FEATURE RELEASE

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Date: February 1, 2008 Release No. MFO-05-08
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Federal Programs Provide Assistance to Landowners for Management Practices

MORGANTOWN, WVa—The U.S. Department of Agriculture provides many support programs that family and individual landowners can use to conserve their working private forest land. These programs fall under the private land stewardship programs offered by different USDA agencies. They provide expert technical advice and often include financial assistance for landowners who use specific management practices. Some programs also offer rental payments to offset income losses due to changes in land use.

These are voluntary programs—the property owner chooses the program that most closely matches their management goals, such as improving wildlife habitat or restoring a wetland. Although the owner chooses which program to enroll in, both the land type and management outcomes must meet certain eligibility requirements that vary depending on the program or combination of programs a landowner pursues. The Natural Resources Conservation Service administers many of the programs, and the U.S. Forest Service and Farm Service Agency manage other programs.

Forest Legacy Program (FLP)

Administered by: U.S. Forest Service

Goal: Encourage protection of privately owned forest land

“The objective of the Forest Legacy program is to identify and protect environmentally important private forest lands threatened with subdivision and development,” said Karen Sykes of the U.S. Forest Service. The program provides a way to ensure that traditional land uses continue to deliver environmental benefits into the future. The program supports a State’s effort to maintain options for forest resource management in the future. Landowner Management Assistance Programs.

Before a State can offer the Forest Legacy Program to forest landowners, the State first conducts an Assessment of Needs. The assessment identifies, describes, and maps areas of the State with exceptional forest and environmental attributes that face development pressure. These geographic areas meet national eligibility criteria and any additional State criteria, which qualifies them as Forest Legacy Areas (FLA). Only forested lands inside designated FLAs are eligible for the Forest Legacy Program.

Forest Legacy Areas contain environmentally important forests that provide one or more significant public values—timber and other forest commodities, scenic vistas, public recreation areas, riparian areas, fish and wildlife habitat, threatened and endangered species, cultural resources, and other ecological values. Forest Legacy Areas also potentially face pressure to be converted to nonforest uses, and may be threatened by the displacement of native vegetation with invasive plants. States can establish additional criteria to refine the selection process for creating FLAs.

Once a State has established an FLA, any private landowner can request to enroll forested land in the program. The submission of applications varies by State, but most States accept applications on a continuous basis. "Once a year, the State agency takes all the applications they have received and ranks them based on the eligibility criteria. The committee further reviews the top applicants, and interviews the landowner[s] to finalize the State's list," Sykes said.

"Each State submits up to three proposals for final ranking by a national team that develops the priority list of projects for the year," said Forest Legacy Specialist Scott Stewart with the U.S. Forest Service.

Eligible land must be primarily forested; however, nonforest land such as cultivated farmland, pasture, grassland, shrub land, open water, and wetlands that make up the composite undeveloped landscape can be included. Nonforested land should make up less than 25 percent of the total area.

Landowners must have a stewardship management plan for the land to qualify for the program. States give program priority to lands that can be effectively protected and managed, have important scenic or recreational values, and are currently forested or are identified to be forested in the stewardship management plan

The Forest Legacy Program functions by acquiring conservation easements from landowners—legal agreements that transfer certain property rights from one party to another. Typically, these easements restrict development and require the landowner to maintain sustainable forestry practices. "The State lead agency holds the conservation easement in perpetuity after the agreement is finalized. The State governor appoints the lead agency when the State enters the program," said Stewart. The landowner retains the remaining interests in the property, including the right to sell the property. However, future owners must abide by the terms and conditions of the conservation easement.

The Forest Legacy Program is a partnership between the U.S. Forest Service and individual States. The program has protected 1.4 million acres of private forest land across the Nation from development. A contact list of Forest Service and State Forest Legacy Program coordinators is available at http://www.fs.fed.us/spf/coop/library/flp_all_contacts.pdf.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

Administered by: Farm Service Agency

Goal: Protect topsoil from erosion

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) provides assistance to landowners with cropland. "The Conservation Reserve Program was created by the Food Security Act of 1985. Under the program, landowners remove highly erodible cropland or marginal pastureland from production, and convert it to native grasses, trees, or other vegetation," said Sherri Butters with the Farm Service Agency.

The program strives to improve the water quality of pond, lake, stream, and river watersheds by reducing water runoff and sedimentation. Landowners can receive additional assistance to replant their acreage in approved cover. The cover planting option makes the program a major contributor in increasing wildlife habitat in many parts of the country. Conservation Reserve Program contracts last for 10 or 15 years.

Through the CRP, landowners receive annual rental payments and cost-share assistance for enrolling eligible land. The program makes yearly rental payments to landowners in exchange for converting highly erodible land from annual crops, such as corn, to grass or tree cover for long-term resource protection. A Maintenance Incentive Payment may also include additional funds to encourage landowners to meet certain maintenance obligations. Cost-share assistance can provide up to 50 percent of the cost associated with planting approved cover on land enrolled in the program.

Enrollment in the CRP can only occur during designated signup periods. However, environmentally desirable land devoted to certain conservation practices may be enrolled at any time under continuous signup. The Farm Service Agency also offers financial incentives for certain continuous signup practices. These incentives can include: cost-share assistance of up to 50 percent to establish approved cover; up to 20 percent of the soil rental rate for windbreaks, grass waterways, filter strips, and riparian buffers; up to $100 per acre for certain practices; and up to 40 percent of the installation costs for certain practices.

Landowners must have owned or operated the land for at least 12 months prior to the close of the CRP signup period to be eligible to enroll in the program. Eligible land is currently defined as cropland that was planted with an agricultural crop during four of the six crop years from 1996 to 2001. The land must also be capable of being planted with a crop under ordinary circumstances using common equipment. Certain marginal pastureland that is enrolled in the Water Bank Program or that is suitable for use as a riparian buffer may also be eligible for enrollment in the CRP. The cropland must be located in a national or State CRP conservation priority area, have a weighted average erosion index of 8 or higher, or be on an existing CRP contract that is expiring. "Determining the conservation priority areas and the erosion index are based on the slope, soil type, and slope length," said NRCS District Conservationist Michael Hanawalt.

The Farm Service Agency ranks CRP applications using the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI), then selects applications based on that ranking. The EBI factors used to evaluate environmental benefits include wildlife habitat benefits resulting from covers created on enrolled land; water quality benefits from reduced erosion, runoff, and leaching; farm benefits from reduced erosion; benefits that extend beyond the contract period; air quality benefits from reduced wind erosion; and cost.

The Farm Service Agency administers the CRP in cooperation with the National Resources Conservation Service, Cooperative State Research and Education Service, State Foresters, and local soil and water conservation districts. Visit http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app?state=us&agency=fsa to locate a Farm Service Agency office or go to http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=copr&topic=crp for more information.

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)

Administered by: Farm Service Agency

Goal: Protect environmentally sensitive land, decrease erosion, restore wildlife habitat, and safeguard ground and surface water

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is similar to the CRP. CREP has many of the same enrollment requirements, but also a few differences. Landowners can enroll in the CREP program at any time instead of during specific signup periods. However, CREP is not available in all areas. States limit enrollment to specific geographic areas and practices, so landowners need to contact their local Farm Service Agency office to see if they are located in a CREP program area. The CREP also includes a land enhancement portion; in addition to paying the annual rental rate, the program pays up to 50 percent of the cost of installing enhancement projects. The program also offers a signup incentive for installing specific practices.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

Administered by: Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency

Goal: Provide assistance to livestock and agricultural farmers to improve environmental quality

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provides assistance to individuals involved in livestock or agricultural production who have soil, water, air, or related natural resource concerns about their land.

Funding from the program is used to promote agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible goals, optimize environmental benefits, and help producers meet environmental requirements based on national priorities. These priorities include reducing nonpoint source pollution; reducing groundwater contamination; conserving ground and surface water; reducing emissions of particulate matter, nitrogen oxides (NO_x), volatile organic compounds, and ozone precursors and depleters; reducing soil erosion and sedimentation; and promoting habitat conservation for at-risk species. As a result, the EQIP can differ among States and even among counties.

Eligible land includes cropland, rangeland, pasture, private forest land, and other farm or ranch lands. In addition to being an agricultural producer, applicants must develop an EQIP plan that includes specific conservation and environmental objectives, and a schedule for implementing conservation practices. Land enrolled in a CRP program is not eligible for EQIP funding during the term of the CRP contract; however, land adjacent to a CRP contract is eligible.

The program may pay up to 75 percent of the costs of certain conservation practices, such as grassed waterways, filter strips, nutrient management, manure management facilities, integrated pest management, irrigation water management, wildlife habitat management, capping abandoned wells, and other practices that are important to improving and maintaining the health of natural resources in the area. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) can provide payments for up to 10 years to encourage producers to carry out management practices that they otherwise might not implement. The EQIP cost-share rates for limited-resource producers and beginning farmers and ranchers may be up to 90 percent. The NRCS has a tool to determine limited resource eligibility for prospective applicants. Visit http://www.lrftool.sc.egov.usda.gov/tool.asp for more information.

Agricultural producers can submit enrollment applications at any time during the year. Local decisionmakers will periodically announce a date when they will rank all applications. The NRCS has responsibility for establishing program policies, procedures, and priorities, including the cost-share and incentive payment limits and the eligibility of specific practices. The FSA has responsibility for the administrative processes and procedures for applications, contracting, and financial matters, including program allocation and accounting.

Visit http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/ to learn more about the EQIP.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)

Administered by: Natural Resources Conservation Service

Goal: Develop upland, wetland, riparian, and aquatic wildlife habitat areas

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) encourages the creation of quality habitat that supports wildlife populations of national, State, Tribal, and local significance. Species that have benefited from this program include the grasshopper sparrow, short-eared owl, Karner blue butterfly, Eastern collared lizard, Bachman’s sparrow, and ovenbird.

Under the program, the NRCS works with a landowner to create a wildlife habitat development plan. The NRCS provides cost-share payments to landowners through agreements that usually last for 5 to 10 years, depending upon the practices to be installed. The NRCS offers short-term agreements to install practices that address wildlife emergencies. Short-term agreements require the approval of the NRCS State Conservationist. The NRCS also provides greater cost-share assistance to landowners who enter into agreements of 15 years or more for practices that create essential plant and animal habitat.

Landowners can enroll land in the program as long as they own or have control of the land for the duration of the agreement period. Land enrolled in the CRP, WRP, Water Bank Program, Grassland Reserve Program, or Watershed Protection Program is not eligible. The NRCS may also determine that land is ineligible if onsite or offsite conditions counteract the benefits of wildlife habitat development. Landowners can submit enrollment applications at any time during the year. The NRCS reviews submitted applications to determine eligibility. High-priority projects include habitat areas for wildlife species that are experiencing declining populations, use of practices that will benefit fish and wildlife that may not be funded otherwise, and wildlife and fishery habitat identified by State and local partners

The NRCS administers the program by working with a variety of partners, including the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service; U.S. Forest Service; Environmental Protection Agency; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; State foresters; and State fish and wildlife agencies. Visit http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/whip/ to learn more about the WHIP.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)

Administered by: Natural Resources Conservation Service

Goal: Restore, enhance, and protect wetlands

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) encourages landowners to retire marginal land from agricultural production through financial incentives. "The WRP program looks to retire soils with high water content to restore the functionality of riparian areas," said Hanawalt.

The program offers three enrollment options: permanent easement, 30-year easement, and restoration cost-share agreement. Under the permanent easement option, the NRCS pays the lowest of three amounts: the agricultural value of the land, an established payment cap, or an amount offered by the owner. In addition, the USDA pays 100 percent of the cost to restore the wetland. The 30-year easement pays 75 percent of the permanent easement value and 75 percent of restoration costs. For both options, USDA will pay all costs associated with recording the easement in the records office. The third option is an agreement for a minimum of 10 years to re-establish degraded or lost wetlands. USDA will pay 75 percent of restoration costs. This does not place an easement on the property.

The NRCS national office considers three factors when determining WRP allocations: ecological considerations regarding the number of wetlands lost in a State and whether the State impacts migratory birds, landowner interest in the program as reflected by the level of unfunded applications, and State performance related to prior-year WRP activity.

Landowners are eligible for conservation easements on their land if they have owned the property for at least 12 months prior to applying for the program. To enroll in the cost-share option, landowners only need to provide proof of ownership. Eligible land for enrollment in the WRP includes wetlands cleared or drained for farming, pasture, or timber production; lands adjacent to restorable wetlands that contribute to wetland functions and values; restored wetlands that need long-term protection; drained wooded wetlands where hydrology will be restored; existing or restorable riparian habitat corridors that connect protected wetlands; and lands substantially altered by flooding where wetland restoration at a reasonable cost is likely. Ineligible land includes wetlands converted after December 23, 1985; CRP contract land where trees have been established; and land where conditions make restoration impossible. “The 1985 Farm bill increased restrictions on the practices of disturbing wetlands, and as a result limited the amount of land converted from wetlands after 1985,” said Hanawalt.

Landowners can submit enrollment applications at any time during the year through the NRCS. Visit http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/wrp/ to learn more about the WRP program.

Grassland Reserve Program (GRP)

Administered by: Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency

Goal: Restore and protect grasslands

The Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) supports working grazing operations; enhancement of plant and animal biodiversity; and protection of grassland and land containing shrubs and forbs under threat of conversion to crop production, urban development, and other activities that threaten grassland resources.

The GRP allows landowners to continue grazing practices. The program also allows haying, mowing, or harvesting for seed production with certain restrictions during nesting season. Landowners can conduct appropriate fire rehabilitation, and construct firebreaks and fences.

The program has three enrollment options: permanent easement, 30-year easement, and rental agreement. Under a permanent easement, the landowner receives payment for the fair market value of the land minus the grassland value of the land encumbered by the easement. An appraiser determines these values. Under the 30-year easement, the landowner receives 30 percent of the value determined using the permanent easement calculation. Landowners can choose a lump sum payment or have the money distributed over a 10-year period for either easement option.

Landowners can also choose a rental agreement as an alternative to an easement. The NRCS offers 10-, 15-, 20-, and 30-year rental agreements. The NRCS will make annual payments of not more than 75 percent of the grazing value of the land on the anniversary date of the agreement.

Eligible land includes privately owned and Tribal lands that contain forbs or shrubs, or land located in areas historically dominated by grassland, forbs, or shrubs that has the potential to serve as wildlife habitat. No limit exists on the maximum acreage that a landowner can enroll; however, there is a minimum requirement of 40 contiguous acres. Only the NRCS State Conservationist can make a determination of special circumstances to accept fewer acres.

Visit http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=copr&topic=grp for more information.

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