

USDA Concerned About Slow Pace Of Sign-Up For Farm Bill Programs

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The USDA is concerned about the slow pace in which farmers are signing up for major farm programs under the 2002 Farm Bill and urged farmers to begin the process to quickly sign up in order to receive intended benefits in a timely and efficient manner.

"Ensuring timely delivery of program benefits is a top priority for USDA," said Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman. "As farmers wrap up this fall's challenges, we are hopeful that the extensive outreach, education, and training USDA has conducted throughout the country will enable producers to quickly focus on signing up for the program, which will help prevent long lines at the county offices next spring."

The USDA team has developed extensive new software, trained personnel and prepared directives for the many new and existing programs. In addition, the department developed a new Website and conducted hundreds of outreach meetings to farmers nationwide to provide information on how to comply with the new law and the required changes in program participation.

Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services Undersecretary J.B. Penn, Deputy Undersecretary Hunt Shipman, and Farm Service Agency Administrator Jim Little, along with various state farm program directors, took to the airwaves with farm broadcasters and reporters from across the country to help relay the mes-

sage to producers to sign up. This is just one of many outreach efforts to accelerate sign-up and participation.

"If producers are putting forth a New Year's resolution, we hope it is to understand the importance of signing up early," said Penn. "USDA is committed to working at every level to assist producers, but it is critical they contact their local FSA office to begin processing individual program information and updates needed to participate."

According to Jim Little, reports to date from the states indicate that producer sign-up for the direct and countercyclical programs is proceeding quite slowly. He said there are several reasons to explain the slow pace, including the late harvest in many parts of the country that kept farmers in the field longer than usual.

Additionally, the complexity of the new programs requires more time for produc-

ers to gain understanding, assemble the necessary information, and make their decision, often involving several different commodities and unknown future market conditions.

"For the sign-up process to proceed smoothly, we need a steady flow of producers visiting their local county FSA office from now to the April 1 deadline," said Little. "We want to avoid a last minute crunch in the county offices. Thus, the sooner producers contact their local FSA offices and begin the sign-up process, the more our staff can be of help to them to receive their intended benefits in a timely manner."

Little also reminded producers that they can sign-up for major programs now and still make changes to their decisions any time until the April 1 closing date for base acreage and yield updating. Also, producers may visit their local FSA office multiple times to review information and

discuss their decisions.

New computer-based tools also have been developed to help producers analyze the economic consequences of the new Farm Bill's updating options. USDA, in conjunction with Texas A&M University, has made available one such calculator on the FSA Website (<http://www.fsa.usda.gov/>). Several other land grant universities and commodity associations have developed similar tools available to producers.

"All of us at USDA recognize the importance of the new Farm Bill to America's producers, and we remain fully committed to providing them with all the necessary information and assistance throughout the implementation process," said Penn.

For a complete list of farm bill programs, benefits, and information needed for sign-up, visit USDA's Farm Bill Website at <http://www.usda.gov/> or contact your local FSA office or service center.

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