their cleanup.

Dr. Amanda Shear:

Shnequie and Sydney, I'm basically going to kind of simplify this here, just from what I've heard, both of you talk about. It's almost like if you're getting into an auto accident, or if damage happens to your home, you want to document all those losses as soon as you can or anything that happens. So, as soon as you get into an auto accident, you take out your phone, you take pictures of the scene, the surrounding area, and that case you contact your insurance agent. But in this case definitely contact your local FSA office. And if you have a crop insurance agent contact them, a lot of times, extension can also help give you advice on things.

Dr. Amanda Shear:

So your local regional extension agent could probably give you some advice there. Extension specialists even get contacted after major events like that to ask, "Well, what should I do with my crop?" "How should I manage this to maximize my yield?" And so sometimes even just one of us coming out there, we can also help give a little bit of a boost to your case as well, but really contacting your local FSA office is really important. And I did have a question for Sydney too, just before we start to wrap up, you mentioned that there will always be some deadlines for like the WHIP program, the deadline to sign up for that obviously for hurricane Michael has passed, where can producers find that information that's easy to access and keep on top of those deadlines of when they need to submit paperwork.

Sydney Griffin:

[inaudible 00:21:53] there is the farmers.gov website. Obviously you could call your local county office. And right now, because of the pandemic, we are in Alabama, our staff is limited. So what we're trying to do is maximize the resources that we have. In other words, if we can fax that to you, if we can email it to you, if we can put it in snail mail and get those applications to you that's what we're trying to do. If we have to put a box outside the window or have a drive-up window at a county office to try to help our producers and they're used to that face to face contact, just letting them know they just because we're going through that right now doesn't mean that we can't still service or take these applications. Also thinking about producers that may be displaced, right?

Sydney Griffin:

So especially some of those that are really hard hit. Maybe you can't physically get to your local county FSA office, maybe those phone lines are down and you're worried about missing a deadline, or you're having to take care of other things that are related to these events. You can always sign onto farmer psych up, right? And our disaster tool, a lot of the documents are available online. However, if you're somewhere else and you're in another county or another city or state, you can go to that FSA office, whichever FSA office is closest to you, and they can take the same documentation at every county office. We have that access now so that we can provide customer service nationwide. So they may take the application for you or print out the documentation you need and provide it to you there. And you may personally mail it or scan it or send it in, or they may take it from you and mail it on your behalf or scan it or email it to us.

Sydney Griffin:

It's your local county office. So you're not limited if you can't access the county that you're used to doing business with because of some of these disasters. We're trying, like I said, trying to maximize the use of technology as much as possible. And when and out, call us, we'll print it and we'll stick it to you in the mail. But right now our partnerships with extension, our partnerships with a lot of our stakeholders, they help try to advertise these programs and these deadlines as much as possible. For example, in farmers.gov right now, hopefully our producers will see that there's a [inaudible 00:24:25] to sign up going on or some COVID relief being offered and the deadline that they have listed out there that was just recently announced is October 12th, 2021.

Sydney Griffin:

If you can't call us, we have it online. And just emphasize that if you can't deal with who you're used to talking to you in your local county office, then wherever you happen to be, there should be another FSA office there that can assist you with signing up or finding out about these deadlines.

Dr. Adam Rabonowitz:

This has been really informative. I really appreciate all of this great information and great programs that you're helping manage for FSA and make available for producers. I'll put in a plug as well for just aces.edu, our own extension website. We often put forth a lot of this information too regarding various programs and deadlines and try to put some relevance to sometimes some of the national fact sheets and national programs bring up some of that relevance directly to Alabama. So certainly encourage our listeners to check out farmers.gov, check out aces.edu as well.

Dr. Amanda Shear:

And just to add to that, definitely subscribed to our Alabama Crops Report newsletter. So it's a companion to this podcast. And a lot of times what we talk about in the podcast, we'll also have little blips in that newsletter. It's a biweekly newsletter. I know some of our listeners have heard this before, but it's easy. You just go to aces.edu. And if you type in the search bar for the newsletter, find it and sign up for it. You just need to put your name and email and we won't spam you I promise. But be careful the first couple ones might go to your junk folder. So if you don't see it, it's probably hanging out in your spam folder. So that's my last little plug. But Adam and I really appreciate both Shnequie Bowman-Greene and Sydney Griffin from the USDA farm service agency Alabama state office for joining us today on this podcast. And we really would like to talk to you guys again, if you have any other information for our producers.

Shnequie Bowman-Greene:

The only information that I have currently is just reach out to your local FSA office, get to know your local agencies. You can sign up for their local, the FSA newsletter as well. And a lot of you, if there's a disaster, certain disasters for that county, that information will be advertised on the local newsletter. So if there's an ECP sign up, that's going on in black county, of course that'd be on their newsletter. So contact their local FSA office, sign up for their newsletters so that you can get information of the programs that are going on in that county as well. So that's one of the things that I recommend all producers to do is get to know their local county FSA office.

Dr. Adam Rabonowitz:

Okay. Thank you, Shnequie. Thank you, Sydney. We really do appreciate you being here and thank you to our listeners as well.

Dr. Amanda Shear:

Yes. And that ends our time today on the Alabama Crops Report Podcast, as always, if you can ever be of any help to anybody, please don't hesitate to reach out.

Announcer:

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