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In the past few weeks, USDA has made several announcements regarding conservation program funding and implementation for 2003. As discussed in the April 23 issue of the *Policy Minute*, USDA announced \$1.9 billion in fiscal year (FY) 2003 funds for several conservation programs during an Earth Day ceremony April 22. Of that total, Kansas is slated to receive \$52 million in program funds.

Further details have become available in recent weeks, including current year program funding levels and new programs and provisions. The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) is the lead agency for most of the conservation programs, although the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is administered through the Farm Service Agency (FSA).

Extensive conservation program information is available on the NRCS or FSA webpages on the USDA website at www.usda.gov. Further information and links to USDA fact sheets on all of the following programs are also available in the policy section of agmanager.info. A summary of funding levels and program provisions for some of the conservation programs follows below.

Conservation Reserve Program

On the same day that USDA announced the FY2003 conservation funding, they announced the next scheduled general sign-up for the CRP. That sign-up is now underway at local FSA offices through the end of May. At the same time, the continuous sign-up provisions of CRP are also available to landowners.

No specific funding levels for CRP were announced, as the CRP is authorized by an

acreage cap of 39.2 million acres, not a funding cap. Further information and detail on the CRP sign-up is discussed in the same earlier issue of the *Policy Minute* available on agmanager.info.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) was funded for FY2003 at \$626.7 million nationally, with \$19.8 million allocated to Kansas. EQIP targets producers and landowners through cost-share assistance, maintenance and incentive payments, and technical and educational assistance to install conservation practices to improve animal waste management, irrigation water management, grazing land, soil erosion and sediment control, and other resource concerns. Under the 2002 Farm Bill guidelines, 60 percent of EQIP funding is to be targeted to livestock operations.

On Friday, May 9, USDA announced \$53 million in funds for water conservation as part of the EQIP program, with Kansas scheduled to receive \$4.1 million. The money will fund the Ground and Surface Water Conservation (GSWC) provision of EQIP. This provision will provide cost-share and incentive payments to producers for adopting eligible water conservation activities such as irrigation improvements, conversion to less water-intensive crops, and dryland farming.

Further information on EQIP and the GSWC provision is available at local NRCS offices.

Wetlands Reserve Program

The April announcement by USDA included \$260.3 million in FY2003 funds to enroll lands in the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). From

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that total, Kansas is scheduled to receive \$1.96 million in funding this year. Like the CRP, the WRP has an enrollment cap of 2.275 million acres, not a funding cap. However, the funding allocation does imply a limit on how much land might be accepted for enrollment in the WRP in FY2003.

WRP funds assistance in the form of permanent easements, 30-year easements, or restoration cost-share agreements to help producers enhance wetlands and address wetland, wildlife habitat, soil, water, and related natural resource concerns on private lands.

For further information on opportunities available through WRP, eligible landowners can contact or visit their local NRCS office.

Farm and Ranchland Protection Program

The FY2003 funding allocation included \$67.2 million nationally with \$735,200 allocated to Kansas. The Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP) provides matching funds to State, Tribal, or local governments and non-governmental organizations with existing farm and ranchland protection programs to purchase conservation easements.

The conservation easements provide the landowner with a payment in exchange for preserving the land in agriculture and preventing its conversion to non-agricultural use. Eligible landowners can submit applications to participating governmental agencies or non-governmental organizations. The FRPP provides up to 50 percent of the purchase price of the easement. The landowner may provide up to 25 percent of the easement cost as a donation, but the participating local agency or organization must pay cash for the remaining balance.

To date, Kansas has at least one parcel of land in Butler County enrolled in the FRPP with more interest growing there and elsewhere in the state. As with the other programs, more information is available at NRCS offices.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) was also included in the April release, with a

national funding level of \$21.2 million and a Kansas funding level of \$568,500. And, in a May 15 announcement, USDA added the option of a 15-year contract to the standard 5- and 10-year contracts available to landowners through WHIP.

WHIP provides technical and financial cost-share assistance to encourage the creation of high-quality wildlife habitats. Eligible landowners can use the assistance to develop wildlife habitat in upland, wetland, riparian, and aquatic habitat areas on their property. Again, more information is available at NRCS offices.

Grassland Reserve Program

The newest conservation program to be implemented is the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP). FY2003 funding and details were just announced on this program on May 14. This program was authorized in the 2002 Farm Bill, but little detail was known prior to USDA's announcement. The GRP differs from other conservation programs in that it provides funds to keep land in grass while still allowing the use of that grassland for grazing and haying purposes.

Nationally, a total of \$49.9 million in FY2003 funding was allocated for the first sign-up under the GRP which will target four specific resource areas. Kansas is included among the targeted areas for the lesser prairie-chicken habitat in the southwest part of the state. The 14 counties include Hamilton, Kearny, Finney, Stanton, Grant, Haskell, Gray, Ford, Morton, Stevens, Seward, Meade, Clark, and Comanche. The first GRP sign-up is scheduled to begin on June 16. While final sign-up details are still unclear, further information will be available from both NRCS and FSA.

Other Programs

The above discussion only highlights some of the key conservation programs with known implementation and funding details. There are many other conservation programs available through NRCS, but the biggest remaining questions focus on the Conservation Security Program (CSP). It remains to be seen exactly when funding and program details of the CSP will be known, although full implementation is not likely until at least FY2004.