USDA Expands and Renews Conservation Reserve Program in Effort to Boost Enrollment and Address Climate Change

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WASHINGTON, April 21, 2021 - Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced today that USDA will open enrollment in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) with higher payment rates, new incentives, and a more targeted focus on the program's role in climate change mitigation. Additionally, USDA is announcing investments in partnerships to increase climate-smart agriculture, including $330 million in 85 Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) projects and $25 million for On-Farm Conservation Innovation Trials. Secretary Vilsack made the announcement today at the White House National Climate Task Force meeting to demonstrate USDA's commitment to putting American agriculture and forestry at the center of climate-smart solutions to address climate change.

The Biden-Harris Administration is working to leverage USDA conservation programs for climate mitigation, including continuing to invest in innovation partnership programs like RCPP and On-Farm Trials as well as strengthening programs like CRP to enhance their impacts.

"Sometimes the best solutions are right in front of you. With CRP, the United States has one of the world's most successful voluntary conservation programs. We need to invest in CRP and let it do what it does best-preserve topsoil, sequester carbon, and reduce the impacts of climate change," said Vilsack. "We also recognize that we can't do it alone. At the White House Climate Leaders Summit this week, we will engage leaders from all around the world to partner with us on addressing climate change. Here at home, we're working in partnership with producers and local organizations through USDA programs to bring new voices and communities to the table to help combat climate change."

Conservation Reserve Program

USDA's goal is to enroll up to 4 million new acres in CRP by raising rental payment rates and expanding the number of incentivized environmental practices allowed under the program. CRP is one of the world's largest voluntary conservation programs with a long track record of preserving topsoil, sequestering carbon, and reducing nitrogen runoff, as well providing healthy habitat for wildlife.

CRP is a powerful tool when it comes to climate mitigation, and acres currently enrolled in the program mitigate more than 12 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO2e). If USDA reaches its goal of enrolling an additional 4 million acres into the program, it will mitigate an additional 3 million

metric tons of CO2 equivalent and prevent 90 million pounds of nitrogen and 33 million tons of sediment from running into our waterways each year.

"We want to make sure CRP continues to be a valuable and effective conservation resource for our producers for decades to come," said Vilsack. "USDA will continue to find new and creative ways of putting producers and landowners at the center of climate-smart practices that generate revenue and benefit our planet."

CRP's long-term goal is to establish valuable land cover to help improve water quality, improve soil health and carbon sequestration, prevent soil erosion, and reduce loss of wildlife habitat. USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) offers a number of signups, including the general signup and continuous signup, which are both open now, as well as a CRP Grasslands and pilot programs focused on soil health and clean water.

New Climate-Smart Practice Incentive

To target the program on climate change mitigation, FSA is introducing a new **Climate-Smart Practice Incentive** for CRP general and continuous signups that aims to increase carbon sequestration and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Climate-Smart CRP practices include establishment of trees and permanent grasses, development of wildlife habitat, and wetland restoration. The Climate-Smart Practice Incentive is annual, and the amount is based on the benefits of each practice type.

Higher Rental Rates and New Incentives

In 2021, CRP is capped at 25 million acres, and currently 20.8 million acres are enrolled. Furthermore, the cap will gradually increase to 27 million acres by 2023. To help increase producer interest and enrollment, FSA is:

- **Adjusting soil rental rates**. This enables additional flexibility for rate adjustments, including a possible increase in rates where appropriate.
- **Increasing payments for Practice Incentives from 20% to 50%**. This incentive for continuous CRP practices is based on the cost of establishment and is in addition to cost share payments.
- **Increasing payments for water quality practices.** Rates are increasing from 10% to 20% for certain water quality benefiting practices available through the CRP continuous signup, such as grassed waterways, riparian buffers, and filter strips.
- **Establishing a CRP Grassland minimum rental rate.** This benefits more than 1,300 counties with rates currently below the minimum.

Enhanced Natural Resource Benefits

To boost impacts for natural resources, FSA is:

- **Moving State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) practices to the CRP continuous signup.** Unlike the general signup, producers can sign up year-round for the continuous signup and be eligible for additional incentives.
- **Establishing National Grassland Priority Zones.** This aims to increase enrollment of grasslands in migratory corridors and environmentally sensitive areas.
- **Making Highly Erodible Land Initiative (HELI) practices available in both the general and continuous signups.**

Expanding Prairie Pothole Soil Health and Watershed Programs

CRP has two pilot programs ? the Soil Health and Income Protection Program (SHIPP) and the Clean Lakes, Estuaries and Rivers 30-year contracts (CLEAR30).

- For SHIPP, which is a short-term option (3, 4, or 5-year contracts) for farmers to plant cover on less productive agricultural lands, FSA will hold a 2021 signup in the Prairie Pothole states.
- The CLEAR30 pilot, a long-term option through CRP, will be expanded from the Great Lakes and Chesapeake Bay pilot regions to nationwide.

Increasing Technical Assistance Capacity and Impact Measurement

USDA technical assistance through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is critical to enable producers to plan and implement conservation practices that are appropriate for their needs. To ensure increased enrollment and support for producers, USDA is increasing NRCS technical assistance capacity for CRP by $140 million.

Additionally, in order to better target the program toward climate outcomes, USDA will invest $10 million in the CRP Monitoring, Assessment and Evaluation (MAE) program to measure and monitor the soil carbon and climate resilience impacts of conservation practices over the life of new CRP contracts. This will enable the agency to further refine the program and practices to provide producers tools for increased climate resilience.

To learn more about updates to CRP, download our "What's New with CRP" fact sheet.

Partnership Programs Contribute to Priorities

In addition to changes to CRP, Secretary Vilsack also announced significant investments for climate-smart policies. First, NRCS is investing $330 million in 85 locally driven, public-private partnerships under the Regional Conservation Partnership Program to address climate change and other natural

resources challenges. NRCS will announce more details on the RCPP project selections on April 26.

Second, NRCS is investing $25 million in proposals for On-Farm Trials, which are part of the Conservation Innovation Grants program. NRCS is seeking proposals through June 21. Project priorities include climate-smart agricultural solutions and soil health practices.

Under the Biden-Harris Administration, USDA is engaged in a whole-of-government effort to combat the climate crisis and conserve and protect our nation's lands, biodiversity, and natural resources including our soil, air and water. Through conservation practices and partnerships, USDA aims to enhance economic growth and create new streams of income for farmers, ranchers, producers and private foresters. Successfully meeting these challenges will require USDA and our agencies to pursue a coordinated approach alongside USDA stakeholders, including state, local, and tribal governments.

USDA touches the lives of all Americans each day in so many positive ways. In the Biden-Harris Administration, USDA is transforming America's food system with a greater focus on more resilient local and regional food production, fairer markets for all producers, ensuring access to safe, healthy and nutritious food in all communities, building new markets and streams of income for farmers and producers using climate smart food and forestry practices, making historic investments in infrastructure and clean energy capabilities in rural America, and committing to equity across the Department by removing systemic barriers and building a workforce more representative of America. To learn more, visit www.usda.gov.

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