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Contact: John Mueller, 254-742-9800
John.mueller@tx.usda.gov

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Dee Ann Littlefield, 940-447-6903
deeann.littlefield@tx.usda.gov

Texas Ag Producers Will Help Improve Health of Gulf of Mexico *USDA Announces Gulf of Mexico Initiative*

TEMPLE, TX, Dec. 16, 2011 – USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service State Conservationist Salvador Salinas today announced an opportunity for Texas farmers and ranchers in the Lower San Antonio and Guadalupe River basins to help improve the ecological health of the Gulf of Mexico.

“Last week, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced USDA’s new Gulf of Mexico Initiative,” said Salinas. “Texas is one of five states selected to implement this new initiative.”

Texas Gulf of Mexico Initiative (GoMI) focuses on providing technical and financial assistance to agricultural producers in targeted watersheds to help them implement conservation practices on their land to reduce erosion or runoff, which carries soil and nutrients into waterways that flow into the Gulf of Mexico. The initiative teams USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) with partners in five Gulf States – Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas – to help agricultural producers improve water quality, increase water conservation, and protect wildlife and fish habitat.

The initiative will provide \$50 million in sixteen priority watersheds in seven major river basins in five states over the next three years through a combination of NRCS programs. In Texas, these programs include the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), Grassland Reserve Program (GRP), and Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP).

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Helping People Help the Land

Identified in the final strategy released earlier this month by the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force, reducing the flow of nutrients was one of the most pressing environmental concerns in the Gulf. The Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force, which NRCS serves on, was created last year, is a collaborative effort of local, state, and federal government, scientists, academia and the five states, working in partnership to develop and implement strategies to improve the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem.

“NRCS and our partners are committed to helping farmers and ranchers implement sustainable agricultural systems that will not only benefit the freshwater inflows to the Gulf of Mexico, but also make agricultural lands more productive, improve wildlife and fish habitats and help the communities that depend on the Gulf of Mexico for jobs,” Salinas said. “Our collective efforts will make a big impact locally and downstream in the Gulf of Mexico.”

In Texas, GoMI project areas includes the Kuy Creek – Guadalupe River, the Guadalupe River – South Guadalupe River, and the Hynes Bay – San Antonio Bay watersheds that include the counties of Refugio, Calhoun, Victoria and Aransas. Preliminary partners include the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), Texas General Land Office (GLO), Coastal Bend Bays and Estuaries Program (CBBEP), Texas Soil and Water Conservation Board (TSSWCB), San Antonio River Authority (SARA), United States Geological Survey (USGS). Other local partners are welcomed and will continue to be sought to provide educational and technical assistance, give biological and habitat recommendations, and share data as well as monitoring assistance.

For a complete list of projects or more information about the Gulf of Mexico Initiative or the technical and financial assistance provided by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, visit <http://www.tx.nrcs.usda.gov>.

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