



01-15-09

## **USDA amends EQIP conservation program rules**

**By Agri-Pulse Staff**

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Agriculture Secretary Ed Schafer announced changes Thursday to the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the U.S. Department of Agriculture's largest conservation program for working agricultural lands.

USDA published an interim final rule containing the statutory changes to EQIP in the Jan. 15<sup>th</sup> Federal Register. The deadline for delivering public comment on the rule to USDA is March 16, 2009.

The 2008 Farm Bill includes non-industrial private forestland as an eligible land use and provides payments for conservation practices related to organic production or the transition to organic production. It also provides for increased payment rates to historically underserved producers, including limited resource, beginning, and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

The EQIP interim final rule 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 public comments will be used to finalize the interim final rule. USDA will publish a final rule, which will incorporate statutory changes and establish the program's policy for the life of the 2008 Farm Bill.

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 forest lands. Farmers and ranchers can use EQIP to farm in an environmentally friendly manner and still meet their agricultural production goals. It is designed to produce significant environmental benefits to the public, such as improved soil, water and air quality; and enhanced wildlife habitat. In addition, farmers and ranchers use EQIP to meet federal, state, tribal and local environmental regulations.

Under the amended EQIP, socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers as well as beginning and limited resource producers are authorized to receive payments of up to 90 percent of the costs of installing or implementing a conservation practice. These producers also can receive advance payments of up to 30 percent of the anticipated costs incurred to purchase materials or to contract services to implement a conservation practice.

EQIP will offer financial and technical assistance for conservation practices to certified organic farmers and ranchers as well as producers interested in transitioning to organic farming. Organic producers must develop and carry out an organic system plan. These producers can receive a maximum payment of \$20,000 annually, or \$80,000 over six years to apply or carry out approved conservation practices contained in that plan.

EQIP will offer financial assistance to forest landowners to develop a forest management plan, along with carrying out the conservation practices contained in the plan. The 2008 Farm Bill also encourages producers to use innovative technologies and cost-effective methods under approved conservation practices to address air quality.

The 2008 Farm Bill reduced the overall payment limitation from \$450,000 to \$300,000 for a six-year period, except for environmentally significant projects.

The new farm bill also established the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP) as a component of EQIP. AWEP provides technical and financial assistance to help producers carry out water enhancement activities on private agricultural land for the purpose of conserving surface and ground water and improving water quality. USDA published a Request for Proposals for AWEP in the Federal Register on Jan. 14, 2009.

For additional information about EQIP, please visit <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/EQIP/> or phone 202-720-1845.