



LRO SNAPSHOT

A brief from the Legislative Research Office

April 2026

Wildfire Recovery Resources for Nebraskans

Public and Private Assistance After the 2026 Nebraska Wildfires

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Four major wildfires ignited on March 12, 2026, collectively burning more than 824,000 acres (as of NIFC estimates, late March) across western and central Nebraska — surpassing the state’s previous single-year record of 503,000 acres set in 2012.
- Governor Pillen declared a state of emergency, activated the National Guard, and issued four executive orders: EO 26-06 (burn permit suspension), EO 26-07 (commercial carrier relief), EO 26-08 (extended burn permit suspension through April 10), and EO 26-09 (renewed carrier relief).
- FEMA issued a Fire Management Assistance Declaration (FM5623NE) on March 13, 2026, covering 75 percent of eligible firefighting costs. As of publication, no presidential major disaster declaration for Individual Assistance had been issued.
- USDA activated multiple producer facing disaster programs, including the Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP), Emergency Assistance for Livestock (ELAP), emergency CRP grazing, and the Emergency Conservation Program (ECP).
- Multiple private relief funds and nonprofit organizations are providing direct assistance to displaced households, agricultural producers, and volunteer fire departments.

Background

On March 12, 2026, four major wildfires ignited across western and central Nebraska during a period of extreme heat, sustained drought, and wind gusts exceeding 60 miles per hour. The Morrill Fire — which burned approximately 643,000 acres across Morrill, Garden, Arthur, and Keith counties — became the largest single wildfire in Nebraska’s modern record ([Nebraska Public Media, March 14, 2026](#)). One fatality was confirmed. A second major fire, the Cottonwood Fire, consumed

approximately 129,000 acres south of Interstate 80 near Brady and Gothenburg. Two additional fires — the Road 203 Fire (approximately 36,000 acres near Halsey, managed by federal authorities) and the Anderson Bridge Fire (approximately 17,000 acres west of Valentine) — brought the combined statewide total to more than 824,000 acres as of late March, according to National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) situation reports. (Earlier estimates placed the total above 827,000 acres; NIFC subsequently revised several incident totals downward based on more accurate perimeter mapping.)

BY THE NUMBERS (as of late March 2026)

~824,000 acres burned across four major fires | ~643,000 acres burned by Morrill Fire | 35,000+ cattle displaced | 1 fatality

Governor’s Emergency Actions

Governor Pillen issued an [emergency proclamation](#) on March 13, activating the Nebraska National Guard and deploying state firefighting resources. He followed with a series of executive orders, summarized below (*Office of Governor Pillen; Nebraska Secretary of State EO Index*):

- [EO 26-06 \(March 13\)](#) — Initial statewide burn permit suspension, effective through March 27.
- [EO 26-07 \(March 16\)](#) — Commercial motor carrier relief: waived hours of service restrictions and adjusted maximum load width/weight limits for carriers delivering feed and supplies to affected areas, effective for 14 days.

- [EO 26-08 \(March 25\)](#) — Extended burn permit suspension through April 10, effective March 28.
- [EO 26-09 \(March 25\)](#) — Renewed commercial motor carrier relief, also effective March 28.

A separate [proclamation](#) on March 26 declared emergencies in counties affected by the Morrill, Cottonwood, and Anderson Bridge fires, and NEMA activated the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC). The Rocky Mountain Complex Incident Management Team assumed operational management under state direction.



Federal Assistance Available Now

FEMA Fire Management Assistance (FM5623NE). FEMA issued a Fire Management Assistance Declaration on March 13, 2026, authorizing federal reimbursement of 75 percent of eligible state and local firefighting costs, with the state covering the remaining 25 percent. FMAG is a governmental costsharing program; it does not provide direct payments to individuals or businesses. The Hazard Mitigation Grant Program Post Fire (HMGP-Post Fire), which funds longterm community mitigation projects, may also become available because it is tied to an FMAG declaration ([FEMA, 2026](#); 42 U.S.C. § 5187).

USDA Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP). Compensates producers for livestock deaths above normal mortality or for sales of injured livestock at reduced prices. Producers must file a Notice of Loss with their local FSA office by March 1, 2027, for 2026 calendar year losses, with acceptable documentation ([FSA, March 20, 2026](#)).

USDA Emergency Assistance for Livestock (ELAP). Compensates eligible producers for feed and grazing losses and above normal costs of transporting livestock to feed or hauling feed and water. Notice of Loss and application due to the local FSA office by March 1, 2027 ([FSA, March 20, 2026](#)).

USDA CRP Emergency Haying and Grazing. FSA authorized emergency use of Conservation Reserve Program acres in Nebraska and 13 other states. Emergency haying and grazing is available outside the primary nesting season (PNS). In Nebraska, the PNS runs May 1 through July 15; during the PNS, emergency grazing may continue only at a 50 percent reduced stocking rate and only in counties eligible for the Livestock Forage Disaster Program (LFP). Producers should contact their local FSA office for eligibility, stocking rates, and procedures to donate grazing rights ([FSA, March 20, 2026](#)).

USDA Emergency Conservation Program (ECP). Provides cost share payments of up to 75 percent (or up to 90 percent for beginning, socially disadvantaged, or limited resource producers) for fence restoration, debris removal, and farmland rehabilitation. County level signup periods will be announced; producers may submit applications in advance ([FSA, March 20, 2026](#)).

USDA Emergency Farm Loans. FSA offers direct and guaranteed operating and emergency farm loans for producers unable to secure commercial financing. Eligible uses include replacing essential property, purchasing feed and seed, covering family living expenses, and refinancing farm related debts. ([FSA, March 20, 2026](#)).

NRCS Technical Assistance, EQIP, and EWP. NRCS provides one on one technical assistance for post fire conservation planning on farms, ranches, and working forests. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) offers financial assistance for conservation practices on fire impacted land. The Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) program assists local government sponsors — including Natural Resources Districts, counties, and tribal governments — with debris removal and streambank stabilization. Sponsors must submit a formal request to the NRCS state conservationist within 60 days of the disaster or within 60 days of when access to the sites becomes available ([NRCS, 2026](#)).

Federal Crop Insurance. Producers with risk protection through Federal Crop Insurance must report crop damage to their insurance agent within 72 hours of discovering the damage and follow up in writing within 15 days. For crops covered under FSA's Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP), a Notice of Loss (CCC576) must be filed within 15 days of the loss becoming apparent ([RMA, 2026](#)).

Federal Assistance Contingent on Further Declarations

FEMA Individual Assistance. Individual Assistance — which provides grants and services directly to households for housing repair, personal property replacement, and other disaster caused needs — requires a presidential major disaster declaration. As of publication (April 1, 2026), no such declaration had been issued for this event. Preliminary damage assessments were underway.

NEMA Public Assistance. NEMA's Public Assistance program, which reimburses eligible state, local, tribal, and territorial governments for disaster response and recovery costs, also requires a presidential major disaster or emergency declaration.

SBA Disaster Loans. If a disaster declaration is approved, the U.S. Small Business Administration may offer low-interest disaster loans to homeowners, renters, businesses, and nonprofits. In past Nebraska disaster declarations, SBA loan rates have been as low as 2.813 percent for homeowners with terms up to 30 years ([SBA, 2025](#) — rates from prior NE disaster). **Note:** SBA disaster loans are generally not available to agricultural producers, farmers, or ranchers (except aquaculture enterprises); USDA programs serve that population.

FEDERAL CONTEXT

At the time of publication, FEMA has posted a notice stating that a lapse in federal funding may result in delayed processing of some nondisaster assistance transactions and reduced website updates. Disaster response operations, including the FM5623NE declaration, remained active ([FEMA.gov notice](#) accessed March 31, 2026).



Disaster Assistance at a Glance

Resource	Services / Contact	Who It Helps	Status
FEMA (FM5623NE)	75% firefighting cost reimbursement; potential HMGP-Post Fire mitigation grants	State, local, and tribal governments	Available now
FSA – LIP	Indemnity for livestock deaths above normal mortality	Livestock producers	Available now
FSA – ELAP	Compensation for feed/grazing losses, transport costs	Livestock producers	Available now
FSA – CRP Grazing	Emergency haying/grazing on CRP acres (PNS rules apply)	Eligible livestock producers	Available now
FSA – ECP	Costshare (75–90%) for fencing, debris removal, land rehab	Agricultural landowners	Available now
FSA – CRP Emergency Use	Low interest operating and emergency farm loans	Producers in designated counties	Available now
NRCS - EQIP /EWP	Conservation practices; watershed protection	Producers / local gov’t sponsors	Available now
Crop Insurance	Report losses within 72 hrs; 15day written followup	Insured producers	Available now
FEMA Individual Assistance	Household grants for housing, personal property	Individuals & households	Pending declaration as of 4/1
NEMA Public Assistance	Reimbursement for government response/recovery costs	State/local governments	Pending declaration as of 4/1
SBA Disaster Loans	Low interest loans for homes, businesses, nonprofits (not ag producers)	Homeowners, businesses, non-profits	Pending declaration as of 4/1

Sources: FSA (March 20, 2026); FEMA FM5623NE; NRCS (2026); SBA (2025 prior NE disaster). *Compiled by the Legislative Research Office.*

Nebraska State Resources

Nebraska Emergency Management Agency (NEMA). NEMA activated the SEOC and is coordinating damage assessments, resource deployment, and federal liaison. Contact: 402-471-7421 ([NEMA, 2026](#)).

Nebraska Department of Agriculture (NDA). NDA is serving as a clearinghouse connecting donors and producers needing hay, feed, fencing, equipment, and services. NDA’s Hay and Forage Hotline connects buyers and sellers of forage at no cost. Producers and donors may contact NDA at 1-800-831-0550 ([NDA, 2026](#)).

Nebraska Grazing Exchange. An interactive online map ([nebraskagrazingexchange.com](#)) connecting livestock producers needing grazing with landowners offering available fields. Supported by NRCS.

Nebraska Department of Revenue — Form 425. Property owners whose real property was significantly damaged by a calamity on or after January 1 and before July 1 may file a Report of Damaged Real Property (Form 425) with the county clerk to request reassessment of their property’s taxable value. The filing deadline is July 15. A separate form is required for each parcel. Damage must equal or exceed 20 percent of the improvement’s assessed value ([Neb. Rev. Stat. § 77-1301](#); [NE Dept. of Revenue](#)).

Nebraska Department of Water, Energy, and Environment. Handles questions related to carcass disposal following livestock losses. Contact: 1-877-253-2603 ([NDA disaster resource sheet, 2026](#)).

Nebraska Veterans Aid Fund (NVA). Provides funding for veterans, spouses, and dependents for unexpected expenses including food, clothing, and temporary housing. Information at [veterans.nebraska.gov/nva](#).

Nebraska Forest Service. Assists producers with damage assessment and renovation planning for windbreaks and shelterbelts destroyed by fire. Contact: [nfs.unl.edu](#) or 402-472-2944 ([NDA disaster resource sheet, 2026](#)).

Nebraska Extension. In partnership with FSA and NRCS, Extension scheduled wildfire recovery informational meetings for April 8–10 in Arthur, Brady, and Oshkosh, covering disaster relief programs, grazing options, conservation planning, and mental health support. Online resources are at [disaster.unl.edu](#) ([Nebraska Extension, April 1, 2026](#)).

Readers are encouraged to verify time sensitive details directly with the agencies listed.



Private and Nonprofit Resources

A broad coalition of private organizations mobilized to support wildfire relief. The American Red Cross Nebraska-Iowa Region has served nearly 2,000 meals and distributed over 280 emergency relief supplies as of late March. The Salvation Army provided meal service and on the ground support (*American Red Cross, March 27, 2026*). Response partners have emphasized that financial contributions are the most effective form of public support at this stage and have asked the public not to bring unsolicited material donations to fire stations or response sites (*Omaha Community Foundation, March 2026*). Key organizations include:

- **American Red Cross Nebraskalowa Region** (displaced individuals & families) — shelters, meals, health services, mental health support, and residential damage assessments.
- **Nebraska Cattlemen Disaster Relief Fund** (beef cattle producers) — monetary aid for hay, fencing, and livestock needs.
- **Nebraska Community Foundation – Wildfire Recovery Fund** (impacted communities) — distributed through NCF’s network of county and community affiliates.
- **United Way of Western Nebraska – Fire Relief Fund** (individuals & families) — temporary housing, food, clothing, essential supplies, and recovery needs not covered by FEMA or insurance.
- **Kearney Area Community Foundation – Sandhills Rancher Relief Fund** (wildfire victims in Garden, Morrill, Arthur, Keith, and Grant counties).
- **Legal Aid of Nebraska – Disaster Relief Program** (income eligible individuals & families) — free civil legal assistance, including FEMA appeals, insurance disputes, contractor fraud, and vital document replacement.
- **America’s Lifeline Emergency Response Team (ALERT)** (ranchers) — coordinating hay, livestock supplies, and fencing assistance.
- **Nebraska State Volunteer Firefighters Association** (volunteer fire departments) — helps address equipment, fuel, and gear costs not fully reimbursed by state or federal programs.

DID YOU KNOW?

Emotional distress after a wildfire can emerge weeks, months, or even a year after the event. The Nebraska DHHS Division of Behavioral Health encourages anyone experiencing overwhelming anxiety, constant worry, or difficulty sleeping to reach out for support (*DHHS DBH, March 21, 2026*).

Mental Health and Crisis Support

DHHS’s Division of Behavioral Health has activated crisis counseling through regional providers including Heartland Counseling & Consulting Clinic (serving Ogallala, Gothenburg, Lexington, Brady, McCook, and North Platte) and Human Services Inc. (telecounseling). Key crisis lines:

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** — call, text, or chat 988 for 24/7 mental health crisis support.
- **Disaster Distress Helpline** — call or text 1-800-985-5990 for 24/7 disasterspecific crisis counseling (multilingual; press 2 for Spanish).
- **Nebraska Rural Response Hotline** — 1-800-464-0258 (8 a.m. to 5 p.m. CT, Mon.–Fri.) for financial assistance, legal referrals, disaster relief, and free mental health counseling vouchers (COMHT program). Available in English and Spanish.

Longer-Term Recovery Issues

Recovery from the 2026 wildfires is expected to be a multi-year process. Fence rebuilding alone may take years, and Nebraska Extension has noted that the sandy Sandhills soils pose a particular management challenge: grazing too early could damage root systems and increase wind erosion risk (*Farm Progress, March 2026*). While most burned acreage is unlikely to support normal summer grazing in 2026, Extension researchers also note that with favorable spring and summer moisture, some late summer or fall grazing may be possible in certain pastures.

Legislators and policymakers may wish to monitor several developing areas:

- Whether a presidential major disaster declaration is issued, which would unlock FEMA Individual Assistance, NEMA Public Assistance, and SBA disaster loans.
- The pace and sufficiency of CRP emergency grazing authorizations and ECP cost share signups in affected counties.
- Adequacy of federal, state, and local resources for the recovery effort, including questions about FEMA staffing levels during the current federal funding lapse and the capacity of state and local agencies to administer multiple concurrent relief programs.
- Longterm ecological recovery of Sandhills grasslands and potential need for targeted conservation and land-management assistance.

