

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 19, 2006

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SNAKE PLAIN AQUIFER CONSERVATION AGREEMENT A WIN FOR WATER USERS AND ENVIRONMENT

Idaho and U.S. Department of Agriculture announce \$258 million agreement

Washington, D.C.—Idaho Senators Mike Crapo and Larry Craig and Congressmen Mike Simpson and C.L. “Butch” Otter say today’s announcement of an unprecedented \$258 million Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) Agreement between the State of Idaho and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will reduce demands on water and improve water quality and wildlife habitat. CREP is part of the Conservation Reserve Program. This is Idaho’s first CREP Agreement.

“This agreement is a major commitment to Idaho water conservation with benefits to water users while at the same time improving water quality and wildlife habitat,” the Delegation members said. “Once again, Idahoans are showing leadership in acting to assist species and preserve the environment in a cooperative and effective manner.”

The CREP agreement envisions enrolling up to 100,000 acres of irrigated cropland in the Idaho Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer and could reduce irrigated water use by 200,000 acre-feet annually. Groundwater levels will be increased under the plan, which would also establish new wetlands, grassland areas, and permanent vegetative cover for wildlife.

“The CREP program will be an effective tool in replenishing the Eastern Snake River Plain Aquifer and helping Idaho meet its conservation goals,” the Delegation members added. “We applaud the efforts of Governor Kempthorne and Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns in reaching this agreement and thank the many Idahoans who are partnering to improve the continued multiple use of Idaho’s jewel, the Snake River and the Snake River Plain Aquifer.

Producers can obtain more information on the Idaho Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer CREP at their local Farm Service Agency office and on FSA’s web site at <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/dafp/cepd/default.htm>.

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Release No. 1453.06

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**QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS - THE IDAHO EASTERN SNAKE PLAIN AQUIFER
CONSERVATION RESERVE ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM**

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1. What is the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program?

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is a federal-state cooperative conservation program that addresses targeted agricultural-related environmental concerns. CREP participants voluntarily enroll in 14 to 15 year Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contracts with USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC). Participants receive financial incentives, cost-share assistance and rental payments in exchange for removing cropland and marginal pastureland from agricultural production. Converting enrolled land to native grasses, trees and other vegetation improves soil retention and water, air and wildlife habitat quality. CRP and CREP are authorized by the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended.

2. What is the Idaho Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer CREP?

The Idaho Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer CREP targets the enrollment of up to 100,000 acres of eligible irrigated cropland to reduce irrigation water use, increase water quality, reduce soil erosion and sedimentation and increase wildlife populations. The CREP agreement is a partnership between USDA/CCC and the State of Idaho. In addition to CREP payments, Idaho State water authorities will enter into State Water Use Contracts with participants on CREP-enrolled land to help ensure that irrigation water is conserved during the 14 to 15 year CRP contract periods.

3. What are the potential benefits of the Idaho Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer CREP?

Enrolling up to 100,000 acres of eligible cropland will significantly reduce irrigation water consumption. The CREP will improve water quantity and quality in the Snake River and its tributaries by reducing agricultural chemicals and sediments. Establishing permanent vegetative cover will provide wildlife habitat for terrestrial and aquatic species.

4. What are the specific goals?

The goals of the Idaho Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer CREP when fully enrolled include:

- * Reduce irrigation water use by up to 200,000 acre-feet annually by reducing or ceasing water application on up to 100,000 irrigated cropland acres;
- * Improve the Snake River's water quality and flow by increasing the aquifer's groundwater

levels and tributary spring water discharge by up to 180 cubic feet per second;

- * Establish permanent vegetative covers to increase wildlife habitat and reduce the amount of agricultural chemicals, non-point source contaminants and sediment entering the water;

- * Improve habitat and populations of sage grouse, sharp-tailed grouse and other grassland-nesting birds by establishing up to 100,000 acres of native grassland habitat in the priority area;

- * Enhance habitat for fish species by increasing stream flow;

- * Improve water quality by reducing soil erosion and non-point pollution adjacent to streams and rivers; and

- * Reduce irrigation water pumping power consumption by 300-350 million kilowatt hours annually.

5. What are the eligibility requirements?

The Eastern Snake River Aquifer CREP Project area of eastern Idaho, includes all or parts of the following counties: Ada, Bingham, Blaine, Butte, Camas, Cassia, Clark, Custer, Elmore, Fremont, Gooding, Jefferson, Jerome, Lemhi, Lincoln, Madison, Minidoka, Owyhee, and Twin Falls. In addition, all or parts of Bannock, Bonneville and Power counties will be eligible if the total CRP enrollment drops below 25 percent of the County's total cropland before the CREP project reaches the 100,000 acre enrollment target.

Cropland must be eligible for the CRP under normal CRP rules. In this CREP project area irrigated cropland must be located within a State CRP Conservation Priority Area, or meet CRP's highly erodible land eligibility requirements. In addition, cropland must:

- * Have been irrigated by ground or surface water sources other than the main stem of the Snake River, at a rate no less than ½-acre-foot per acre for 4 out of the 6 years, 1996-2001;

- * Have been irrigated or included in an IDWR mitigation plan within 24 months prior to offer submission; and * Be physically and legally capable of being irrigated in a normal manner at the time offers are submitted.

(Note: Non-irrigated center pivot corners will not be eligible for enrollment in this project.)

Before CCC can approve a CREP contract, the producer must enter into a water use contract with the State of Idaho. The contract, "Agreement Not to Divert Water from the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer," covers all irrigated cropland to be enrolled in CREP. Other conditions also apply.

6. When is the sign-up and how long does land remain under contract?

The CREP sign-up begins May 30, 2006, and will continue until enrollment goals are attained, or through Dec. 31, 2007, whichever comes first. Enrolled land remains under contract for 14- to 15-years, as specified in the contract.

7. What conservation practices are approved for the CREP?

To better serve program goals, CCC has approved the following CRP conservation practices (CP) for the Idaho Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer CREP:

- * CP2 - Establishment of Permanent Native Grasses
- * CP4D - Permanent Wildlife Habitat, Noneasement

- * CP12 - Wildlife Food Plot
- * CP22 - Riparian Buffer (cropland only)
- * CP25 - Rare and Declining Habitat

8. What payments is CCC offering?

Subject to contract terms and certain limitations, CREP participants will be eligible for the following types of CCC payments:

- * Signing Incentive Payment: One-time additional payment of \$100 per acre for land enrolled in CP22. This payment is made after the contract has been signed and approved.
- * Practice Incentive Payment: One-time additional rental payment equal to 40 percent of the eligible reimbursable cost to establish CP22.
- * Cost-share Assistance: Up to 50 percent cost-share of reimbursable costs to install approved conservation practices.
- * Annual Rental Payment: Annual payment based on posted irrigated rental rates for each enrolled irrigated acre in which an "Agreement Not to Divert Water from the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer" has been secured under the CREP at the per-acre rates. The per-acre maximum irrigated rental rate is the sum of:
 - The posted per-acre weighted-average irrigated cropland rental rate; and
 - A per-acre maintenance incentive payment.

9. What payments and assistance is the State of Idaho offering?

Subject to contract terms and certain limitations, the State of Idaho will provide the following payments and assistance:

- * Idaho Incentive Payment: One-time payment of \$30 per acre to participants who:
 - Have been diverting groundwater from the CREP project's incentive area; and
 - Enter into an "Agreement Not to Divert Water from the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer" for the contract's duration.
- * Water Rights Acquisition: Provide \$5 million to purchase permanent private water rights within the CREP Project area, most of which will not pertain to CRP acreage enrolled under this CREP.
- * Pay all costs associated with the CREP annual monitoring programs.
- * Provide technical assistance to help participants develop conservation plans.
- * Contribute substantial additional funding for water management activities, natural resource planning, CREP operations staffing, and related functions consistent with the goals of the CREP project.

10. What is the cost?

The total cost over a 15-year period is estimated at \$258 million with CCC contributing \$183 million, or 71 percent, and the State of Idaho funding \$75 million, or 29 percent. The \$258 million does not include any costs that may be assumed by producers.

11. Can I still enroll in general and continuous sign-up CRP?

Yes. CREP is another option under CRP that farmers may select to enhance their land. Applicants may still enroll eligible land in the general CRP or continuous sign-up CRP. However, CREP provides additional benefits not available through general and/or continuous sign-up. For instance, CREP payments are at a higher effective per acre payment rate because

they are based in prevailing irrigated cash rental rates.

12. Can I hay or graze my CREP land?

Haying and grazing are not permitted during the CREP contract period unless CCC allows them for emergency or managed haying and grazing purposes, if applicable, under normal CRP rules.

13. Is CREP part of CCC's CRP?

Yes. CREP is part of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), America's largest and most effective private-lands conservation program, with more than 36 million acres enrolled. Through CRP and CREP, farmers and ranchers plant grasses and trees in crop fields and along streams. The plantings stop soil and nutrients from washing into regional waterways and contaminating the air. They also provide habitat for wildlife.

CRP celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2006. The program has amassed a wealth of benefits for our nation, including preventing 450 million tons of soil from eroding each year and restoring 1.8 million wetland acres.

14. Where can I get more information?

More information on the Idaho Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer CREP is available at local Farm Service Agency (FSA) offices and on FSA's Web site at:
www.fsa.usda.gov/dafp/cepd/default.htm.