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Does USDA Technical Assistance for New Water Resource Development Need to be Altered?

BACKGROUND

Access to adequate water resources is critical to the continued success and growth of agriculture. Various sectors of agriculture have turned to municipal water supplies for both convenience and quality. Connecting agricultural users to municipal water infrastructure could put significant strain on existing water sources during times of drought. Creating new water resources on farms and ranches could relieve strain on public water systems. Past Farm Bills have provided means by which farmers and ranchers could develop new resources for crops and livestock production; however, the current Farm Bill stipulates certain conditions farmers must meet to get assistance in establishing new water resources.

ISSUE

USDA rules require the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to provide technical assistance to develop new water resources, but require consideration be given to the lowest cost alternative as well as the potential impact on the water resource. In nearly all cases where a local municipal water line is available, tapping it is the least-cost alternative. In many cases, establishing a well on an aquifer or damming a drainage area could be determined as having a negative impact on the resource.

Rules for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) do not allow for cost share on installation of new irrigation systems. Incentives may not be offered to install irrigation systems where baseline aquifer levels have been defined. Also, current EQIP rules require that cost-share assistance only be available for the least-cost alternative.

OPTION #1

Allow USDA to provide cost share and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers in developing new on-farm water resources regardless of whether lower cost municipal water tap-ins are available.

OPTION #2

Require USDA to consider water withdrawals from aquifers or surface water as having a negative impact on the resource when an application for assistance is made.

OPTION #3

Provide agriculture a preferential status to water resources, second to human use.

OPTION #4

Farmers and ranchers should be allowed to install the alternative that is best for their individual operation with corresponding cost-share. The least-cost alternative is not always the best conservation alternative or the most cost-effective in the long term.

OPTION #5

Require proper utilization and monitoring of water resources to ensure resources are positively maintained and managed for the future.