

Contact: Sylvia Rainford (202) 720-2536

DEPUTY SECRETARY MERRIGAN ANNOUNCES FIRST NATIONAL SIGN-UP FOR NEW CONSERVATION STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

Continuous Enrollment for Producers Begins Aug. 10

WASHINGTON, Aug. 6, 2009 - Agriculture Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan today announced that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will begin continuous sign-up for the new Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) on August 10 with the first sign-up period cutoff scheduled for September 30. CSP is a voluntary program that encourages agricultural and forestry producers to maintain existing conservation activities and adopt additional ones on their operations.

"This program will help the Nation's agricultural and forestry producers reach greater levels of conservation performance, which will help protect our land and water," Merrigan said. "The conservation benefits derived from maintaining and enhancing natural resources will improve the quality of soil and water, assist in addressing global climate change, and encourage environmentally responsible energy production."

The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Farm Bill) authorizes CSP. Congress renamed and revamped the former Conservation Security Program completely to improve its availability and appeal to agricultural and forestry producers. USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) administers CSP. Eligible lands include cropland, grassland, prairie, improved pastureland, rangeland, non-industrial private forestland—a new land use for the program—and agricultural land under the jurisdiction of an Indian tribe.

Eligible applicants may include individual landowners, legal entities, and Indian tribes. The program will be offered to producers in all 50 states, District of Columbia and the Pacific and Caribbean areas through continuous sign-ups. Agricultural and forestry producers must submit applications by Sept. 30 to be considered for funding in the first ranking period. Congress capped the annual acreage enrollment at 12,769,000 acres for each fiscal year nationwide.

To apply for the newly revamped CSP, potential participants will be encouraged to use a self-screening checklist first to determine whether the new program is suitable for them or their operation. It will be available on NRCS Web sites and at NRCS field offices. After self-screening, the producer's current and proposed conservation practices are entered in the conservation measurement tool (CMT). This tool estimates the level of environmental performance to be achieved by a producer implementing and maintaining conservation activity. The conservation performance estimated by the CMT will be used to rank applications. States will determine their own priority resource concerns, one of the criteria that will be used to rank applications. States will establish ranking pools to rank applications with similar resource concerns.

NRCS field staff also will conduct on-site field verifications of applicants' information obtained from the CMT. Once the potential participant has been field verified and approved for funding, he or she must develop a conservation stewardship plan.

For information about CSP, including eligibility requirements, producers can visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/new_csp or visit their local NRCS field office.

Producer Self-Screening checklist and Conservation Activity List available at CGFG office and at the website cgfg.org.