

Notices

Federal Register

Vol. 68, No. 114

Friday, June 13, 2003

This section of the FEDERAL REGISTER contains documents other than rules or proposed rules that are applicable to the public. Notices of hearings and investigations, committee meetings, agency decisions and rulings, delegations of authority, filing of petitions and applications and agency statements of organization and functions are examples of documents appearing in this section.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Commodity Credit Corporation

Grassland Reserve Program

AGENCY: Commodity Credit Corporation, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of availability of program funds for the Grassland Reserve Program.

SUMMARY: The Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) announces the availability of \$49,492,000 to implement the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) in fiscal year 2003. Section 2401 of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Pub. L. 107-171) amended the Food Security Act of 1985 to authorize this program. The Secretary of Agriculture delegated the authority to administer GRP on behalf of the CCC, to the Administrator, Farm Service Agency (FSA) and the Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). These agency leaders are officers of the CCC.

Although this notice applies only to funds made available in FY2003, CCC will, at a later date, issue a regulation for FY 2004 through FY 2007 program implementation. The rule will address and seek comment on a number of issues including: the process for establishing program priorities and criteria; the administration of easements and long-term contracts; the process of allocating and focusing funding at State and local levels; and the process for private organizations and State agencies to apply to hold and enforce GRP easements.

DATES: Funds will be available from June 30, 2003 through September 30, 2003.

ADDRESSES: Address all comments to Charles Whitmore, Acting Director, Conservation Operations Division, Natural Resources Conservation Service, P.O. Box 2890, Washington, DC 20013, (202) 720-1845, fax 202-720-4265; Submit electronic comments to

FarmBillRules@usda.gov; Attn: Grassland Reserve Program.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Leslie Deavers, Watersheds and Wetlands Division, Natural Resources Conservation Service, P.O. 2890, Washington, DC 20013, (202) 720-1067, fax (202) 720-2143, e-mail: *leslie.deavers@usda.gov*.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Grasslands constitute the largest land cover on America's private lands. Privately-owned grasslands and shrublands cover more than 525 million acres in the United States. These lands contribute significantly to the economies of many regions, provide biodiversity of plant and animal populations, and play a key role in environmental quality. Specifically, grasslands and shrublands impact water quantity and quality and, when properly managed, can result in cleaner water supplies, healthy riparian areas, reduce potential for flooding, and control sediment loadings in streams and other water bodies. These lands are vital for the production of forage for domestic livestock, and provide forage and habitat for maintaining healthy wildlife populations. These lands also improve the aesthetic character of the landscape, provide scenic vistas and open space, provide recreational opportunities, and protect the soil from water and wind erosion.

Large expanses of grassland acreage are annually threatened by conversion to other land uses such as cropland and urban development. Approximately 23 million acres of grassland and shrubland were converted to cropland between 1982 and 1997, and about six million acres were converted to urban and other uses (1997 NRI).

Background

Section 2401 of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Pub. L. 107-171) amended the Food Security Act of 1985 to authorize GRP (16 U.S.C. 3838n-3838q). The purpose of the program is to assist landowners with restoring and conserving grassland, rangeland, pastureland, and certain other lands. The statute provides that no more than two million acres of restored or improved grassland, rangeland, and pastureland can be enrolled in the program through FY 2007. The program offers landowners the option to grant an easement to the Secretary or enter into

a long-term agreement to preserve and protect the ecological benefits of eligible land.

The GRP statute requires the Secretary to consider grazing operations, biodiversity, and grassland under the greatest threat of conversion when evaluating and ranking applications. In FY 2003, CCC plans to use GRP to protect grazing lands from conversion and support efforts to maintain or enhance biodiversity.

Although CCC is implementing the program nationwide in FY2003, it recognizes that with limited funding and large pool of eligible acreage, nationwide implementation may result in a large number of applications remaining unfunded. Therefore, the application selection criteria are critical to ensure only the highest priority areas are protected.

Definitions

For the purposes of this notice, the following definitions apply.

Conservation plan means a record of the decisions, and supporting information, for the conservation treatment of a unit of land or water. The conservation plan includes the schedule of operations, activities, and estimated expenditures, if needed to solve identified natural resource concerns.

Eligible applicant means the landowner(s) for easement applications because only a landowner can transfer land rights. Easement applications will only be considered when the applicant can provide evidence of ownership. For annual rental agreements, eligible applicant means both landowners and operators who have evidence of control of the land for the agreement period.

Eligible practices means any practice identified in the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) that enhances or restores native grasses, forbs, or shrubs as determined by the NRCS State Conservationist.

Fair market value for easement acquisition means the amount determined through a real property appraisal that will be used to calculate the offer to the participant. Fair market value is the amount in cash, or on terms reasonably equivalent to cash, for which in all probability the property would have sold on the effective date of the appraisal, after a reasonable exposure time on the open competitive market, from a willing and reasonably knowledgeable seller to a willing and