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In an announcement yesterday, Agriculture Secretary Anne Veneman announced that the current sign-up period for the Conservation Reserve Program would be extended into mid-June. The sign-up started on May 5 and was originally scheduled only through May 30, but will now run through June 13.

This sign-up extension mitigates several concerns from legislators, agricultural organizations, and state offices as noted in news reports. In particular, the original scheduled sign-up started very quickly after the original announcement of a CRP sign-up; the CRP rule was published on May 8, after the sign-up started; the CRP handbook and software necessary to conduct the sign-up were not available immediately; the sign-up is occurring at the height of the busy planting season; and the final week of the original sign-up contains a major holiday.

Even as the focus is currently on the general sign-up period, remember that there is a continuous CRP sign-up provision that provides opportunities to enroll partial fields in the CRP to address certain high priority practices. This sign-up is ongoing and provides a way to enroll land without entering the competitive bid process.

The official news release from USDA announcing the extended sign-up follows below.

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### USDA EXTENDS CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM SIGN-UP TO JUNE 13

WASHINGTON, May 20, 2003 – Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman today announced that sign-up for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is extended from May 30, 2003 to June 13, 2003.

“Farmers and ranchers’ interest in the general CRP sign-up has been very strong,” said Veneman. “This extension will give producers who are busy with this year’s planting season more time to sign up for this highly successful environmental program.”

CRP is the nation’s largest private lands environmental improvement program. The program protects millions of acres of American topsoil from erosion, provides valuable wildlife habitat and safeguards America’s streams and other bodies of water. The 2002 Farm Bill authorized CRP enrollment up to 39.2 million acres.

CRP participants voluntarily remove environmentally sensitive land from agricultural production by entering into long-term contracts for 10 to 15 years. In exchange, participants receive annual rental payments and a payment of up to 50 percent of the cost of establishing conservation practices. Producers can sign up at county Farm Service Agency (FSA) offices across the nation.

Current participants with contracts expiring this fall – covering about 1.5 million acres – can make new contract offers which, if accepted, will become effective on Oct. 1, 2003. All other contracts awarded under this sign-up will become effective either at the beginning of the next fiscal year, Oct. 1, 2003, or the following year, Oct. 1, 2004, whichever the producer chooses.

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FSA will evaluate and rank eligible CRP offers using the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI), a ranking of environmental benefits to be gained from enrolling the land in CRP. Decisions on the EBI cutoff will be made by the Secretary after the sign-up ends and after FSA analyzes the EBI numbers of all the offers. Those who would have met previous sign-up EBI thresholds are not guaranteed a contract under this sign-up.

Aside from the general sign-up, the CRP continuous sign-up program is available on an ongoing basis for working lands. FSA has reserved 2 million acres for the continuous

sign-up program, which protects the most environmentally desirable and sensitive land. FSA is making a special effort to help enhance wildlife habitats and air quality by earmarking 500,000 of these acres for hardwood tree planting. Continuous sign-up for hardwood planting will start after the general sign-up.

For more information on CRP, visit FSA's Web site at:

<http://www.fsa.usda.gov/dafp/cepd/default.htm>.

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