

USDA Seeks Comment On Conservation Program Rule

By Administrator
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RALEIGH, (SGRToday.com) - The U.S. Department of Agriculture is seeking input from farmers and ranchers on a rule intended to simplify regulations regarding conservation practice scheduling, payment limitations and other administrative actions.

The rule outlines how the agency will improve the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), one of USDA's largest conservation programs. The interim final rule includes program changes authorized by Congress in the 2014 Farm Bill.

USDA has established a 60-day comment period for the rule. The rule is expected to be available in the Federal Register and regulations.gov on Friday, Dec. 12. Beginning Friday, public comments can be submitted through regulations.gov or by mailing them.

Comments are due by Feb. 10, 2015. Full details are in the Federal Register notice.

According to the USDA, rule change highlights include:

Requires at least 5 percent of available EQIP funds be targeted for conservation practices that promote wildlife habitat;

Establishes EQIP as a contributing program for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program;

Increases the advanced payment from 30 percent to 50 percent for eligible historically underserved producers, including beginning farmers, to help purchase material or contract services;

Targets assistance to veteran farmers and ranchers including eligibility for the new 50 percent advance payment and up to 90 percent of the cost to implement EQIP conservation practices;

Increases the payment limitation for EQIP from \$300,000 to a maximum of \$450,000 for benefits received during 2014-2018 and removes the option for a waiver to exceed payment limitations;

Eliminates the requirement for a program contract to remain in place for one year after the last practice has been implemented, allowing practices to be scheduled through the tenth year of a contract;

Includes an option to waive the irrigation history requirement under certain conditions;