The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has set Feb. 1 as the cutoff to rank applications from farmers and ranchers wishing to receive cost-share funds for the installation of soil, water, grazing, or wildlife practices, according to NRCS.

Steve Chick, NRCS state conservationist, said last year more than $52 million in federal dollars, not counting the landowner's investment, were committed in conservation programs. Most of these programs are in a continuous sign-up where farmers and ranchers can apply any time.

The programs available include:

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

"This is the base conservation program for most people," said Chick. "Irrigation practices, erosion control, grazing practices, animal manure systems are just a sample of the options available."

Within EQIP, there are also several special initiatives funds for which people can apply. These initiatives target: forestry, organic agriculture, wildlife habitat legacy areas, the Agriculture Water Enhancement Program (AWEP), targeting five areas in Nebraska for water conservation, and the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI), which targets the removal of invasive vegetation from fully and over-appropriated river basins in Nebraska.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) aims to improve wildlife habitat on private lands;

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) helps landowners restore wetlands on their property by providing an easement payment or cost-share funds, depending on the option selected.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), which rewards producers for past conservation

practices and offers enhancements to do additional conservation work, is also under a continuous sign-up. “The ranking cutoff date for this program is not yet determined but will be after Feb. 1, 2010,” said Chick.

Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) allows enhancement of plant and animal biodiversity, and protection of grassland under threat of conversion to other uses, while retaining the right for grazing.

Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), which provides matching funds for development rights to keep to vulnerable range or cropland in agricultural uses.

The important action for farmers and ranchers to remember is Feb. 1 is the cutoff for NRCS to rank applications on hand. Landowners can get help for any of these programs at any NRCS office in their USDA Service Center.

For additional information, go on-line to learn about NRCS conservation programs .