NRCS Announces New Agricultural Water Enhancement Program to Improve Water Quality and Quantity in Agricultural Productions

Auburn, Alabama, Aug. 14, 2009 - U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service State Conservationist Dr. William Puckett today announced that $1.58 million in financial assistance was approved for the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP). NRCS will begin accepting applications for AWEP on August 17, 2009. The signup period will end on August 25, 2009.

"We must take steps to protect and preserve our water resources, and AWEP provides financial and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers to improve water conditions on their land," said Puckett.

The Agricultural Water Enhancement Program promotes ground and surface water conservation and improves water quality by helping farmers and ranchers implement agricultural water enhancement activities. Alabama AWEP will focus on the installation of upland storage ponds. Stored water will be used during the summer for irrigation. Practices that will be available include:

- Constructing upland irrigation storage ponds
- Installing pumps and pipelines to fill storage ponds
- Irrigation system improvements or irrigation efficiency enhancements to improve the efficiency of and reduce the energy needs of existing irrigation systems
- Installation of soil moisture sensors and water meters to monitor and improve irrigation efficiencies

AWEP was established by the 2008 Farm Bill and funding comes from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) administers the program for USDA. NRCS implements AWEP by entering into EQIP contracts directly with agricultural producers. Funding for this project was a direct result of a grant proposal by the Alabama Farmers Federation, the Alabama Soil and Water Conservation Committee, and the Alabama Universities Irrigation Initiative.
All AWEP recipients must meet EQIP requirements. It is designed for bona fide agricultural producers that have been in crop production and have the need for water. The amount of storage will be determined by an irrigation budget based on the exact amount of water justified by the crops produced. Applicants must be in agricultural production in order to apply. The statewide signup will be continuous with the first batching period ending on August 25, 2009. Successive batching periods may occur if additional funds become available.

Applicants will be ranked competitively statewide based on their needs and how much water they are conserving. Those applications that do not impact wetlands, those that have practices like conservation tillage on the land they are irrigating to improve infiltration and decrease runoff, and those that improve the efficiency of existing irrigation systems will rank higher than others. When applicants are ranked, they will be funded in order of rank until funds are exhausted. Applicants will be notified if funded and EQIP contracts will be developed with their input to implement the plan over a 3-4 year period.

For information about AWEP, producers can visit their local NRCS field office listed in the telephone directory under U.S. Department of Agriculture or on-line at http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov.