



Natural Resources Conservation Service
655 Parfet Street, Room E200C
Lakewood, Colorado 80215

- VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL -

To: Colorado Land Conservation Organizations

Date: May 27, 2009

Subject: Announcement of Application Cut-off Date
for the 2009 Grassland Reserve Program

DEADLINE: June 17, 2009

The Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) now affords land conservation organizations the opportunity to submit applications for program participation (for easements). In the past, applications were limited to those submitted by individual landowners, but that has changed with the 2008 Farm Bill. We are operating within a very tight schedule this fiscal year, and have established a cut-off date of **JUNE 17** to receive applications from cooperating entities.

Background:

GRP is a voluntary program offering landowners the opportunity to protect, restore, and enhance grasslands on their property. Section 2403 of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (Pub. L. 110-246) reauthorized GRP. The program emphasizes support for working grazing operations, enhancement of plant and animal biodiversity, and protection of grasslands under threat of conversion to cropping, urban development and other activities. Participants voluntarily limit future development of the land while retaining the right to conduct common grazing practices and operations using rental contracts and conservation easements. Priority enrollment consideration will be given to Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contracts that are within 12 months of expiration.

The program has two enrollment options: (1) permanent easements and (2) rental contracts with terms of 10-, 15-, or 20-years. Enrollment of eligible expiring CRP lands into GRP will be limited to perpetual easements or 20-year rental contracts.

GRP is jointly administered by the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). (The USDA Forest Service also has a role in holding easements on land adjacent to National Forests, at its discretion.)

NRCS coordinates most of the "front-end" program administration, including the technical aspects of application evaluation and ranking. NRCS administers and manages the easements. FSA manages the program funds and administers the rental contracts, once they have been selected for funding. Applications from cooperating land conservation organizations are limited to easement applications, so the following guidance will ignore rental contracts.

Key notes about the FY 2009 Grassland Reserve Program:

- GRP uses a continuous sign-up. Applications received after the cut-off date will be accepted and considered for funding in the next funding cycle.
- Until the revised program application form NRCS-CPA-1200 becomes available, applications can be accepted using form AD-1153. **CAUTION:** The form is out-of-date, as it includes references to GRP “30-year contracts” and “30-year easements.” Neither of these enrollment options is available now, per the 2008 Farm Bill.
- Final award selections will be jointly made by the Colorado NRCS State Conservationist and the Colorado FSA State Executive Director.

Cooperating Entity Applications:

The application requirements for cooperating land conservation organizations is fairly simple: just provide us with information that will allow us to complete Sections I and II of the Screening & Ranking Tool (the “screen” and “initial scoring section”). That includes ensuring that landowners of record are deemed eligible for USDA program participation by the FSA. That means they must have submitted, or should submit immediately, to the local FSA office forms CCC-926 and AD-1026 which deal with “average adjusted gross income” (AGI) and “highly erodible land conservation and wetland conservation” (HELC/WC) compliance requirements, respectively. We don’t need a separate narrative applications, although you are certainly free to submit anything that will help provide more information about the offered land, its management, and the conservation values. We will need, at a minimum, the following:

1. An “AD-1153” (application for program assistance) signed by the landowner(s).
2. Good quality maps at appropriate scales that depict:
 - The offered acres
 - The location of the offered lands within the regional landscape
 - Proximity to development
 - Proximity to cropland (as defined in the screening/ranking tool)
 - Proximity to other protected lands (as defined in the screening/ranking tool)
3. A custom soils report that identifies rangeland ecosites (i.e., “range sites”) associated with the soil map units, as well as the “Land Capability Classification” of the soils.
4. Documentation that will allow us to complete item “C3. Rangeland Suitability” in Section II of the ranking tool (i.e., documentation of adaptive grazing management).
5. Information about your organization, your legal ability to hold easements, and your experience in acquiring, managing, and enforcing conservation easements.
6. A budget, indicating estimates of easement value, the purchase price, landowner donation (if any), and the amount of funds you are requesting from GRP. (Note: We are limited to contributing no more than 50% of the purchase price for GRP easements.)
7. Proof of a pending offer. We need evidence that a landowner has clear intent to convey a conservation easement to your organization, even if the actual purchase price has not yet been established (because an appraisal has not been completed, for example).

The local NRCS can assist you in securing soils reports and some maps, but they are very busy, so please make any request with plenty of lead time.

Before submitting an application package to NRCS, complete Sections I and II of the Screening/Ranking Tool. If you can complete both parts, then you’ll know you have assembled enough documentation in your application. Submit application packages to Gary Finstad, Easements Coordinator, by close of business on **June 17**. Gary will coordinate with the

applicable NRCS field office to screen the application and perform initial scoring on those that pass the screen. These applications will be pooled, and compete, with all others. The highest ranked applications will be selected for a second round of scoring that will be field-based and performed by one or more NRCS technical teams. The teams will consist of at least one range conservationist and one biologist. (Note: The technical teams will coordinate with the applicant organization and landowner before arranging for a site visit. This will occur between June 22 and June 29.)

The fully scored applications will be sent to Gary Finstad no later than June 29. NRCS's national office has established a July 1 deadline for states to assess their ranked applications and to submit reports of pending projects with cost-estimates.

Also transmitted with this announcement are:

- ✓ Grassland Reserve Program Fact Sheet-Key Points
- ✓ 2009 GRP Screening & Ranking Tool
- ✓ The new GRP Conservation Easement Deed

When applications have been selected for funding, NRCS field staff will coordinate with the cooperating entity and the landowner to ensure a grazing management plan is in place for the offered acres.

Submit your application package (electronically, if possible) to:

Gary Finstad, Easements Coordinator, NRCS, Lakewood, CO

E-mail: Gary.Finstad@co.usda.gov

Mail: USDA NRCS, 655 Parfet Street

Room E200C

Lakewood, CO 80215

Phone: 720.544.2820

We look forward to working with you.

/s/

ALLEN GREEN
State Conservationist

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cc: Tim Carney, Assistant State Conservationist-Programs, NRCS, Lakewood, CO
Gary Finstad, Easements Coordinator, NRCS, Lakewood, CO
All Area Conservationists
All District Conservationists