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Drought Assistance Available to Alabama Producers

Auburn, Ala., August 3, 2012 – The drought of 2012 has caused serious degradation to many natural resource concerns in Alabama including wildlife cover, livestock forage, wildlife and livestock water and soil quality. USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) State Conservationist Dr. William Puckett said “NRCS is committed to helping sustain the success of Alabama’s farmers through these difficult times.”

Beginning today, NRCS is accepting Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) applications for consideration for funding for specific practices that address wildlife habitat and drought resource concerns including wildlife cover, wildlife forage, and fire prevention. Examples of practices include re-forestation of longleaf pine stands and prescribed burning for fuel reduction. Several supporting practices are also allowed and include practices such as site preparation, fuel breaks, and fire breaks. The deadline for producers to sign up is August 10, 2012. Funding will be targeted towards hardest hit drought areas. The primary purpose of the WHIP sign up is to protect wildlife habitat by providing wildlife access to cover during the fall and winter as well as reducing the fuel load to help prevent wildfires. This saves farmers and the general public money and protects wildlife habitat and rural residential areas.

NRCS is also accepting applications for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) for consideration for funding for specific practices that address water quantity, irrigation efficiency, and soil quality. Examples of practices include watering facilities, wells, ponds and pond renovations, cover crops, conservation tillage and mulch tillage, and rainwater harvesting on poultry houses. The deadline to signup is also August 10th. The primary purpose of the EQIP signup is to provide livestock water and promote efficient use of irrigation systems. In addition, drought stressed crops are not allowed to use the applied nitrogen fertilizer which could be lost when it rains. EQIP can help provide funding for cover crops to protect these nutrients, making them available for the next crop. This saves farmers money and protects water quality.

Producers can also modify current EQIP contracts to re-schedule planned conservation practices such as prescribed grazing, livestock watering facilities, water conservation and other conservation activities until drought conditions improve. EQIP is a voluntary program that provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers to address natural resource concerns on agricultural and forest land. “We will work closely with producers to modify

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existing EQIP contracts to ensure successful implementation of planned conservation practices,” Puckett said. Where conservation practices have failed because of the drought, NRCS will look for opportunities to work with producers to re-apply those activities.

To assist farmers and ranchers affected by the drought, NRCS is also expediting compatible use authorization requests for haying or grazing of Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) easements in drought-affected areas where such haying or grazing is consistent with conservation of wildlife habitat and wetlands. For landowners with land currently enrolled in WRP, the compatible use authorization process provides NRCS and affected producers the management flexibility to address short-term resource conditions in a manner that promotes both the health of the land and the viability of the overall farming operation. WRP is a program administered by NRCS that purchases easements from landowners in exchange for their commitment to maintain areas as wetlands. “Cutting hay on WRP easements will be allowed until August 31, but all bales must be removed from those areas by September 15, 2012,” said Puckett. Producers interested in cutting hay on WRP easements must first contact their local NRCS offices to obtain a compatible use authorization.

NRCS accepts applications for financial assistance on a continuous basis throughout the year. To begin the process, check with your local NRCS office at: <http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov> For more information about NRCS programs, initiatives, and services in Alabama, visit us online at: www.al.nrcs.usda.gov.

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