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Announcement at Pheasant Fest Marks 25th Anniversary of CRP, Opens New Conservation Opportunities to Landowners

OMAHA, Jan. 28, 2011 — Speaking today at National Pheasant Fest 2011, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced that the next general signup for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) will begin on March 14, 2011, and continue through April 15, 2011. This is the second consecutive year that USDA has offered a general CRP signup.

"Over the past 25 years, support for CRP has grown thanks to strong backing from farmers, ranchers, conservationists, hunters, fishermen and other outdoor sports enthusiasts," said Vilsack. "Not only has CRP contributed to the national effort to improve water and air quality, it has preserved habitat for wildlife, and prevented soil erosion by protecting the most sensitive areas including those prone to flash flooding and runoff. Today's announcement continues the Obama Administration's effort to conserve sensitive areas and improve wildlife habitat."

Through CRP, eligible landowners receive annual rental payments and cost-share assistance to establish long-term, resource conserving covers on eligible farmland. Land can be enrolled for a period of up to 15 years. During the general signup period, farmers and ranchers may offer eligible land at their county Farm Service Agency (FSA) office. Land currently not enrolled in CRP may be offered in this signup provided all eligibility requirements are met. Additionally, current CRP participants with contracts expiring this fall may make new contract offers. Contracts awarded under this signup are scheduled to become effective Oct. 1, 2011. The general sign-up for CRP will not affect cropped acres for this growing season. Acres will be enrolled in the program in the fall.

To help ensure that interested farmers and ranchers are aware of the signup period, USDA has signed partnership agreements with several conservation and wildlife organizations that will play an active role in USDA's 2011 CRP outreach efforts. They include; Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, National Association of State Foresters, Playa Lakes Joint Venture (Lesser Prairie Chicken/Sage Grouse), and the Longleaf Incorporated Bobwhite Conservation Initiative.

The FSA implements CRP on behalf of Commodity Credit Corporation. FSA will evaluate and rank eligible CRP offers using an Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) that shows the environmental benefits to be gained from enrolling the land in CRP. The EBI consists of five environmental factors (wildlife, water, soil, air and enduring benefits) and cost. Decisions on the EBI cutoff will be made after the sign-up ends and after analyzing the EBI data of all the offers.

In addition to the general sign-up, CRP's continuous sign-up program will be ongoing. Continuous acres represent the most environmentally desirable and sensitive land. For more information, visit http://www.fsa.usda.gov/crp .

CRP protects millions of acres of American topsoil from erosion and is designed to safeguard the Nation's natural resources. By reducing water runoff and sedimentation, CRP protects groundwater and helps improve the condition of lakes, rivers, ponds, and streams. Acreage enrolled in the CRP is planted to resource-conserving vegetative covers, making the program a major contributor to increased wildlife populations in many parts of the country. Through the 2008 Farm Bill, CRP is authorized for a maximum enrollment of 32 million acres. USDA estimates that contracts on 3.3 million to 6.5 million acres are scheduled to expire annually between now and 2014.