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USDA Secretary Ann Veneman recently announced a new conservation program to fund innovative conservation efforts nationwide. A total of \$15 million in funding will be available through the remainder of fiscal year 2004 to fund selected grant proposals under the Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) Program.

The CIG program was authorized in the 2002 Farm Bill as part of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and is administered through USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS). The CIG program promises to "promote conservation technologies and stimulate innovative approaches to environmental enhancement and protection on working lands," according to Veneman's announcement.

The program will solicit proposals from eligible governmental and non-governmental entities as well as individuals for innovative conservation projects involving producers who qualify for assistance under EQIP. While the program is designed to work with EQIP participants, the program is specifically targeted at new, innovative proposals. Technologies and approaches that are eligible for funding through normal EQIP assistance in a given proposal's geographic area are not eligible for CIG funding.

A given proposal should encompass the development and field testing, evaluation, and implementation of conservation adoption incentive systems or new conservation technologies and approaches. For the remaining fiscal year 2004 funding, proposals are requested that target resource concerns including water resources, soil resources, atmospheric resources, grazing land and forest health, and wildlife habitat.

The CIG program requires the involvement of other sectors in the agricultural community by limiting any federal grant awarded under the program to no more than 50 percent of the project's total cost. Program applicants must provide non-federal matching funds for at least 50 percent of the project costs, of which up to one-half (25 percent of total costs) may be in-kind contributions. It is expected that states, conservation organizations, and philanthropic groups may get involved in the program to share the costs and leverage the impact of program dollars spent by the federal government.

The interim final rule and initial request for proposals was published in the Federal Register on March 29, 2004 with program details and a request for comment. The period for public comment runs through May 28, 2004.

The program will operate under the interim final rule throughout the rest of fiscal year 2004, distributing the \$15 million in available funding through a national competitive grant process. The interim final rule notes there will be a corresponding state-level competition in future years. At that time, the NRCS state conservationists may announce individual state-level competitions through public notices separate from the national competition.

Details on the CIG program are now available on the NRCS website at www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/cig/index.html.

The initial request for proposals should be available soon on the NRCS website and also on the federal government's grant website at www.grants.gov.

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Extension Agricultural Economist, K-State Research and Extension, 3311 Waters Hall, Manhattan, KS 66506. Phone: 785.532.2276; fax: 785.532.6925; e-mail: blubben@ksu.edu. This publication is designed to provide information about developing agricultural policy issues and farm programs. The document does not necessarily represent the views of Kansas State University. This publication and other agricultural policy resources are available from Kansas State University at www.agmanager.info while program information is available from USDA at www.usda.gov.

A direct link to the program information from NRCS and the formal request for proposals is available on the AgManager website. The links are in the Program Information table on the Conservation page of the Policy Section of AgManager at agmanager.info.

In short, the program may provide partial funding to initiate some new and innovative approaches to conservation across the country. It is not designed to fund new permanent conservation programs or projects, but rather to help fund a

pilot effort to determine or demonstrate the project's feasibility.

Any proposed project does require a strong buy-in on the part of producers and state, local, or private partners to make it feasible. The non-federal partners must come up with at least 50 percent of the project's total costs. Getting those partners on board and willing to commit resources to a new idea may be a perfect role for some Extension professionals or conservation organizations to play.