USDA partners with Colorado in safeguarding irrigated lands

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Colorado will become only the second state in the nation to idle land in favor of water conservation today when Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns conducts a ceremony signing south of Wiggins.

Johanns

Johanns will be joined by Rep. Marilyn Musgrave, R-Colo., and state officials in the signing of Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program agreements that will provide farmers $91.6 million in the next 15 years to safeguard environmentally sensitive lands.

About 35,000 acres of irrigated land in Logan, Sedgwick, Phillips, Yuma and Kit Carson counties are involved, said John Johnson, deputy administrator for farm programs with the Farm Service Agency of USDA, which makes this program different from previous conservation efforts.

Johnson, who was in Greeley Thursday, said the CREP differs from USDA's Conservation Reserve Program in that it includes irrigated land in addition to dryland farmland. There are about 250,000 dryland acres in Weld County signed into CRP, which was started in 1985.

"We like to look at this as not just taking land out of production, but putting it to a modified use that still has benefits," Johnson said of the voluntary program. The Colorado Water Conservation Board and Colorado Division of Wildlife is providing the $18.9 million share of the state's contribution to the program.

In addition to reducing erosion, the two agreements will increase habitat for wildlife, including the ring-necked pheasant and other ground nesting birds, Johnson said.

Nebraska became the first state to participate in the program a year ago, Johnson said, while Idaho will become the third state later this year or early next.