## Sec. Veneman Tells Cattlemen President **To Propose \$3.9 Billion For Conservation Programs**

an address to cattle producers and ranchers at the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) annual convention, USDA Secretary Ann M. Veneman announced that President Bush will propose a record \$3.9 billion, an increase of \$582 million over the FY 2003 level, for conservation programs to strengthen environmental stewardship on the nation's farmlands.

The Secretary said the FY 2004 funding request is \$1.9 billion higher, or more than double the funding for these activities, when the Bush Administration came into office just two years ago. She also announced the release of proposed rules for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

"This Administration has worked hard to ensure strong environmental programs are available to our nation's farmers and ranchers," said Veneman. "Farmers and ranchers are the

NASHVILLE, Tenn. -During best stewards of the land and we will continue to ensure these programs are administered effectively and in the best interest of producers and the environment.'

> Nearly \$3.5 billion of the President's record-level proposal will be used for financial assistance or other direct payments to farmers. Highlights of the budget include:

> •\$2 billion for the Conservation Reserve Program for rental and other costs on new and old acreage, an increase of approximately \$140 million over 2003;

> •\$850 million will be provided for the EQIP program, a \$255 million increase above FY 2003;

> •\$250 million for the Wetlands Reserve Program to enroll an additional 178,000 acres;

> •\$112 million for the Farmland Protection Program, which is \$27 million over the 2003 level;

> •\$85 million for the Grassland Reserve Program, a \$13 million increase over 2003:

> •\$51 million for Ground and Surface Water Conservation, a \$6 million increase over 2003;

Habitat Incentives Program, an increase of \$16 million over 2003;

•\$19 million for the new Conservation Security Program on which an Advanced Notice of Proposed Rule (ANPR) is expected shortly; and

•\$8 million for water conservation and water quality enhancements in the Klamath Basin of Oregon and California.

This budget ensures that all of the cost-share and technical assistance conservation work authorized by the 2002 farm bill for FY 2004 will be delivered, USDA will use an additional \$432 million, through a new Farm Bill Technical Assistance account, to ensure farmers and ranchers can access the technical work necessary to fully utilize the conservation programs' financial assistance. This new account, which the Administration initially proposed for FY 2003 at \$333 million, is necessary because of a statutory cap that restricts USDA's ability to pay for techni-

•\$42 million for the Wildlife cal assistance from farm program funds.

> "In the short time this Administration has been in office, we are more than doubling our investment in environmental and conservation programs that not only benefit farmers and ranchers, but communities throughout the country," said Veneman. "This record-level request illustrates the priority the President places on conserving natural resources by providing landowners the tools they need for private land management.

The Secretary also announced that the proposed rule for EQIP, reauthorized in the 2002 Farm Bill, is being released today for publication in the Federal Register for public comment. This will allow farmers and ranchers the ability to utilize program funding in the coming year.

Highlights of the revised EQIP proposal include a reduction in the amount of planning requirements needed to develop a contract; provides up to 90 percent cost share for limited resource and beginning producers; provides livestock producers with cost share assistance for waste storage facilities regardless of size, but must develop and implement a comprehensive nutrient management plan; allowance of producers to have more than one contract per tract at any given time; allocates 60 percent of EQIP funds towards livestock related practices; and, eliminates the program's dual administration by delegating EQIP to the **Natural Resources Conservation** Service.

"Conservation incentive programs for working lands, in combination with technical assistance, help reduce the regulatory burden on farmers and ranchers faced with air and water quality restrictions," Veneman said. "The team at USDA has worked to ensure these proposed rules are producer-friendly and will achieve the intended results of these programs." Comments on the EQIP proposal will be accepted for 30 days after publication.

During her remarks, Secretary Veneman also discussed other issues of importance to cattle producers, including animal disease protection programs, risk management tools, trade, food safety, country-of-origin labeling, and forest management.

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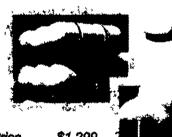
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