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**For Immediate Release**

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**JOHANNES ANNOUNCES SIGN-UP, EXPANSION, AMENDMENT TO INTERIM FINAL RULE  
FOR 2005 CONSERVATION SECURITY PROGRAM**

*Sign-Up Begins March 28 in 220 Watersheds Nationwide*

WASHINGTON, March 17, 2005—Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns today announced a nationwide sign-up for the Conservation Security Program (CSP) that will be available to approximately 235,000 farmers and ranchers in 220 watersheds, during remarks at the National Agriculture Day Luncheon. Sign-up will be held March 28 through May 27.

“As President Bush has stated, those who depend on the land to make a living are the best stewards of the land,” said Johanns. “This is a unique program that offers payments for enhancing natural resources, rewards those farmers and ranchers who are model conservationists and provides incentives for other producers to meet those same high standards of environmental performance.”

The 220 watersheds selected represent more than 185 million acres in every state and the Caribbean Area. The 2005 CSP sign-up includes the 202 watersheds announced by USDA on Nov. 2, 2004, and the 18 pioneer watersheds from the fiscal year 2004 sign-up. Producers who have a current CSP contract are not eligible for this sign-up. The sign-up announcement and an amendment to the CSP interim final rule that will detail specific program requirements will be published in the Federal Register soon.

Congress funded the fiscal year 2005 CSP budget at \$202 million. This allows the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to write an estimated 12,000 to 14,000 contracts. Most working agricultural lands will be eligible, including cropland, orchards, vineyards, pasture and range.

CSP is a voluntary conservation program that supports ongoing stewardship of private, agricultural working lands and rewards those producers who are meeting the highest standards of conservation and environmental management on their operations.

The CSP program sign-up includes a renewable energy component. Eligible producers will receive compensation for converting to renewable energy fuels such as soy biodiesel and ethanol, for recycling 100 percent of on-farm lubricants, and for implementing energy production, including wind, solar, geothermal and methane production.

Payments will be made using three tiers of conservation contracts and are capped at \$20,000, \$35,000 and \$45,000 annually and will last for 5 years for Tier I and 5 to 10 years for Tier II and Tier III.

Payments can include four components: 1) an annual stewardship component for the base level of conservation treatment, 2) an annual component for maintenance of existing conservation practices, 3) a one-time new practice component for additional needed practices, and 4) an enhancement component for exceptional conservation effort. Enhancement activities could include limited pesticide applications, total farm energy audits, shelterbelts for wildlife and air quality, and riparian forest buffers for restoring critical stream habitat.

To apply for CSP, NRCS asks potential participants to complete a self-assessment workbook—available on the Web or from local NRCS offices—to determine if their operations meet the requirements of the program and qualify for program participation. The self-assessment process is completed using a self-screening questionnaire for each land use to be enrolled.

When this process is completed, the producer submits the workbook to the local NRCS office during the sign-up period and meets with NRCS personnel to go over any additional needed documentation. NRCS will then determine which enrollment category the producer qualifies for and selects the categories to be funded through CSP.

Additional information on CSP, including eligible watersheds, self-assessment workbook and the amendment to the interim final rule, is available at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/csp>.

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