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# NEWS RELEASE

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **USDA announces early sign-up for conservation programs in Massachusetts**

**Farmers, forest land owners encouraged to apply by October 15<sup>th</sup> for federal assistance**

AMHERST, Mass. (July 21, 2010) — Massachusetts farmland or forest land owners and managers who would like help with soil erosion, water quality and conservation, integrated pest management, forest stand improvement, greenhouse efficiency, pasture and hayland improvement, invasive plant control or wildlife habitat improvement are encouraged to sign-up by **October 15<sup>th</sup>** for federal conservation programs available through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

"Applications for NRCS programs may be submitted at any time, but by applying by October 15<sup>th</sup>, landowners can start the conservation planning process with the assistance of NRCS staff and be ready for the next round of federal funding when it's available," said Elvis Graves, Acting Massachusetts State Conservationist for NRCS. "A conservation plan is the essential first step to participating in federal conservation programs."

USDA service center locations are listed on-line at <http://offices.usda.gov> or in the phone book under Federal Government, U.S. Department of Agriculture. General program information is available on the NRCS Massachusetts website at [www.ma.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.ma.nrcs.usda.gov).

"NRCS conservationists discuss with landowners their conservation objectives, help them identify resource concerns and suggest alternatives for treatment. They will also identify conservation programs that may provide financial help to implement practices," said Graves.

With financial and technical assistance from NRCS, farmers and other landowners promote environmental quality on farmland and forest land. The 2008 Farm Bill, under which NRCS programs are authorized, identified several high priority environmental protection goals including water quality, pollinator habitat and wildlife habitat improvement, and alternative energy development and conservation.

The 2008 Farm Bill provides additional incentives for landowners who are beginning, have limited resources, or who are socially disadvantaged because they belong to racial or ethnic groups that have historically been subjected to prejudice. Such landowners can receive up to 90 percent of the costs associated with planning and implementing conservation measures and up to 30 percent of expected costs may be provided in advance.

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Among the voluntary conservation programs authorized in the 2008 Farm Bill are:

- **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)** – EQIP helps farmers and forest landowners address water quality, water conservation, invasive species control, soil quality, erosion control, nutrient and pest management, residue management, irrigation efficiency, energy conservation, air quality and other natural resource concerns. In Massachusetts, EQIP is also available to help greenhouse operations with water quality and conservation practices, aquaculture operations with best management practices, and certified organic growers and those transitioning to organic production with specific conservation practices. Massachusetts farmers can also receive help establishing seasonal high tunnels to extend the growing season in an environmentally friendly manner.
- **Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)** – WHIP provides assistance to landowners who want to improve fish and wildlife habitat or restore natural ecosystems on their land.
- **Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA)** – AMA helps farmers adopt conservation practices that will reduce or mitigate risks to their agricultural enterprises. In Massachusetts, financial and technical assistance is available to producers for drought mitigation.
- **Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP)** – GRP is a voluntary program offering landowners the opportunity to protect, restore, and enhance grasslands on their property.

In Massachusetts for federal fiscal year 2010, NRCS provided \$6.6 million for 244 EQIP contracts, \$568,000 for 30 WHIP contracts and \$209,000 for 12 AMA contracts statewide.

NRCS is celebrating its 75th year of helping people conserve, maintain, and improve our natural resources and environment. NRCS has offices in Greenfield, Hadley, Holden, Hyannis, Pittsfield, Westford, and West Wareham, which work with local conservation districts and other partners to serve farmers and landowners throughout the commonwealth.

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