



NEWS RELEASE

United States Department of Agriculture • Office of Communications • 1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250-1300 • Voice: (202) 720-4623 • Email: oc.news@usda.gov • Web: <http://www.usda.gov>

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Contact:
Sylvia Rainford (202) 720-2536

SCHAFFER ANNOUNCES AVAILABILITY OF \$58.4 MILLION TO PRODUCERS, ENTITIES THROUGH NEW CONSERVATION PROGRAM

WASHINGTON, Jan. 14, 2009-Agriculture Secretary Ed Schafer today announced that up to \$58.4 million in financial assistance is available to agricultural producers and entities through the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP), established in the new farm bill to promote ground and surface water conservation and water quality improvement.

USDA is seeking project proposals from potential partners through this program. A Request for Proposals was published in the Federal Register today. Proposals must be submitted by March 2, 2009.

Potential partners may submit proposals to be considered for a partnership agreement with USDA on the Internet at http://www.grants.gov/applicants/apply_for_grants.jsp using the on-line instructions.

The AWEP Request for Proposals can be viewed at the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service's ([USDA-NRCS](#)) Web site; at the official [government regulation](#) Web Site; and at the [Federal Register](#).

The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, or 2008 Farm Bill, established AWEP as a component of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), USDA's largest conservation program on working agricultural lands. All EQIP requirements and policies will apply to AWEP.

USDA-NRCS administers EQIP, a voluntary conservation program that provides technical assistance and payments to help crop and livestock producers address environmental concerns through conservation improvements on agricultural and non-industrial private forests lands. Farmers and ranchers can use EQIP to farm in an environmentally friendly manner and still meet their agricultural production goals. In addition, it is designed to produce significant environmental benefits to the public, such as improved soil, water and air quality, and enhanced wildlife habitat.

The new farm bill expanded EQIP to include AWEP. AWEP offers financial and technical assistance to help farmers and ranchers carry out water enhancement activities that conserve ground and surface water and improve water quality on agricultural lands such as cropland, pasture, grassland and rangeland.

“AWEP is designed to address water quality and quantity issues on a regional level,” Homer L. Wilkes, Mississippi State Conservationist said. “By leveraging federal funds with

the efforts of local and regional partners, we can encourage a more collective approach to addressing specific concerns.”

Agricultural water enhancement activities include:

- water quality or water conservation plan development;
- water conservation restoration or enhancement projects, including conversion to the production of less water-intensive agricultural commodities or dry land farming;
- water quality or quantity restoration or enhancement projects;
- irrigation system improvement or irrigation efficiency enhancement;
- activities designed to reduce drought's impacts; and
- other related activities that will help achieve water quality or water conservation benefits on agricultural land.

Under this new program, USDA-NRCS can contract directly with agricultural producers who are included in approved partner proposals. Eligible partners include federally- recognized tribes, states, units of local government, or agricultural or silvicultural associations. Producers who apply for AWEP assistance must meet EQIP eligibility requirements. All AWEP funding must go to producers. Like EQIP, contract terms for producers under AWEP run from 1 year to 10 years.

Agricultural producers in selected project areas can apply for available AWEP funds at their local USDA service center.

For additional information about the AWEP under EQIP, please visit <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/EQIP> or call (202) 720-1845 during business hours.

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