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Agriculture Secretary Vilsack Announces Efforts to Assist Farmers and Ranchers Impacted by Drought

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today announced new flexibility and assistance in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) major conservation programs to get much-needed help to livestock producers as the most wide-spread drought in seven decades intensifies in the United States.

"President Obama and I are committed to getting help to producers as soon as possible and sustaining the success of America's rural communities through these difficult times," said Vilsack. "Beginning today, USDA will open opportunities for lands enrolled in conservation programs while providing additional financial and technical assistance to help landowners through this drought."

"The assistance announced uses the Secretary of Agriculture's existing authority to help create and encourage flexibility," said Eric B. Banks, Kansas State Conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). For producers, their Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contracts can be modified and the Compatible Use Authorization for haying and grazing under the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) can be expedited.

"Farmers and ranchers needing assistance because of the drought in modifying their EQIP and/or WRP contracts should visit with their local district conservationist," advised Banks.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

To assist farmers and ranchers affected by drought, Vilsack is using his discretionary authority to provide assistance to farmers and ranchers by allowing them to modify current EQIP contracts to re-schedule planned conservation practices such as prescribed grazing, livestock watering facilities, water conservation, and other conservation activities until drought conditions improve. EQIP is a voluntary program that provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers on their land to address natural resource concerns on agricultural and forest land. The NRCS will work closely with producers to ensure successful implementation of planned conservation practices. Where conservation activities have failed because of drought, NRCS will look for opportunities to work with farmers and ranchers to re-apply those activities. In the short term, funding will be targeted towards hardest hit drought areas.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)

To assist farmers and ranchers affected by drought, Vilsack is expediting Compatible Use Authorization requests for haying or grazing of WRP easements in drought-affected areas where such haying or grazing is consistent with conservation of wildlife habitat and wetlands. WRP is a voluntary conservation easement program that provides technical and financial assistance to agricultural landowners to restore and protect valuable wetland resources on their property. For landowners with land currently enrolled in WRP, the Compatible Use Authorization process provides NRCS and affected producers the management flexibility to address short-term resource conditions in a manner that promotes both the health of the land and the viability of the overall farming operation.

Thus far in 2012, 104 counties in Kansas have been designated by USDA as disaster areas. Increasingly hot and dry conditions have damaged or slowed the maturation of crops such as corn and soybeans, as well as pasture land and rangeland.

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