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Winter Ideal Time to Review Compliance Plans

Winter is the ideal time for landowners to review conservation compliance plans, according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the U.S. Department of Agriculture's lead conservation agency.

The NRCS encourages landowners to review their compliance plans for highly erodible land and wetlands now, while making plans for spring planting. "Reviewing compliance plans now will allow landowners to ensure they have practices in place to maintain eligibility for USDA programs," says Leroy Brown, State Conservationist for the Iowa NRCS.

Conservation compliance remains an integral part of the 2002 Farm Bill even though it was implemented in the 1985 Farm Bill. Landowners interested in participating in conservation and commodity programs that were re-authorized or created in the 2002 Farm Bill will be required to follow compliance provisions previously established for highly erodible land and wetlands. "By reviewing compliance plans now landowners will be ready to participate in Farm Bill programs when funding is received," says Brown.

In order to be eligible for USDA program payments, landowners with highly erodible land (HEL) are required to maintain a fully applied conservation system, outlined in their conservation plan.

Wetland compliance requires landowners that are considering altering a wet area (by removing trees, tiling, dredging, etc.) to receive a wetland determination from the NRCS prior to beginning any work. If a wetland determination is made on the land, landowners have the option to leave the wetland unchanged, or to request mitigation. Mitigation allows the landowner to alter a wetland as long as equal wetland values are replaced in another location.

Since implementation of the 1985 Farm Bill, NRCS has provided assistance to producers to develop conservation compliance plans on highly erodible land. Ultimately it is the producer's responsibility to implement and maintain conservation systems on highly erodible land.

Local NRCS office staff can provide landowners with information on acceptable conservation practices included in their compliance plans or alternatives necessary to achieve and maintain compliance. Landowners considering changes to their farming operation on highly erodible land or wet areas should contact their local NRCS office. Changes in ownership may also require plan revisions.

Compliance reviews are conducted annually by the NRCS to determine if producers have applied and are maintaining approved conservation systems. Tracts of land are randomly selected for review from a national database of farm program participants. Additional tracts may be reviewed as a result of a report to the NRCS or other USDA agency of

possible non-compliance. Producers scheduled for reviews will be notified in the spring, and the reviews are typically conducted right after planting.

Brown encourages landowners with questions or concerns about their compliance plans to contact their local NRCS office.

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