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USDA Seeks New Project Proposals to Improve Water Quality in Mississippi River Basin *USDA Expands Initiative to Include South Dakota; Proposals due January 28, 2011*

WASHINGTON, Dec. 17, 2010 – Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today announced the U.S. Department of Agriculture is seeking proposals for new conservation projects that support comprehensive efforts already underway to improve the water quality and overall health of the Mississippi River from North-Central Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico.

"The Mississippi River is one of America's most valuable water resources," Vilsack said. "Through the cumulative actions of conservation-minded farmers, we can continue to provide our nation with the food, fiber and fuel we rely on, while at the same time ensuring cleaner waters than we've seen in decades."

As part of its Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative, USDA is providing up to \$40 million in financial assistance for new partnership projects in 43 priority watersheds in 13 states. USDA will use a competitive process to distribute the available funding through existing conservation programs such as the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative and the Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program.

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service administers this initiative, first announced in 2009. At that time the following 12 states participated—Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee and Wisconsin. This fiscal year USDA is adding South Dakota to the list of participating states in response to a recent comprehensive cropland study assessing conservation effects in the Upper Mississippi Basin, which includes South Dakota and several states listed above. The USDA study showed that much progress has been made in reducing excessive sediment losses on cropland acres in eight states; however additional treatment is needed on cropland acres in all the states.

Through approved projects, eligible farmers and landowners will voluntarily implement conservation practices that avoid, control and trap nutrient runoff; improve wildlife habitat; restore wetlands; and maintain agricultural productivity.

Key conservation practices include nutrient management, conservation crop rotations and residue and tillage management. Farmers and landowners can also restore wetlands and plant trees along streams to filter nutrients out of water draining off the farm. On a voluntary basis, participants can use financial assistance to install edge-of-field monitoring systems in specific locations within the selected watersheds. This monitoring will allow NRCS to assess environmental outcomes of the project.

USDA published its Request for Proposals (RFP) in the Federal Register recently, and project proposals are due on or before Jan. 28, 2011. The RFP explains the procedures for potential partners to sign agreements with USDA for projects that support the initiative's objectives.

Federally recognized Indian tribes, state and local units of governments, farmer cooperatives, producer associations, institutions of higher education and other nongovernmental organizations can download the RFP at <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2010-11-29/html/2010-29958.htm>.

The RFP contains a list of the eligible watersheds as well as information about where project proposals should be submitted.

USDA also is seeking applications for Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG), with priority given to new projects in the Mississippi River Basin. Pre-proposal applications must be submitted by close of business Dec. 28, 2010. The CIG program funds the best new ideas for achieving environmental goals on agricultural lands.

In addition to the new projects, Vilsack also announced funding for existing projects in this initiative on Nov. 29, 2010. Forty-three million in financial assistance from conservation programs will be used to support more than 70 existing projects in the 12 states.

For more information about the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative, including the RFP and the eligible watersheds, as well as the CIG requirements, visit http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/mrbi/mrbi_overview.html.

NRCS celebrates its 75th anniversary in 2010 and the federal commitment to conserve natural resources on private and Tribal lands. Originally established by Congress in 1935 as the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), NRCS has expanded to become a conservation leader for all natural resources, ensuring private lands are conserved, restored, and more resilient to environmental challenges.

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