



USDA seeks project proposals to improve water quality in Mississippi River Basin

By Agri-Pulse Staff

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Washington, March 4 – Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced Thursday that the U.S. Department of Agriculture is seeking project proposals to improve water quality and the overall health of the Mississippi River in 41 eligible watersheds in 12 states.

“USDA is committed to improving the overall water quality in the Mississippi River Basin and this initiative is a significant step toward achieving that goal,” Vilsack said. “We need the help of agricultural producers, organizations, Indian tribes, and state and local agencies to achieve maximum results from this initiative.”

The Request for Proposals (RFP) for the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative, through which up to \$75 million will be available for partnership projects, was published in the Federal Register this week. Proposals are due by May 1. The RFP explains the procedures for potential partners to sign agreements with USDA for projects that meet with the initiative’s objectives.

The RFP contains a list of the eligible watersheds. Federally recognized Indian tribes, state and local units of governments, farmer cooperatives, producer associations, institutions of higher education and other non-governmental organizations can download the RFP at www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/mrbi/mrbi.html.

USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service will administer this initiative, first announced on September 24, 2009. Forty-one eligible watersheds or focus areas in 12 states (Arkansas, Kentucky, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee and Wisconsin) were selected to participate in this initiative. Smaller watersheds within the initial 41 will be selected for approved partnership projects based on their potential for managing nitrogen and phosphorus – nutrients associated with impaired water quality in the Mississippi River Basin – while maintaining agricultural productivity and benefiting wildlife. Individual producers can only participate in this initiative in approved partnership projects.

USDA will use a competitive process to distribute up to \$75 million using two conservation programs in fiscal year 2010, the initiative’s first year. Up to \$50 million

will come from the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) and an additional \$25 million from the Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP). USDA expects to provide about \$320 million in financial assistance over four years for voluntary conservation projects in these watersheds.

USDA uses CCPI to enter into multi-year agreements with eligible partner organizations to address conservation priorities related to agriculture and non-industrial private forest land. CCPI uses the funding and policies from three conservation programs: the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the Conservation Stewardship Program and the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program.

WREP, administered under the Wetlands Reserve Program, is designed to foster coordination with partners and to encourage non-federal investment in natural resource conservation through the use of matching funds and in-kind services.

Producers interested in participating in conservation programs detailed in approved projects must meet the eligibility and funding requirements for the program or programs for which they are applying. Eligible partners must submit separate proposals for CCPI and WREP. Higher priority will be given to projects that integrate both CCPI and WREP.

For information about CCPI and WREP, go to: www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs. For information on the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative, including the RFP and the eligible watersheds, go to: www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/mrbi/mrbi.html.

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