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CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE

A July 18 article incorrectly said that Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.) did not return telephone calls seeking comment on a federal farm program. Cochran's office returned a call early in the preparation of the article but did not return a subsequent one before publication.

No Drought Required For Federal Drought Aid

By Gilbert M. Gaul, Dan Morgan and Sarah Cohen
Washington Post Staff Writers
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CHANDLER, Tex. -- On a clear, cold morning in February 2003, Nico de Boer heard what sounded like a clap of thunder and stepped outside his hillside home for a look. High above the tree line, the 40-year-old dairy farmer saw a trail of smoke curling across the sky -- all that remained of the space shuttle Columbia.

Weeks later, de Boer was startled to learn that he was one of hundreds of East Texas ranchers entitled to up to \$40,000 in disaster compensation from the federal government, even though the nearest debris landed 10 to 20 miles from his cattle.

The money came from the U.S. Department of Agriculture as part of the Livestock Compensation Program, originally intended as a limited helping hand for dairy farmers and ranchers hurt by drought. Hurriedly drafted by the Bush administration in 2002 and expanded by Congress the following year, the relief plan rapidly became an expensive part of the government's sprawling system of entitlements for farmers, which topped \$25 billion last year.

In all, the Livestock Compensation Program cost taxpayers \$1.2 billion during its two years of existence, 2002 and 2003. Of that, \$635 million went to ranchers and dairy farmers in areas where there was moderate drought or none at all, according to an analysis of government records by The Washington Post. None of the ranchers were required to prove they suffered an actual loss. The government simply sent each of them a check based on the number of cattle they owned.

At first, livestock owners were required to be in a county officially suffering a drought to collect the money. But ranchers who weren't eligible complained to their representatives in Washington, and in 2003 Congress dropped that requirement. Ranchers could then get payments for any type of federally declared "disaster." In some cases, USDA administrators prodded employees in the agency's county offices to find qualifying disasters, even if they were two years old or had nothing to do with ranching or farming.

In one county in northern Texas, ranchers collected nearly \$1 million for an ice storm that took place a year and a half before the livestock program was even created. In Washington state, ranchers in one county received \$1.6 million for an earthquake that caused them no damage. In Wisconsin, a winter snowstorm triggered millions of dollars more. For hundreds of ranchers from East Texas to the Louisiana border, the shuttle explosion opened the door to about \$5 million, records show.

John A. Johnson, deputy administrator for farm programs for the USDA, said that initially the program provided meaningful assistance to ranchers in areas suffering from drought. But after Congress loosened the rules, he acknowledged, "what was meant as disaster assistance ended up being given to people who didn't have a need or a loss."

The money doled out for the livestock program was part of more than \$20 billion that taxpayers have given to ranchers and farmers since 1990 to compensate for droughts, hurricanes, floods and other forms of damaging weather. Many of those events caused serious damage. But in some cases, routine storms triggered millions in payments, The Post's investigation found.

"The livestock program was a joke. We had no losses," de Boer said. "I don't know what Congress is thinking sometimes."

Still, while de Boer said he was embarrassed by the \$40,000 check, he added: "If there is money available, you might as well take it. You would be a fool not to."

\$18 a Head

Shortly before the 2002 congressional elections, the Bush administration faced growing pressure from ranchers and politicians in a handful of Western states that were hit hard by drought. Of special political concern to the White House, sources said, was South Dakota, where Republican Rep. John Thune was close to unseating Democratic Sen. Tim Johnson.

The USDA responded with a plan to give ranchers cash payments based on how much livestock they owned. A beef cow would count for \$18; a dairy cow, \$31.50. Lesser payments would be awarded for buffalo and sheep. The maximum an individual rancher could get was \$40,000.

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