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FUNDS AVAILABLE FOR KANSAS FARMERS FOR ORGANIC TRANSITION PRACTICES; INCLUDES HOOP HOUSE COST-SHARE FUNDS

Whiting, Ks.- March 12, 2010 is the deadline for signing up for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) 2010 Organic and Transition to Organic Special Initiative under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

Kansas has received \$1,416,186 for this initiative in 2010. The initiative can provide up to \$20,000 per year for no more than \$80,000 over a six year period to assist farmers and ranchers to transition to organic or to improve conservation benefits on existing organic farms. Funds not allocated in Kansas will be sent back to national headquarters for reallocation.

Eligible farmers include:

- * Farmers just beginning or in the process of transitioning to organic production;
 - * Existing certified organic farmers who want to transition additional acres or animals;
 - * Existing certified organic farmers who need to adopt additional conservation measures;
 - * Producers who sell less than \$5,000 in agricultural products and are thus exempt from formal certification are still eligible for Organic Initiative payments:
- Farmers whose 2009 applications to the Organic Initiative were deferred will receive a letter from NRCS outlining their options in 2010.

The Kansas State Conservationist and NRCS staff developed a list of conservation practices offered through the initiative. Kansas' list is fairly inclusive of all possible practices currently used. Successful applications will receive a 75% payment rate for practices undertaken. For beginning, socially disadvantaged, or limited resource farmers, the payment rate will be 90% of practices undertaken.

One new practice included in the 2010 program in Kansas is the Seasonal High Tunnel System for Crops or Hoop houses. Funds are limited to \$4,000 per agricultural operation. There was an earlier Kansas sign-up with a deadline of January 15, 2010 under the general Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). States have the option to include the Seasonal High Tunnel System practice under either the general EQIP or under the EQIP Organic Initiative. In Kansas, the State Conservationist made the decision to run the Seasonal High Tunnel System practice under the Organic Initiative, which extends the sign up date to March 12, 2010 for the EQIP Organic Initiative.

To apply for the EQIP Organic Initiative, farmers and ranchers must contact their local NRCS office and submit the general EQIP application and a screening criteria worksheet for either "Transition to Organic" or for a "Certified Organic Operation". Producers who have **not** participated in federal farm programs (such as some market garden operations) will need to sign up with their local Farm Services Administration Office to determine eligibility for federal farm programs. Forms are available at the local NRCS office or online. The important thing is to contact the local county NRCS office and sign up. Details of the application can be developed later.

Farmers already certified organic who are applying must submit a copy of their current organic system plan (OSP) and maintain certification through the length of the EQIP contract. Transitioning organic farmers must certify that they are in the process of obtaining organic certification, and submit a self-certification letter stating that they agree to develop and implement conservation practices for certified organic production consistent with an organic system plan, and that they are working with an organic certifying agency.

State NRCS officials have stated that applications submitted for hoop house funds before the earlier deadline will suffice for the Organic Initiative. Applicants for the high tunnel or hoop house practice however will need to pursue organic certification under the Organic Initiative.

Applications can be submitted at anytime throughout the year, but those submitted before March 12, 2010, will be evaluated in a competitive ranking process this spring.

According to the national NRCS guidance, applications will be treated as two separate ranking pools, one for transitioning farmers and ranchers without any current certified organic production and another for certified organic farmers who need additional conservation practices. Funding is not guaranteed, as EQIP is a competitive program. But the separate EQIP Organic Initiative allows applicants to be ranked against other organic or transitioning to organic farmers, and not against the much larger pool of all EQIP applicants.

Additional information on the EQIP Organic Initiative and Seasonal High Tunnel Systems can be found at the Kansas Rural Center website at www.kansasruralcenter.org, at the national Alternative Technology Transfer for Rural Areas or ATTRA website at www.attra.ncat.org/eqip, and at www.hightunnels.org.

General information about organic production practices and organic certification are available from ATTRA at www.attra.ncat.org/organic and at the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) at www.mosesorganic.org/news.html.

For Kansas specific information, contact your local county NRCS office and/or the Kansas Rural Center at 785-873-3431 or ksrc@rainbowtel.net.