

Farm Bill Overhauls Agricultural Conservation

NEW ORLEANS, La. — The 1996 Farm Bill is reshaping the way U.S. agriculture deals with conservation of the country's natural resources, the acting associate director of the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service told attendees at the National Resource Management Planning Conference here recently.

The key to the landmark Farm Bill can be summarized as "transition," said Gary Margheim, acting associate chief of the NRCS.

Just as the new Farm Bill moved the American farmer from an era of price supports to an era of free market agriculture, it also marks the "transition into a new conservation era for the next century," Margheim said. "It will be an era where our producers will be rewarded for being good conservationists."

Programs and initiatives dealing with conservation in the 1996 Farm Bill are a recognition of the "phenomenal progress" made in

conservation efforts by farmers in the past, and a recognition that the U.S. farmer and rancher is the world leader in developing sound land and water management policies and techniques, Margheim said. The new programs will further enhance U.S. land management practices and will be based on programs developed at the local level by local people, acting voluntarily, he said.

The conservation programs are part of the Federal Agricultural Improvement and Reform (FAIR) Act, otherwise known as the 1996 Farm Bill. The programs include the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), the Environmental Quality Improvement Program (EQIP), the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), the Private Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI) and the Conservation Farm Option (CFO) Program.

Each of the conservation programs has individual applicant

requirements, different funding levels, varying contract lengths, and provisions to eliminate duplication among various programs.

Gary Nordstrom, acting director of conservation operations for the NRCS, said a major feature of EQIP is that 50 percent of its resources will be devoted to livestock. Whether livestock or farm based, the program will be closely monitored to see that it is attaining maximum benefits for the federal dollars spent. Contracts for the program will be for five to 10 years. Seventy-five percent of funding for individual EQIP contracts go to cost sharing for structural and vegetative practices.

Under the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, anything not a "plant or mineral" will be eligible for funding, said Jeanne Christie, national program leader for

WHIP. Included are species found in wetlands, uplands, as well as aquatic species, Christie said. The maximum for an individual contract is \$10,000 per contract per landowner.

Significant program emphasis needs to be placed in the area of grasslands, Christie said. Various types of grasslands are among the most fragile ecosystems in the country, she said, adding the vulnerable nature of grasslands has caused some of the most serious wildlife survival problems in the U.S.

Gary Westmoreland, national coordinator for the Grazing Lands Conservation initiative, echoed Christie's observations on the fragile nature of the nation's grasslands. He pointed out that while grazing lands make up more than

half of the private land area in the U.S., the technological assistance to those programs has been declining.

When grazing lands are mentioned, Westmoreland said, the popular image is western range land. He emphasized that grazing lands range from Arctic tundra to the Great Plains to coastal marsh.

Because of the broad scope of the land types everyone has a direct stake in how those lands are managed.

The final provisions of the program will be published in the *Federal Register* in the next month, according to Dan Smith, team leader for the CFO program. Those who choose to participate in CFO will not be eligible for participating in CRP, WRP or EQIP. The central goal of CFO is to test innovative conservation technology and whole farm planning, as well as new program administrative procedures, Smith said.

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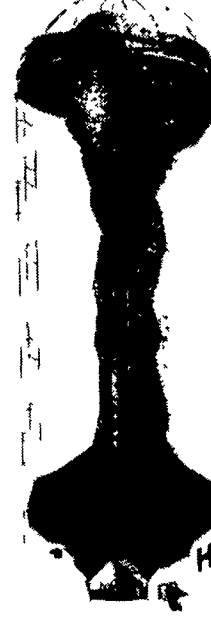
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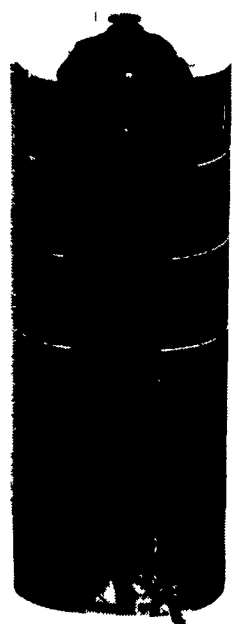
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