

USDA Announces 45th General Sign-Up

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today announced at the National Pheasant Fest and Quail Classic that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will conduct a four-week general sign-up for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), beginning May 20 and ending on June 14. CRP has a 27-year legacy of protecting the nation's natural resources through voluntary participation, while providing significant economic and environmental benefits to rural communities across the United States. Under Secretary Vilsack's leadership, USDA has enrolled 11.7 million acres in various CRP efforts.

"Since the 1980s, the CRP program has established itself as a benchmark in voluntary conservation efforts, providing American producers with assets to address our most critical resource issues," said Vilsack. "Last year, during one of the worst droughts in generations, the CRP proved vital in protecting our most environmentally sensitive lands from erosion. Emergency haying and grazing on CRP lands also supplied critical feed and forage for livestock producers due to the drought. And the program continues to bring substantial returns to rural areas, attracting recreation and tourism dollars into local economies while sustaining natural and wildlife habitat for future generations."

Additional sign-ups for continuous CRP programs-such as Highly Erodible Land Initiative and Initiative to Restore Grasslands, Wetlands and Wildlife-will be announced in spring 2013.

Currently, about 27 million acres are enrolled in CRP, which is a voluntary program available to agricultural producers to help them safeguard environmentally sensitive land. Producers enrolled in CRP plant long-term, resource-conserving covers to improve the quality of water, control soil erosion and enhance wildlife habitat. Contracts on 3.3 million acres of CRP are set to expire on Sept. 30, 2013. Producers with expiring contracts or producers with environmentally sensitive land are encouraged to evaluate their options under CRP.

Producers that are accepted in the sign-up can receive cost-share assistance to plant long-term, resource-conserving covers and receive an annual rental payment for the length of the contract (10-15 years). Producers also are encouraged to look into CRP's other enrollment opportunities offered on a continuous, non-competitive, sign-up basis and that often provide additional financial assistance. Continuous sign-up dates will be announced at a later date.

Over the past 27 years, farmers, ranchers, conservationists, hunters, fishermen and other outdoor enthusiasts have made CRP one of the largest and most important USDA efforts. CRP continues to make major contributions to national efforts to improve water and air quality, and to prevent soil erosion by protecting the most sensitive areas including those prone to flash flooding and runoff. CRP has also

helped increase populations of pheasants, quail, ducks, and rare species, like the sage grouse, the lesser prairie chicken, and other grassland birds. Highlights of CRP include:

- CRP has restored more than two million acres of wetlands and two million acres of riparian buffers;
- Each year, CRP keeps more than 600 million pounds of nitrogen and more than 100 million pounds of phosphorous from flowing into our nation's streams, rivers, and lakes.
- CRP provides \$1.8 billion annually to landowners-dollars that make their way into local economies, supporting small businesses and creating jobs; and
- CRP is the largest private lands carbon sequestration program in the country. By placing vulnerable cropland into conservation, CRP sequesters carbon in plants and soil, and reduces both fuel and fertilizer usage. In 2012, CRP resulted in carbon sequestration equal to taking about nine million cars off the road.

The Obama Administration is leading a host of federal agencies in the America's Great Outdoors initiative to develop a 21st century conservation agenda and reconnect Americans to the outdoors. At the same time, USDA continues to enroll a record number of acres of private working lands in conservation programs, working with more than 500,000 farmers and ranchers to implement conservation practices that clean the air we breathe, filter the water we drink, and prevent soil erosion. Since 2009, USDA has enrolled more than 50 million acres into the Conservation Stewardship Program to incentivize the most productive, beneficial conservation practices. And USDA's work in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, the Mississippi River Basin, and Gulf of Mexico are among 19 initiatives applying the most effective conservation practices to increase agricultural and environmental returns. USDA science is also helping to focus work in areas to reduce problematic nutrients making it to rivers and streams by as much as 45 percent.

For more information on CRP and other FSA programs, visit a local FSA service center or www.fsa.usda.gov.