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## USDA Approves Drought Disaster Declaration for USVI, Opening Emergency Loans to Farmers

**USDA designated St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John as primary natural disaster areas after prolonged drought, allowing eligible farm operators to seek emergency loans for qualifying losses involving equipment, livestock and certain debt refinancing needs.**

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**Cattle stand in a parched St. Croix pasture during the 2015 drought, illustrating the dry conditions that continue to threaten livestock producers and helped prompt the latest USDA disaster declaration. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM.**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has designated St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John as primary natural disaster areas because of prolonged drought, making eligible Virgin Islands farmers and

agricultural producers able to apply for federal emergency loans to recover from qualifying losses.

Governor Albert Bryan Jr., who announced the approval Friday, was notified by USDA on August 20 that the three islands had received the Secretarial drought disaster designation based on conditions documented by the U.S. Drought Monitor. Mr. Bryan formally requested the declaration earlier this month as persistent dry conditions placed increasing pressure on the territory's agricultural sector, particularly livestock producers.

"Our farmers are essential to our food security, our economy and our way of life, and when they are hurting, we have an obligation to do everything we can to help," Governor Bryan said. "That is why I asked the Department of Agriculture to issue this declaration, and I am grateful that the federal government responded to our request. This designation gives our farmers another important resource to help them recover from the impacts of this drought and continue doing the work that feeds and sustains our community."

The disaster designation allows eligible farm operators in the affected areas to apply for emergency loan assistance through the USDA Farm Service Agency. The loans are intended to help agricultural producers recover from qualifying natural-disaster losses and may be used for purposes including replacing essential equipment or livestock, reorganizing farming operations or refinancing certain debts.

Farmers have eight months from the date of the disaster declaration to apply. The Farm Service Agency evaluates applications individually, considering factors including the extent of production losses, available security and the applicant's ability to repay.

"This declaration does not make the drought disappear, but it gives our farmers another tool to withstand its effects," Governor Bryan said. "Our Administration will continue working with our federal partners and our local agricultural community to make sure Virgin Islands farmers know what assistance is available and how to access it."

The designation follows sustained drought conditions across the Virgin Islands. Under USDA criteria, an area can qualify for a drought-related Secretarial disaster designation after experiencing D2 Severe Drought for eight or more consecutive weeks, or D3 Extreme Drought or D4 Exceptional Drought during the growing season.

Mr. Bryan said his administration will work with the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture and federal partners to provide affected producers with information about available assistance and application requirements. Eligible farmers and producers are also being encouraged to contact their local USDA Farm Service Agency office for information about emergency loans and other disaster assistance programs.

"This is exactly why we maintain strong partnerships with the federal government and why we act when our community needs help," Governor Bryan said. "We asked for this declaration on behalf of our farmers, USDA answered that request, and now our focus is making sure the assistance reaches the Virgin Islanders who need it."