

Grassland Reserve Program Offers Funds For Working Lands

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The national Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) offers funds to farmers and ranchers who maintain working grasslands. The 2002 Farm Bill amended the Food Security Act of 1985 to include authorization for this program.

Nationwide sign-up for the program began on June 30. Natural Resources Conservation Service officials in Pennsylvania are helping to coordinate and promote the program in the state.

Jana Malot, NRCS natural resources specialist in Pennsylvania, recently gave an overview of the program during Ag Progress Days.

"We're not paying you to stop using land," Malot said. "We're paying you to keep using land in a very wise manner."

Among others benefits, the GRP offers funds to graziers and hay producers for doing a good job maintaining working grasslands.

"Grasslands provide critical ecological benefits and play a key role in environmental quality, as well as contributing to the economies of many rural areas," said U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman. "This voluntary program helps protect valuable grasslands from conversion to other land uses, thus helping to ensure this national resource is available to future generations."

Grasslands make up the largest land cover on America's private lands. Privately-owned grasslands and shrublands cover more than 525 million acres in the U.S. For the first

time, the U.S. Department of Agriculture will direct financial resources and technical expertise to help landowners protect and restore these lands.

Applications for participation will be accepted on a continuous basis at local USDA service centers. Once funding has been exhausted, eligible applicants will remain on file until additional funding becomes available. Veneman previously announced that \$49.9 million in fiscal year 2003 funds are available to implement GRP.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency and Forest Service are coordinating implementation of GRP, which helps landowners restore and protect grassland, rangeland, pastureland, shrubland and certain other lands and provides assistance for rehabilitating grasslands. The program will conserve vulnerable grasslands from conversion to cropland or other uses and conserve valuable grasslands by helping maintain viable ranching operations.

When properly managed, grasslands and shrublands can result in cleaner water supplies, healthier riparian areas and reduced sediment loadings in streams and other water bodies. These lands are vital for the production of forage for domestic livestock and provide forage and habitat for maintaining healthy wildlife populations. These lands also improve the aesthetic character of the landscape, provide scenic vistas and open space, provide for recreational activities and protect the soil from water and wind erosion.

GRP offers producers several

enrollment options: permanent easements, 30-year easements, rental agreements (10, 15, 20 or 30-year duration) and restoration agreements. For permanent easements, USDA makes a payment based on the fair market value of the property less the grazing value. For 30-year easements, USDA pays 30 percent of what would be paid for a permanent easement. For rental agreements, USDA pays 75 percent of the grazing value in annual payments for the length of the agreement.

For restoration agreements, USDA pays up to 90 percent of the restoration costs on grassland and shrubland that has never been cultivated and not more than 75 percent on restored grassland and shrubland (land that once was cultivated).

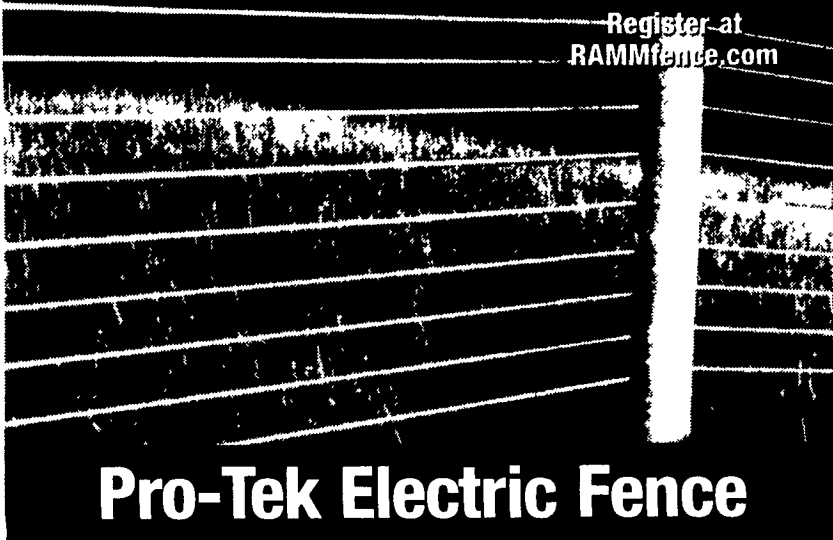
To participate in GRP, offers must be private land that includes at least 40 contiguous acres. Additional eligibility criteria are described in the "Notice of Availability of Program Funds for the Grassland Reserve Program" that was published in the Federal Register on June 13, 2003, and is available on the NRCS Web site listed below. This notice applies only to fiscal year 2003 funds and will be used for the initial sign-up.

For more information about GRP and other conservation programs, contact your local USDA Service Center, listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture, or online at <http://offices.usda.gov/>. Information, including Federal Register notices and rules, also is available at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farbill/2002>.

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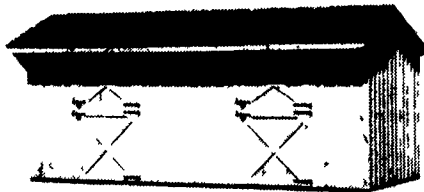
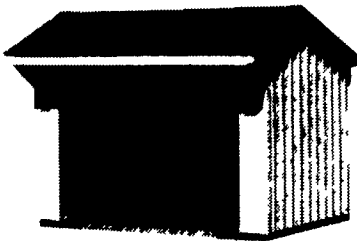
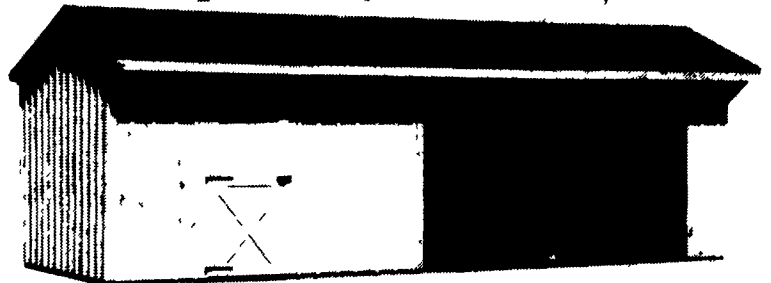
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