



Massachusetts State Office

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NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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USDA Seeks Comment on Environmental Quality Incentives Program

AMHERST, Mass. -- The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service is seeking comments from Massachusetts farmers and organizations on its flagship conservation cost-share program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Cecil Currin, State Conservationist for NRCS in Massachusetts, is launching a comment period to allow public input on EQIP through March 21, 2005.

The EQIP program offers farmers technical expertise and cost-share assistance for planning and applying conservation practices that protect water and air, increase soil productivity, manage animal waste and sustain agricultural land.

“NRCS periodically reviews and updates EQIP priorities, with input from the public, the state technical committee and local conservation districts, to ensure the program continues to address the most important natural resource needs as well as any emerging resource issues,” said Currin.

A listening session will be held on Wednesday, February 23, 2005, 10:00 am to 12:00 noon at the NRCS State Office, 451 West Street, Amherst, Mass. Farmers, representatives of agricultural organizations, environmental groups, commodity organizations, and government agencies, and other interested parties are invited to attend and provide comment.

Comments may also be submitted by calling toll-free 800-206-8851, x4359 (24 hours), by fax to 413-253-4375, by e-mail to equip.comments@ma.usda.gov, by filling out a form on the NRCS state website at www.ma.nrcs.usda.gov or by mail to USDA-NRCS, 451 West Street, Amherst, MA 01002, attn: Richard DeVergilio.

Those providing comments on EQIP are asked to consider what emerging natural resource issues are not addressed by current national EQIP priorities and the extent or significance of the issue within Massachusetts. Comment is also sought on what modifications, if any, are needed to the four existing national priorities and whether these existing priorities continue to reflect critical national resource needs and concerns.

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NRCS's current national priorities for EQIP, which the agency uses to determine which producers will be selected for program funding, are:

1. **Water Quality:** Reductions of nonpoint source pollution, such as nutrients, sediment, pesticides, or excess salinity in impaired watersheds consistent with TMDLs where available, as well as the reduction of groundwater contamination and the conservation of ground and surface water resources;

2. **Air Quality:** Reduction of emissions, such as particulate matter, nitrogen oxides (NO_x), volatile organic compounds, and ozone precursors and depleters that contribute to air quality impairment violations of National Ambient Air Quality Standards;

3. **Soil Erosion:** Reduction in soil erosion and sedimentation from unacceptable levels on agricultural land; and

4. **Wildlife Habitat:** Promotion of at-risk species habitat conservation.

“Updating the national priorities will help us prepare for the 2006 program year and for the next Farm Bill reauthorization in 2007,” said Currin. The program originated in the 1996 Farm Bill and was re-authorized in 2002.

“And these listening sessions are not exclusive to EQIP,” adds Currin. “We also invite comments on our other programs, such as the Farm and Ranchlands Protection Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program and Wetlands Reserve Program.”

NRCS will compile all comments received for state review. They will also be forwarded on for national review in developing the 2006 EQIP program and beyond. A compilation of state comments will be presented at a national listening session tentatively scheduled for spring.