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NRCS Finalizes 2005 EQIP Ranking Criteria

CHAMPAIGN, IL— USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has received more than \$12.6 million in financial assistance funds for the 2005 Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) in Illinois. EQIP has a continuous sign-up process for applicants. The first cutoff date for selecting new applications is January 20, 2005; the second cutoff date is set for March 18, 2005. Producers with those applications selected to receive cost-share funds are based on statewide ranking criteria and will be notified by NRCS. Producers who have not yet applied or who are interested should visit their local county NRCS office today.

Details of NRCS' EQIP Ranking Criteria for Illinois will be available online, as other EQIP application forms and information are currently. The intention of NRCS' ranking system is to identify producers who make the greatest improvement to the environment. Applications with the highest ranking will be the first recipients of NRCS' federal funding assistance. According to NRCS Farm Bill Coordinator Paula Hingson, “Those applications not funded from the last sign-up will be NOT be automatically included in the application process. Producers must contact NRCS and indicate any updates or changes in their operation and let us know they want to be put back into the ranking selections.”

Ranking criteria for Illinois for 2005 is again divided into the following categories: Confined Livestock Operations, Grazing Land Operations, and Non-Livestock Related Agricultural Operations. Criteria for livestock operations focus on waste management, prescribed grazing, and water quality, while non-livestock related operations focus on reduction of soil erosion, improvement to water quality, and creation of quality wildlife habitat. From the \$12.6 million total, 60% will help target livestock related applications and 40% to applications not related to livestock. Of the livestock funds, 60% will target confined operations and 40 % will be directed to grazing land operations.

"As always, NRCS has worked with our clients and partners to develop ranking criteria that best fits the environmental needs we have here in Illinois," explains NRCS' State Conservationist Bill Gradle. **New to this year's criteria is credit for the use of Drainage Water Management practices, which improves water quality. Producers using drainage management can receive a \$5 an acre incentive for the affected area. These funds are designed to help support management costs for a three-year period. Producers can also receive cost-share assistance for the expense of components associated with drainage management. Drainage Management is a practice that is only used on certain landscapes found in the state.**

In addition, NRCS' EQIP offers easier access to the Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP) incentive, a \$1,000 lump sum payment designed to encourage landowners to secure a nutrient management plan in order to protect their operations and prepare for upcoming NPDES requirements. "This serves as a financial incentive to our clients through this continuous CNMP sign-up and a way to ensure landowners are creating quality conservation plans that protect their farms and our natural resources," adds Gradle. According to Gradle, producers with a CNMP can secure higher EQIP rankings.

EQIP is just one of the 2002 Farm Bill's effective and time-tested conservation programs. Applications and plan development for EQIP are underway across the state of Illinois and the nation. NRCS evaluates and ranks applications to determine which contracts will receive cost-share assistance. "EQIP has been instrumental in helping Illinois producers be better stewards of the land," says Gradle.

To learn more about EQIP or to view all ranking criteria and cost-share assistance rates, visit <http://www.il.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/index.html>

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