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USDA Highlights First Conservation Security Program Sign-Up

Big Questions Loom for Program's Future

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Today and tomorrow top USDA political appointees and conservation agency leaders are holding events at about a dozen locations around the country highlighting the results of the first sign-up for the Conservation Security Program (CSP). USDA Secretary Ann M. Veneman announced today that approximately 2,200 farmers from the 18 CSP-eligible watersheds in 2004 have enrolled, representing 1.9 million acres. More detailed numbers are expected to be released by the Department tomorrow.

The CSP is a new voluntary farm program that will help farmers protect farmland and natural resources and provide clean water, improved wildlife habitat, and other public benefits. It is the major new program established by the 2002 Farm Bill.

Speaking on behalf of farmers and other conservationists participating in the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, Ferd Hoefner made the following comments about the sign-up announcement:

"The 2004 enrollment was an important initial step in the direction of getting the CSP implemented. The interest of farmers and the hard work of USDA employees in getting the enrollment accomplished in a very short time frame should be applauded. But less than a quarter of one-percent of the nation's farmers were given the opportunity to participate in 2004 and the best conservation farmers in the country are still waiting for their first chance to enroll.

"The key test for USDA and the Bush Administration will be whether they ramp up to a full-scale nationwide program in their expected forthcoming announcement about a second sign-up period this winter. If they continue their go-slow strategy of picking and choosing among watersheds they will leave the vast majority of farmers waiting in the wings for years to come and important environmental gains will be lost as a result.

"We hear a common refrain from farmers in all regions of the country. Producers across the wide spectrum of American agriculture say the eligibility test for the CSP should be top-notch conservation and environmental performance, not where you happen to live. Their message to the Administration is: 'Let's get on with the nationwide, comprehensive environmental program provided for by Congress in the 2002 Farm Bill without further delay.'

"Family farmers are particularly concerned with the Bush Administration's insertion into the CSP of a per acre payment cap not found in the law that severely limits the program's benefit to small and medium sized farms, discouraging their participation and environmental contribution and tilting program benefits to larger farms in general and those with high rental rates in particular. Arbitrary government rules that penalize smaller farms and penalize areas of the country without commodity program-driven high rental rates are unfair and need to be overhauled. We hope USDA and the White House will hear this message loud and clear and scrap their unnecessary and biased per acre contract limitations before the next sign-up.

America's small and mid-sized farms deserve better treatment than what was offered in this first test run of the CSP."

Background

The CSP could set the stage for the next era of U.S. farm policy. The CSP differs from farm commodity programs by rewarding environmental performance rather than production at any cost and by including all agricultural operations rather than just the third of all farms producing farm program crops. Unlike the difficulties facing commodity production subsidies at the World Trade Organization, the CSP is fully trade-compliant and could be a key to a successful agricultural trade round. The CSP differs from the Conservation Reserve Program by assisting farmers to farm responsibly, rather than removing land and farmers from agricultural production altogether. The CSP differs from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program by requiring participants to meet rigorous conservation standards, focusing on comprehensive conservation systems rather than individual practices, and rewarding sound stewardship and positive environmental outcomes rather than subsidizing pollution clean-ups.

The 2002 Farm Bill required the program to be implemented nationwide by February 2003, but a long series of delaying tactics by the Administration kept the program under wraps until this summer. Despite the long delays, the Administration now proposes to quickly end the opportunity for the public to comment on the regulation used to implement the program before the results and assessments of this initial sign-up have been completed and made available to the public. The current due date for all public comment on the program is September 20.

The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition has requested a 60 day extension of the comment period to be able to undertake a full scale assessment of this first CSP sign-up, including a survey of farmer reaction in some of the 18 watersheds designated for program participation in 2004. The Coalition believes the Administration can move ahead with planning for a 2005 sign-up without prematurely cutting off the opportunity for careful review and comment.

Over 14,000 farmers and other citizens wrote to USDA in response to the CSP proposed rule released at the beginning of the year, the most comments by far ever received by USDA for a conservation program. Farm and environmental groups of all stripes have been extremely and unusually united in calling for a speedier and more comprehensive implementation of the program.