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CONTACT: Anita Brown (530) 792-5644
Alan Forkey (530) 792-5653

NRCS and Partners Preserve Record Number of Farms and Ranches in California *Approximately \$20 million invested in local farm and ranch communities*

DAVIS, Calif., Oct. 25, 2011 – The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) California State Office, with the California State Department of Conservation (DOC) and several farm and ranchland trusts, have had an historic year preserving 14 significant farms and ranches throughout Northern and Central California in 2011. NRCS and partners invested approximately \$20 million in conservation easements to preserve 5,000 acres of prime and productive agricultural land.

“NRCS could not have done this important work without the dedication and commitment from our easement partners throughout the state,” said Ed Burton, NRCS California state conservationist. “These properties will continue to have a profound impact on California agriculture and their local economies for generations to come.”

NRCS provided up to 50 percent of the cost of the conservation easements through its Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), with additional funding being provided by DOC, other partners, and landowner donations. In Fiscal Year 2011, NRCS closed the highest numbers of properties, and invested the largest amount of funding, since FRPP was created in 1996.

The 14 easements are located in Butte, El Dorado, Fresno, Kings, Marin, Merced, San Joaquin, Santa Barbara, Stanislaus, Tehama and Yolo counties. These properties provide a diverse mix of agricultural products for domestic consumption and export as well as pump millions of dollars into local economies. Many of these farms grow crops unique to California, such as walnuts and almonds, and have prime soil and provide wildlife benefits.

“The partnership between DOC’s California Farmland Conservancy Program and the USDA’s Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program has resulted in the protection of thousands of acres of the nation’s best agricultural land from development and is a model of state-federal cooperation,” said Derek Chernow, DOC acting director. “Good farmland is a finite resource, and there’s less and less of it every year. We have to continue to work to preserve as much high-quality farmland as possible.”

In many these counties, the population-increase rates are nearly double the state average. In this difficult economy, the temptation to sell prime ag land for development is high.



These landowners are committed to keeping their land in agriculture for the long term and an easement provided them the security they were looking for.

Descriptions of two of the easements:

In December 2010, NRCS worked with DOC and the Yolo Land Trust to preserve the 140-acre Clark Farm, located between the cities of Davis and Winters. The farm grows tomatoes, walnuts, alfalfa, sunflower and beans, and was at risk of being converted to residential properties. The property also provides wildlife habitat for both common and protected wildlife species, including nesting and foraging habitat for Swainson's hawks.

In July 2011, NRCS worked with DOC and the Northern California Regional Land Trust to preserve the 145-acre Comanche Creek Farm in Chico, Calif. The farm grows almonds and walnuts, and was at risk of being broken up into 20-acre ranchettes. This easement preserves the farm during a time when Butte County is experiencing a decrease in agriculture production and farm revenue.

“Conservation easement transactions are complex and can take a long time to negotiate and implement,” said Michael Bilancione, NRCS California realty specialist. “At the end of the day, though, we can reflect on and be proud of the landscape and natural resources that our efforts have protected, and this year was especially rewarding.”

The federal FRPP is a voluntary easement program that protects productive agricultural land by providing funds for the purchase of conservation easements to limit conversion of farm and ranch lands to non-agricultural uses. NRCS partners with state, tribal or local governments, and non-governmental organizations to fund the acquisition of conservation easements or other interests in land from landowners. More information is available at www.ca.nrcs.usda.gov.

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