

## **USDA AND OKLAHOMA PARTNER FOR 9,000-ACRE CONSERVATION PLAN**

WASHINGTON, April 23, 2007 - Agriculture Deputy Secretary Chuck Conner today announced a new \$20.6 million cooperative conservation partnership with the State of Oklahoma to create up to 9,000 acres of riparian buffers and filter strips. The conservation plantings will reduce the flow of nutrients, sediment and other pollutants in the Spavinaw Lake and Illinois River/Lake Tenkiller watersheds.

"I'm pleased to announce this new Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program as we celebrate Earth Day. Through this project, USDA and the state of Oklahoma will help landowners and operators establish effective conservation practices to enhance water quality in eastern Oklahoma," said Conner. "Voluntary programs like this represent President Bush's commitment to the environment and exemplify how Cooperative Conservation promotes a healthier rural landscape."

Conner and Oklahoma Governor Brad Henry signed the project agreement during a special ceremony today at the Oklahoma Capital Building in Oklahoma City. Oklahoma Secretary of Agriculture Terry Peach, Oklahoma Secretary of Environment Miles Tolbert, Oklahoma Conservation Commission Executive Director Mike Thralls, Tulsa Metropolitan Utilities Authority Chairman R. Louis Reynolds, Oklahoma Scenic Rivers Commission Chairman Bill Blackard and USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) Oklahoma State Executive Director Jim Reese also participated in the event. Key CREP partners also include the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, Oklahoma Scenic Rivers Commission, City of Tulsa, local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, the USDA Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC), FSA and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

USDA and the State of Oklahoma titled the new program the Spavinaw Lake and Illinois River/Lake Tenkiller Watersheds Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (Oklahoma CREP). The project area includes parts of Adair, Cherokee, Delaware, Mayes and Sequoyah counties. This new Oklahoma CREP project seeks to filter runoff, stabilize stream banks, shade stream channels, and improve drinking water and aquatic habitat by creating 500 acres of filter strips and 8,500 acres of riparian buffers. Program participants will install these conservation practices on eligible environmentally sensitive marginal pastureland and cropland in the Spavinaw Lake and Illinois River/Lake Tenkiller watersheds.

The project will also enhance wildlife habitat and preserve Oklahoma's natural resources by increasing the amount, quality and connectivity of protected riparian corridors. Other project goals include:

- Providing producers, through financial and technical assistance, an opportunity to protect water resources from current and future agricultural practices and development by entering into voluntary 14- to 15-year Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contracts and additional voluntary 15-year or permanent State easements;
- Reducing the effects of agriculture on water resources of the targeted project area by installing field buffers to filter and trap sediment, nutrients and bacteria;
- Reducing sediment loading by 3,700 tons, phosphorus loading by more than 19,000 pounds and nitrogen loading by more than 191,000 pounds annually; and
- Enrolling additional adjacent non-CREP forested grazing riparian acreage into a State Incentive Program.

Under Oklahoma CREP, participants will receive annual rental payments and other incentives for voluntarily enrolling land into contracts. FSA will administer Oklahoma CREP, with support from Oklahoma State CREP partners. Eligible landowners receive a one-time Practice Incentive Payment and a one-time Signing Incentive Payment. Also, 50 percent of the reimbursable costs of establishing eligible practices, compliance reviews and technical assistance will be provided. USDA will provide a total of \$16.5 million for Oklahoma CREP.

The State of Oklahoma will help identify eligible producers with appropriate land for enrollment in Oklahoma CREP. The state will provide payments to participants and pay a minimum of 20 percent of the overall costs of Oklahoma CREP, including payments for fencing and related costs for non-

CRP acreage. The state will also offer and administer the easement portion of the program. Additionally, it will provide staffing for the project, coordinate with other natural resource conservation programs at the local, state and federal levels, and provide other services. The State of Oklahoma will provide \$4.1 million in cash and in-kind services for Oklahoma CREP.

USDA will announce sign-up for Oklahoma CREP at a future date. USDA will accept offers for CRP contracts under this CREP on a first-come/first-served basis until the 9,000-acre goal is achieved or until Dec. 31, 2007, whichever comes first. More information about the program can be found in the Oklahoma CREP fact sheet posted online at <http://www.fsa.usda.gov>; click on Find FSA Fact Sheets.

CREP is part of CRP, which is also administered by FSA. CRP is the nation's largest private-lands conservation program with more than 36 million acres enrolled. Through CRP, farmers and ranchers enroll in 10- to 15-year contracts. They plant grasses and trees in crop fields and along streams. The plantings prevent soil and nutrients from running into regional waterways and affecting water quality. The long-term vegetative cover also improves wildlife habitat and soil quality.