



United States Department of Agriculture

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# News Release

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## **USDA ASSISTS WITH HURRICANE KATRINA RELIEF EFFORTS**

### ***USDA Resources Include 30,000 Housing Units and \$50 million in Food Assistance***

WASHINGTON, Sept. 5, 2005- Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns today issued two directives to further meet the food and housing needs of Hurricane Katrina survivors.

Johanns authorized states to pre-load electronic food benefit cards with \$50 worth of assistance, which will enable displaced residents to immediately purchase food even before their application has been processed to receive complete benefits. These cards can then be distributed to displaced residents as they move from shelters to temporary housing. The food stamp program is administered by states and fully funded by USDA. States are being notified of the authorization and urged to take advantage of it.

USDA has earmarked \$50 million dollars to provide emergency food assistance to Hurricane Katrina survivors. USDA is increasing the level of assistance available to current food stamp recipients who were affected by the hurricane, as well as providing assistance to hurricane survivors who have not previously participated in the food stamp program. Additionally, USDA will ensure that schools are able to provide free lunches to students who have been relocated because of the hurricane.

Johanns also directed USDA Rural Development staff to coordinate with the private sector to identify privately owned rental housing nationwide that is available to house displaced residents. The USDA Rural Development program currently has 30,000 available housing units across the country. USDA is coordinating with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and faith-based organizations to match residents left homeless by Hurricane Katrina with these homes and apartments. Eligibility requirements associated with the rural housing program are being waived to expedite the relocation process.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has dedicated the following resources to Hurricane Katrina relief:

- **Personnel Deployed** - USDA has deployed 2,760 Forest Service employees who are trained in rescue and response to large-scale incidents to assist the Federal Emergency Management Agency. These teams have expertise in setting up logistics staging areas, distribution of food products and debris removal. In addition, the Forest Service has devoted aircraft to facilitate the airlift of 325 New York City Fire Department personnel to support the City of New Orleans.
- **Food Assistance** - USDA has delivered or has on the way more than 300 trucks containing over 12 million pounds of food (canned vegetables, fruits, cheese and meats) and baby food and formula products, with truckloads of additional supplies being prepared for delivery to affected communities.
- **Housing Assistance** - To ensure that displaced residents are able to move into safe housing as quickly as possible, USDA has established an expedited placement process that waives maximum income limits, security deposits, credit checks, streamlines month-to-month leasing procedures and institutes telephone background checks. USDA property managers will also be assisting these families by providing them with information on how to access additional government programs and services to assist them, like food stamp benefits.

Additionally, USDA Rural Development has announced a general debt service moratorium for a minimum of 90 days for all housing program borrowers in counties that are included in the Presidential Disaster Declaration issued in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina in the states of Louisiana, Mississippi and

Alabama. This action will help up to 50,000 low-income residents, as they work to rebuild their lives in the aftermath of the hurricane.

- **Community Assistance** - USDA will provide a 90-day moratorium on debt collection on electric, water and community facilities programs in the affected states. These facilities range from rural schools, libraries, childcare, hospitals, medical clinics, assisted living facilities, fire and rescue stations, police stations, community centers and public buildings. USDA has established a team to conduct assessments of these facilities with priority given to the hospitals and nursing home properties and is also assembling teams to go to the region to facilitate grant and loan applications for rebuilding.

Additional information and updates about USDA's hurricane relief efforts are posted daily on the Web site at <http://www.usda.gov/>. For more information about making contributions for disaster assistance go to <http://www.firstgov.gov/> and <http://www.disasterhelp.gov/>.

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