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**Guest Editorial by Montana Farm Service  
Agency Executive Director Bruce Nelson:  
USDA seeking tribal input into new Farm Bill  
programs**

This month the U.S. Department of Agriculture is hosting six regional tribal consultation sessions across the country - the first of its kind under the Obama Administration. A session for Montana, Wyoming and other regional tribal leaders, members and agriculture producers on Aug. 24th in Billings will focus on new provisions in the Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008, better known as the 2008 Farm Bill.

Two USDA agencies - Farm Service Agency (FSA) and Rural Development-Rural Utilities Service (RD) - are hosting these government-to-government consultations to gather tribal input that will help USDA to develop and finalize federal regulations to implement and administer a new set of credit, conservation and economic development programs.

FSA is undertaking both the Purchasers of Highly Fractionated Land Loan Program and the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program while Rural Development will focus on the Substantially Underserved Trust Areas provisions to the Farm Bill involving its water, environmental, telecommunications, distance learning, telemedicine, broadband and electric loan and grant programs.

With FSA, the new loan program will provide the agency discretionary authority to make and insure loans to eligible purchasers of highly fractionated lands in relation to relevant provisions of the Indian Land Consolidation Act of 1983. Eligibility will be open to individual tribal

members, tribal corporations and tribal governments. The agency is asking tribal stakeholders how FSA determines that there is a valid purchase agreement which consolidates all interest in the property, whether FSA should consider taking security other than the real estate being purchased for the loan, whether the program should be restricted to land for agricultural use and what type of Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) involvement is needed in the program. Rather than taking a lien on the real estate being financed, USDA is asking whether FSA should consider tribal guarantee as security for the loan.

FSA's new voluntary public access and habitat incentive program will provide up to \$50 million grants to states and tribal governments to encourage owners and operators of privately held farm, ranch, and forest land to voluntarily make land available for public access for wildlife-dependent recreation, including hunting or fishing under programs administered by States and tribal governments. The agency is asking if any tribes have access or walk-in programs in place, if so, what types of access are allowed, i.e. hunting, fishing, other outdoor recreation and access corridor to public land. Since more than 20 states have access or walk-in programs in place, USDA is asking if tribes would consider administering a program similar to those already in place, and what additional federal, state, tribal or private resources would tribes consider using to carry out the program, and about BIA involvement in this program.

In addition to comments presented at the tribal consultation session, written comments for the FSA programs will be accepted until Sept. 1, 2010. Written comments can be directed to FSA Administrator Jonathan Coppess through [connie.holman@wdc.usda.gov](mailto:connie.holman@wdc.usda.gov), fax (202) 720-6797 or mail: USDA FSA/FLP/LMD, 1400 Independence Ave. SW Stop 0522, Wash., DC 20250. For more about the RD provisions, you can visit [www.usda.gov/rus/suta](http://www.usda.gov/rus/suta).

The Aug. 24<sup>th</sup> session is scheduled from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Wingate by Wyndham hotel. For more information, contact Jennifer Perez Cole, Montana FSA public affairs specialist,

state outreach and civil rights coordinator, at 406.587.6786 or [jennifer.cole@mt.usda.gov](mailto:jennifer.cole@mt.usda.gov). We look forward to hearing from you and helping USDA to better serve you.

*(Bruce Nelson, a fourth-generation Montanan and wheat farmer, was appointed by the Obama administration as state executive director of the Montana Farm Service Agency in July 2009 and previously served in this position from 1993-2000. He can be reached at 406.587.6872 or [bruce.nelson@mt.usda.gov](mailto:bruce.nelson@mt.usda.gov).)*

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