

Agricultural Water Enhancement Program



Background:

The Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP) is a voluntary conservation initiative under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). AWEP provides financial and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers to assist them in applying agricultural water enhancement activities that conserve ground and surface water and improve water quality on agricultural lands.

The Alabama Irrigation Initiative Team (AIIT), has championed the use of agricultural irrigation water resources in a responsible manner from off-stream storage during high winter flows, upland storage of rainfall runoff, and surface/ground water efficiency combinations. They promote wise and effective irrigation water management by determining and controlling the volume, frequency, and application rate of irrigation water in a planned, efficient, and environmentally safe manner.

Since 2009, the AWEP Initiative has made available over \$3.5 million to benefit the local economy. In Alabama, 102 farmers have improved efficiency in their irrigation operations which resulted in savings of about 875 million gallons of water per year.

The state of Alabama also provided matching funds for this project which contributed to its success. The \$320,938 investment by the state has generated these \$3.5 million in direct federal dollars and an additional \$1,185,340 in private landowner contributions to these projects. This represents a 9.1 ratio of federal to state dollars.

NRCS carries out AWEP in conjunction with the AIIT through project proposals and enters into contracts directly with private landowners to provide funding for irrigation.

Program Challenge:

To be eligible for financial assistance for irrigation-related conservation practices through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), producers must be able to demonstrate an irrigation history. Due to Alabama's landscape and farming systems, very few farms have a history of irrigation. Since the AWEP program is tied to EQIP this requirement has prevented the program from being more widely utilized.

According to the 2007 Agriculture Census, only about 5% of Alabama's farms have irrigated cropland (112,819 acres of farms with irrigated land out of 1,994,743 acres of farms with harvested cropland).

What is needed:

As the next farm bill is developed, we are asking for some degree of flexibility that would allow for the AWEP program to be utilized by producers that do not have a history of prior irrigation. It should be noted there are regions of the country such as the Southeastern United States that have ample surface water or groundwater availability. It can be demonstrated that the use of surface water or groundwater for increased irrigation on farms, regardless of prior irrigation history, in these regions can be accomplished in a manner that is both environmentally and ecologically sound while allowing producers to be more productive and efficient.

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