

## Ohio River Basin Conservation Gets \$146 Million Boost

**HOOKSTOWN, Pennsylvania**, March 23, 2004 (ENS) - Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman travelled to Hookstown in the Ohio River basin on Monday to announce a 15 year, \$146 million Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) agreement with Pennsylvania to improve water conditions in the Ohio River, the third largest drainage basin in the Gulf of Mexico watershed.

"This program will improve western Pennsylvania's surface water quality, groundwater quality and wildlife habitat in a 16 county area," Veneman said. Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell, Senator Arlen Specter and Congresswoman Melissa Hart were at the signing ceremony in Hookstown with state and local officials.

CREP is a voluntary program that pays participants to implement conservation practices on environmentally sensitive land. In return, participants receive annual rental payments paid on a per-acre basis, cost-share assistance and other financial incentives.

CREP combines the Conservation Reserve Program with state programs to meet state and national environmental objectives. CREP partnerships with states, tribal governments and private groups are intended to provide a coordinated approach to address conservation issues.

The Ohio River is formed at the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers in Pittsburgh, and one-third of the state lies within the river's basin. Planting grasses, trees and other vegetation along 65,000 targeted acres of cropland and marginal pastureland will help restore and protect wetlands, highly erodible land and riparian areas along the basin.

The Ohio River Basin CREP is expected to reduce sediment, nitrogen and phosphorous entering the basin, which will also help address the Gulf of Mexico's hypoxia zone issues. Hypoxia, the loss of oxygen, occurs in Gulf waters when excess nutrients, such as nitrogen and phosphorous, accumulate and cause algae to flourish. Algae depletes the oxygen, essentially causing dead zones.

The improved water quality will create habitat for declining grassland, riparian and wetland dependent plant and animal species.

The total program cost over a 15 year period is estimated at \$146 million, with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) contributing \$99 million and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania funding \$47 million. Throughout this period, participants will receive incentive payments and cost-share assistance for installing approved conservation practices.

The USDA will also provide annual rental payments for the life of the contract. Pennsylvania will offer cost-share assistance, technical assistance to plan approved conservation practices and in-kind services to implement the practices.

Signup for the Pennsylvania CREP will begin April 19 and continues until enrollment goals are attained or through December 31, 2007, whichever comes first. Land enrolled in the program will remain under contract for a period of 10 to 15 years, as specified in the contract.

Producers can obtain more information from the Farm Service Agency online at:

<http://www.fsa.usda.gov/dafp/cepd/default.htm>.

While in Hookstown, Veneman also released the interim final rule for Conservation Innovation Grants and announced that \$15 million will be available to fund selected grant proposals.

The grants will fund projects targeting innovative on-the-ground conservation, including pilot projects and field demonstrations. Project proposals may address areas such as market based pollution credit trading, agricultural conservation systems, carbon sequestration and reduction of applied nutrients, Veneman suggested.

"This program provides a great opportunity to promote conservation technologies and stimulate innovative approaches to environmental enhancement and protection on working lands," Veneman said. "Farmers and ranchers will benefit by having new technologies to protect the environment and comply with federal, state and local regulations."

Information about Conservation Innovation Grants is available at:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/cig>

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