

Authority: (42 U.S.C. 1758(b)(1)).

Dated: March 6, 2003.

Roberto Salazar,

Administrator.

[FR Doc. 03-6079 Filed 3-12-03; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3410-30-C

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

National Agricultural Statistics Service

Notice of Intent To Seek Approval To Conduct an Information Collection

AGENCY: National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice and request for comments.

SUMMARY: In accordance with the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (Public Law 104-13) and Office of Management and Budget regulations at 5 CFR part 1320 (60 FR 44978, August 29, 1995), this notice announces the intention of the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) to request approval to conduct a new information collection, the Conservation Effects Assessment Survey.

DATES: Comments on this notice must be received by May 19, 2003 to be assured of consideration.

ADDRESSES: Comments may be mailed to Ginny McBride, NASS OMB Clearance Officer, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Room 5336 South Building, 1400 Independence Avenue SW., Washington, DC 20250 or sent electronically to gmcbride@nass.usda.gov.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Carol House, Acting Associate Administrator, National Agricultural Statistics Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, (202) 720-4333.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Title: Conservation Effects Assessment Survey.

Type of Request: Intent to Seek Approval to Conduct a New Information Collection.

Abstract: The primary objective of the National Agricultural Statistics Service is to prepare and issue State and national estimates of crop and livestock production, prices, and disposition. The goal of this NASS project is to collect land management information that will assist the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in assessing environmental benefits associated with implementation of various conservation programs and installation of associated conservation practices. The 2002 Farm Bill substantially increased funding for the

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) as well as other conservation programs; a portion of the technical assistance funds for conservation programs has been allocated for use in assessing the environmental benefits of these conservation practices. The assessment will be used to report progress annually on Farm Bill implementation to Congress and the general public. The information collected will also be used to provide OMB with requested information on the cost effectiveness of the EQIP and the Conservation Reserve Program.

NRCS has been given the responsibility of leading a multi-agency effort to estimate the environmental benefits of conservation practices. Benefit measures will initially include soil quality enhancement, erosion reduction, reduction in nutrient and sediment losses from farm fields, soil carbon sequestration, water use efficiency, and reductions in in-stream nutrient and sediment concentrations. Investments are being made in additional model development to address benefits associated with reductions in pesticide losses, air quality, and wildlife habitat. The assessment is designed to be national and regional in scope. A sampling and modeling approach has been adopted to avoid the high costs associated with expanded reporting by NRCS field staff.

Benefits will be estimated by applying transport models and other physical process models at sample sites associated with the National Resources Inventory (NRI) sampling frame. The NRI is a scientifically-based, longitudinal panel survey designed to assess conditions and trends of soil, water, and related resources of the Nation's non-federal lands. The NRI is conducted for the U.S. Department of Agriculture by NRCS in cooperation with the Iowa State University Statistical Laboratory and provides critical information to address agri-environmental issues at national, regional, and State levels. Data gathered in the NRI are linked to NRCS soil survey and climate databases. These linked data, along with NRI's historical data for 1982-2001, form the basis for unique modeling applications and analytical capabilities. The NRI sampling frame will be used for this project because it captures the diversity of the Nation's agricultural resource base (soils, topography, and climate), which is a critical factor in estimating benefits of conservation practices. Also critical are the historical and linked data that already exist for each NRI sample site. The assessment of benefits is not

possible, however, without augmenting these existing data with additional information on land management and conservation practice adoption.

NASS will collaborate with NRCS in the acquisition of this additional information by conducting a survey for a sub-sample of NRI sample units in the contiguous 48 States. The survey will utilize personal interviews to administer a questionnaire that is designed to obtain from farm operators field-specific data associated with the selected sample units. Specific questions are asked about physical characteristics of the field and technical aspects of conservation practices associated with the field. Several other questions deal with production activities before and after implementation of specific conservation practice and with the operator's participation in conservation programs. The survey will be conducted in the fall of each year beginning in 2003 and extending through 2008, which is the last year covered by the 2002 Farm Bill. Approximately 15,000-20,000 interviews will be conducted each year. Each year's data collection will be for a different set of agricultural land units. The scope of the study will broaden as the models are extended to cover a broader suite of conservation practices and effects. These data will be collected under the authority of 7 U.S.C. 2204(a). Individually identifiable data collected under this authority are governed by Section 1770 of the Food Security Act of 1985, 7 U.S.C. 2276, which requires USDA to afford strict confidentiality to non-aggregated data provided by respondents.

Estimate of Burden: Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 60 minutes per response.

Respondents: Farm operators.

Estimated Number of Respondents: 18,000.

Estimated Total Annual Burden on Respondents: 18,000 hours.

Copies of this information collection and related instructions can be obtained without charge from Ginny McBride, NASS OMB Clearance Officer, at (202) 720-5778.

Comments: Comments are invited on: (a) Whether the proposed collection of information is necessary for the proper performance of the functions of the agency, including whether the information will have practical utility; (b) the accuracy of the agency's estimate of the burden of the proposed collection of information including the validity of the methodology and assumptions used; (c) ways to enhance the quality, utility, and clarity of the information to be collected; and (d) ways to minimize the

burden of the collection of information on those who are to respond, including through the use of appropriate automated, electronic, mechanical, or other technological collection techniques or other forms of information technology.

All responses to this notice will become a matter of public record and be summarized in the request for OMB approval.

Signed at Washington, DC, February 13, 2003.

Carol House,

Acting Associate Administrator.

[FR Doc. 03-6057 Filed 3-12-03; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3410-20-P

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Rural Business-Cooperative Service

Maximum Portion of Guarantee Authority Available for Fiscal Year 2003

AGENCY: Rural Business-Cooperative Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice.

SUMMARY: As set forth in 7 CFR part 4279, subpart B, each fiscal year (FY) the Agency shall establish a limit on the maximum portion of guarantee authority available for that fiscal year that may be used to guarantee loans with a guarantee fee of 1 percent or guaranteed loans with a guarantee percentage exceeding 80 percent. This notice covers only FY 2002 carryover and recovered funds. Once FY 2003 appropriated funds are apportioned, a second notice will be published for those funds.

Allowing the guarantee fee to be reduced to 1 percent or exceeding the 80 percent guarantee on certain guaranteed loans that meet the conditions set forth in 7 CFR 4279.107 and 4279.119 will increase the Agency's ability to focus guarantee assistance on projects which the Agency has found particularly meritorious, such as projects in rural communities that remain persistently poor, experience long-term population decline and job deterioration, are experiencing trauma as a result of natural disaster or are experiencing fundamental structural changes in the economic base.

Not all of the available Business and Industry (B&I) Guaranteed Loan program funding authority for FY 2002 was used; consequently, this and recovered funding authority for approved B&I Guaranteed Loans which did not come to fruition are now apportioned and available for use. Not

more than 12 percent of the Agency's quarterly apportioned carryover and recovered guarantee authority will be reserved for loan requests with a guarantee fee of 1 percent, and not more than 15 percent of the Agency quarterly apportioned carryover and recovered guarantee authority will be reserved for guaranteed loan requests with a guaranteed percentage exceeding 80 percent. Once the above quarterly limits have been reached, all additional loans guaranteed with carryover and recovered funds during the remainder of that quarter will require a 2 percent guarantee fee and not exceed an 80 percent guarantee limit. As an exception to this paragraph and for the purposes of this notice, loans developed by the North American Development Bank (NADBank) Community Adjustment and Investment Program (CAIP) will not count against the 15 percent limit. Up to 50 percent of CAIP funds may be used for loan requests with a guaranteed percentage exceeding 80 percent.

Written requests by the Rural Development State Office for approval of a guaranteed loan with a 1 percent guarantee fee or a guaranteed loan exceeding 80 percent must be forwarded to the National Office, Attn: Director, Business and Industry Division, for review and consideration prior to obligation of the guaranteed loan. The Administrator will provide a written response to the State Office confirming approval or disapproval of the request.

EFFECTIVE DATE: March 13, 2003.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Fred Kieferle, Processing Branch Chief, Business and Industry Division, Rural Business-Cooperative Service, USDA, Stop 3224, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW., Washington, DC 20250-3224, telephone (202) 720-7818.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: This action has been reviewed and determined not to be a rule or regulation as defined in Executive Order 12866.

Dated: March 4, 2003.

John Rosso,

Administrator, Rural Business-Cooperative Service.

[FR Doc. 03-6052 Filed 3-12-03; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3410-XY-P

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Rural Housing Service

Notice of Request for Collection of Public Information With the Use of a Survey

AGENCY: Rural Housing Service, USDA.

ACTION: Proposed collection; comments requested.

SUMMARY: In accordance with the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, this notice announces the Rural Housing Service's intention to request clearance for a new information collection to measure the quality of service provided by the Rural Housing Service (RHS) Centralized Servicing Center (CSC).

DATES: Comments on this notice must be received by May 12, 2003, to be assured of consideration.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Bill Scaggs, Section Head, Customer Service Branch, Centralized Servicing Center, 1520 Market Street, Room 3622, St. Louis, Missouri 63103, phone: (314) 206-2096, e-mail: bs244@stl.rural.usda.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Title: Rural Housing Service—Customer Satisfaction Survey.

Type of Request: New information collection.

Abstract: The Rural Housing Service (RHS) provides insured loans to low- and moderate-income applicants located in rural geographic areas to assist them in obtaining decent, sanitary, and safe dwellings. RHS currently processes loan originations through approximately 900 Field Offices. The RHS Centralized Servicing Center (CSC), located in St. Louis, Missouri, provides support to the Field Offices and is responsible for loan servicing functions with borrowers. The CSC was established to achieve a high level of customer service and operating efficiency. The CSC has established a fully integrated call center and is able to provide borrowers with convenient access to their loan account information.

To facilitate the CSC's mission and in an effort to continuously improve its services, a survey has been developed that can measure the quality of service that the Field Offices and borrowers receive when they contact the CSC. Respondents will only need to report information on a one-time basis. The outcome of the Customer Satisfaction Survey will provide the general satisfaction level among RHS customers throughout the nation highlighting areas that need improvement and to provide a benchmark for future surveys and improvements in customer service. A follow up survey will be conducted in 18 months, but may or may not be sent to the same initial respondents. Additionally, in accordance with Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), the survey will enable CSC to measure the results and overall effectiveness of customer services