To protect prime farmland, historic or archaeological sites in Nebraska, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has announced that $800,000 is available through the agency's Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program.

Nebraska conservation partners and land preservation groups have until Fe.1, 2010, to apply.

The Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) is a voluntary program that helps farmers and ranchers keep their land in agriculture while preventing the conversion of land to nonagricultural uses.

"This program can help communities preserve farm or ranch land and cultural resources," Steve Chick, NRCS state conservationist, said. "The program offers an excellent way to keep prime farmland in agriculture and, at the same time, keep farming and ranching communities thriving by relieving development pressures," he said.

NRCS is seeking proposals from organizations interested in working with landowners to acquire conservation easements on farms and ranches.

Applications from eligible entities may be submitted at anytime, but must be received by Feb. 1 to be considered for fiscal year 2010 funding. Proposals should be sent to: Steve Chick at the NRCS state office, Federal Building, 100 Centennial Mall North, Rm. 152, Lincoln, NE 68508.

The program provides matching funds to state, tribal or local governments and non-governmental organizations with existing farm and ranch land protection programs and the ability to purchase conservation easements. Landowners may also contribute up to 25% of the matching funds.

NRCS may provide up to 50% of the appraised fair market value of the conservation easement. The entities purchase perpetual easements from landowners in exchange for a lump sum payment, not to exceed the appraised fair market value of the land's development rights.

The eligible farm or ranch must have the following components:

- Contain productive soils or historic or archaeological sites;
- Furthers a state or local policy consistent with the purposes of the program;
- Be part of a pending offer from a nongovernmental organization, State, Tribe, or local farmland protection program;
- Privately owned;
- Covered by a conservation plan, and;
- Large enough to sustain agricultural production, or serve as a buffer to protect an agricultural operation from development.

To participate in FRPP landowners agree to limit the use of their land for nonagricultural purposes. Landowners keep possession of their land, and work with NRCS to develop and implement a conservation plan.

Parcels submitted by eligible entities will be ranked on the following factors:

- Percent of prime, unique, and important farmland in the parcel to be protected;
- Percent of cropland, pastureland, grassland, and rangeland in the parcel to be protected;
- Ratio of the total acreage of land in the parcel to be protected to average farm size in the county;
- Decrease in the percentage of acreage of farm and ranch land in the county in which the parcel is located;
- Percent of population growth in the county;
- Population density;
- Proximity of the parcel to other protected land; and
- Proximity of the parcel to other agricultural operations and infrastructure.

For more information about FRPP please contact Randy Epperson at 402-437-4048 or visit on-line
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