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DATA SHARING AGREEMENT TO ENHANCE CONSERVATION PROGRAM ANALYSIS AND DELIVERY

Columbia, SC, April 24, 2007 - Officials with USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) recently announced a new formal inter-agency data sharing effort that allows the agencies to better measure and document conservation program benefits and delivery.

"The data sharing agreement will expand FSA's ability to calculate benefits provided by the Conservation Reserve Program and similar practices, help the agencies target areas with the greatest need and ensure that the benefits of taxpayer dollars are maximized," said FSA Administrator Teresa Lasseter. "These are important elements of the President's Management Agenda, and illustrate how agencies can work together to improve government efficiency."

NRCS Chief Arlen L. Lancaster said, "Data sharing is the logical next step to making conservation programs available to more people than ever before. This agreement strengthens the Nation's investment in conservation by creating a more efficient system for managing the taxpayers' financial resources."

Recently, officials with FSA, NRCS, U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) formalizing and extending the agencies' cooperative efforts to develop and implement science-based measures of environmental benefits from conservation. NRCS Chief Arlen Lancaster, FSA Deputy Administrator for Farm Programs John Johnson, USFWS Chief H. Dale Hall and USGS Associate Director for Biology Susan Haseltine signed the agreement during the 72nd North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference in Portland, Ore.

Under the MOU, agencies agree to share data and expertise to identify and quantify benefits from conservation programs and practices. The agreement also demonstrates the

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commitment of FSA, NRCS, USFWS and USGS for developing and adopting more comprehensive, common measures of conservation benefits. Additionally, sharing resources will allow agencies to conduct integrated analyses and use research funds more effectively. These measures will help provide more efficient and better targeted conservation programs.

The agreement builds on data sharing efforts by the agencies in recent years that resulted in successful analyses including:

- Two USFWS studies that show the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is helping to produce and sustain millions of ducks and grassland birds in parts of North Dakota, South Dakota and Montana. Researchers used CRP and geospatial data, USDA and Department of Interior resource data, and USFWS waterfowl survey data to conduct the studies.
- A study by USGS's Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center identified and quantified the environmental services provided when Prairie Pothole wetlands are restored. These benefits include enhanced water quality, reduced erosion, healthier wildlife populations and increased carbon sequestration. This analysis resulted from sharing and integrating multiple FSA, NRCS and USGS databases, use of emerging geospatial techniques and cooperation between the agencies' scientific staffs.

"Conservation on private lands plays a critical role in sustaining our country's soil and water resources," said South Carolina NRCS State Conservationist Walter Douglas. "This inter-agency effort of sharing information will enhance program effectiveness and pinpoint areas where improvement is needed."

FSA implements CRP on behalf of USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC). CRP is the nation's largest private-lands conservation program with more than 36 million acres enrolled. Through CRP, farmers and ranchers enroll eligible land in 10 to 15 year contracts. Participants plant appropriate cover such as grasses and trees in crop fields and along streams. The plantings help prevent soil and nutrients from running into regional waterways and affecting water quality. The long-term vegetative cover also improves wildlife habitat and soil quality.

NRCS provides technical and financial assistance through voluntary conservation programs such as Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA), the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Security Program (CSP), and the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) that enable people to be better stewards of the nation's soil, water, and related natural resources on non-Federal lands.

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