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## *NEWS*

For Immediate Release:

### **USDA ANNOUNCES SIGN-UP FOR NEW GRASSLAND RESERVE PROGRAM**

DURHAM, June 26, 2003—Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman recently announced that the first sign-up for the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) will begin nationwide on June 30, 2003.

“Grasslands provide critical ecological benefits and play a key role in environmental quality, as well as contributing to the economies of many rural areas,” said Veneman. “This voluntary program helps protect valuable grasslands from conversion to other land uses, thus helping to ensure this resource is available to future generations.”

Applications for participation will be accepted on a continuous basis at local USDA Service Centers. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Farm Service Agency (FSA) and the Forest Service (FS) are coordinating the implementation of GRP, which helps landowners restore and protect grassland, rangeland, pastureland, shrubland and certain other lands and provides assistance for rehabilitating grasslands.

When properly managed, grasslands and shrublands can result in cleaner water supplies, healthier riparian areas and reduced sediment loadings in streams and other water bodies. These lands are vital for the production of forage for domestic livestock and provide forage and habitat for maintaining healthy wildlife populations. These lands also improve the aesthetic character of the landscape, provide scenic vistas and open space, provide for recreational activities and protect the soil from water and wind erosion.

GRP offers producers several enrollment options: permanent easements, 30-year easements, rental agreements (10, 15, 20 or 30-year duration) and

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restoration agreements. For permanent easements, USDA makes a payment based on the fair market value of the property less the grazing value. For rental agreements, USDA pays 75 percent of the grazing value in annual payments for the length of the agreement.

To participate in GRP, offers must be private land that includes at least 40 contiguous acres. If there is less acreage a waiver by the Secretary may be granted. Additional eligibility criteria are described in the “Notice of Availability of Program Funds for the Grassland Reserve Program” that was published in the Federal Register on June 13, 2003. This information is available on the NRCS website at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/>. For more information contact your local USDA Service Center or Conservation District Office, listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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