

GUIDELINES for FY 2006 Small Farmer Initiative for Mississippi

Purpose

The purpose of this initiative is to improve technical service and program participation in all USDA programs through improved outreach efforts to Small Scale and Limited Resource Farmers. The target audience is defined as small farmers who have historically not participated in nor ever ranked high enough to be selected for a contract. We must be innovative in allowing small farmers to select practices that are best suited for their particular operations while at the same time low enough in cost to be effective and practical for small farms to implement and maintain.

In developing and implementing this outreach initiative in Mississippi, NRCS technical practices and programs will help break through potential barriers to participation in USDA programs by small farmers.

Issue

There is an ongoing national and state concern over the low participation of small farmers in the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Farm Bill Programs.

Eligibility

- The resource concerns to be addressed in Mississippi are: (1) Surface Water Quality – runoff of nutrients and organics (2) Water Quantity – water management and irrigation (3) Soil Quality – erosion control above soil loss tolerance (T) (4) Sustainable Forestry.
- All Small Farmers Initiative funds will be used to help **small farmers with 100 acres or less**. Acres can be any combination of cropland and/or grassland. Wooded areas will be counted towards the total but will only be eligible for tree planting and site preparation practices.
- **To be eligible for irrigation practices, at least 10 percent of the cropland acres must be planted to alternative crops.** (Note: Alternative crops are not traditional crops such as cotton, soybeans, rice, grain sorghum, field corn, wheat, or similar crops grown on large acreage and produced for off-farm scales. These crops include warm and cool season vegetables and herbs.)
- **Applicants with pastureland** must be willing to follow a prescribed grazing plan.
- Sustainable forestry will be limited to those incidental woodlands. The acreage will be limited to tree planting and site preparation **not to exceed 20 acres**.
- **Contracts will be limited to \$10,000 per operation** (well cost for irrigation does not count toward the contract limit). Cost share rates will be up to 90 percent for all practices.
- **All** participants must be registered in the Service Center Information Management System (SCIMS) or grant permission to be registered in SCIMS.
- **2006 Average State Cost will be used when developing contracts.** When practice cost is

not available for the cost of installing a conservation practice, at least two written estimates will be required when and if actual cost of work is used.

- **Record keeping will be required for nutrient and pest management.** There will be one incentive payment per contract of **\$200/year** for three years of the contract period when nutrient or pest management is included. This is a maximum value of **\$600**. All contract participants will be required to attend and provide documentation that a recent farm record management training class has been completed.
- **Conservation tillage (residue management)** is an allowable cost share practice because the adoption rate in Mississippi is considered extremely low for Small Farmers. The practice is eligible as a continuous long term system.
- **Existing field office technical standards are available to accomplish conservation planning for this small farm initiative.**
- **As needed**, NRCS will develop and apply innovative and cost effective technical standards according to policy and place in the field office technical guide.
- General practice planning guide lines:
 1. **Fence** – Practice Code 382 includes boundary and cross fencing, which are both approved for cost share in Mississippi **only** under the New Small Farmers Initiative. Boundary fences may only be approved if absolutely necessary for livestock production as an essential element in the farm operation. This is not applicable when converting from forestland to pastureland.
 2. **Irrigation Water Management** – Practice Code 449 – This is an incentive payment for irrigation systems which is used for both micro and sprinkler.
 - A. Irrigation Water Management – Micro - **\$100/year** (includes recordkeeping and scheduling)
 - B. Management Payments may be received only three times.
 - C. Total payment will be limited to **\$300**.
 3. If producer wants to **establish** NEW silvopasture, use Silvopasture (381) practice standard.
 4. Pest Management – Heavy mechanical control of woody vegetation removal has been added. When heavy equipment is used to remove trees and brush that impede forage growth, critical area planting must be planned to protect disturbed sites. Contracts are limited to 5 acres with a maximum cost share amount of \$1000 plus mobilization fee of \$300.

It is very important that we **do not allow vendor payments and the cash flow of small farmers** to become a barrier to applying practices to the land. **NRCS may assist participants in completing and using the CC-36 Form, Assignment of Payment, to work with small farmers in paying for conservation work and services provided under the Small Farmer Initiative contracts.** This tool has been used in the past and is still being used by the Farm Service Agency.

Applications for ranking: March 1, 2006

Ranking to be done by: March 31, 2006.

Funding determination will be made: April 14, 2006.

Conservation Plans and contracts will be written by: May 26, 2006.