News Release

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Las Cruces selected as USDA Southwest Regional Climate Hub

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced today the locations for seven Regional Hubs for Risk Adaptation and Mitigation to Climate Change. “Climate Hubs” will address increasing risks such as fires, invasive pests, devastating floods and crippling droughts on a regional basis, aiming to translate science and research into information to farmers, ranchers and forest landowners on ways to adapt and adjust their resource management.

“For generations, America's farmers, ranchers and forest landowners have innovated and adapted to challenges. Today, they face a new and more complex threat in the form of a changing and shifting climate, which impacts both our nation's forests and our farmers' bottom lines," said Vilsack. "USDA's Climate Hubs are part of our broad commitment to developing the next generation of climate solutions, so that our agricultural leaders have the modern technologies and tools they need to adapt and succeed in the face of a changing climate."

The Southwest Regional Hub is located at the Rangeland Management Unit/Jornada Experimental Range, the Agricultural Research Service location housed at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, N.M.

“The Southwest is the area of the county that will be experiencing further effects of climate change before other parts of the nation will, because of its southerly location,” said Al Rango, Southwest Regional Hub leader and USDA Agricultural Research Service research hydrologist. “Like other arid and semiarid parts of the world, we depend on mountain snow pack for our water supply. We’ve studied that for awhile here and in other areas of the Southwest.”

In the Southwest Region, there have been recent success stories of adapting to the effects of climate change.

Water supply forecasts: From 2006-2012, the Agricultural Research Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service partnered with the National Science Foundation, New Mexico State University and landowners to expand and upgrade instrumentation throughout the Upper Rio Grande Watershed in northern New Mexico. These instrumented stations are used in real time to provide water supply forecasts for the Upper Rio Grande, which supplies 56 percent of the irrigated agricultural needs in New Mexico. The improved forecasts support decision-making regarding crop selection, time of planting and irrigation scheduling.

Forest Pest Management: From 2002-2009, an estimated 21.7 million acres of forest were impacted by bark beetles in the intermountain west. Although western forests have experienced regular outbreaks of insects throughout history, recent infestations are unprecedented due to extended drought and warmer winters. One recently treated area is within California’s Lake Davis Recreational Ares of the Plumas National Forest. The Forest Service is developing comprehensive restoration strategies to address insect infestation and other significant disturbance factors that threaten the long-term sustainability of southwestern forest areas and restore weed-infested rangelands; and improve productivity of Pacific Northwest agricultural and range lands under current and potential future climate conditions.

“We share a strong interest in collaborating with the Southwest Regional Hub to develop and deliver science-based information and technologies to inform and support improved water management in an uncertain climatic environment,” said Alexander “Sam” Fernald, director of the New Mexico Water Resources Research Institute at New Mexico State University.

Today’s announcement is part of the Obama Administration’s Climate Action Plan to responsibly cut carbon pollution, slow the effects of climate change and put America on track to a cleaner environment.

The Hubs will provide outreach and information to producers on ways to mitigate risks; public education about the risks climate change poses to agriculture, ranchlands and forests; regional climate risk and vulnerability assessments; and centers of climate forecast data and information. They will also link a broad network of partners participating in climate risk adaptation and mitigation, including universities; non-governmental organizations; federal agencies such as the Department of Interior and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; Native Nations and organizations; state departments of environment and agriculture; research centers; farm groups and more.

Across the country, farmers, ranchers and forest landowners are seeing an increase in risks to their operations due to fires, increases in invasive pests, droughts, and floods. For example, in the Midwest, growing seasons have lengthened by almost two weeks since 1950. The fire season is now 60 days longer than it was 30 years ago, and forests will become increasingly threatened by insect outbreaks, fire, drought and storms over the next 50 years. These events threaten our food supply and are costly for producers and rural economies. Drought alone was estimated to cost the U.S. $50 billion from 2011 to 2013. Such risks have implications not only for agricultural producers, but for all Americans.

The Hubs were chosen through a competitive process among USDA facilities. In addition to the seven Hubs, USDA is designating three Subsidiary Hubs (“Sub Hubs”) that will function within the Southeast, Midwest and Southwest. The Sub Hubs will support the Hub within their region and focus on a narrow and unique set of issues relative to what will be going on in the rest of the Hub. The Southwest Sub Hub, located in Davis, Calif., will focus on specialty crops and Southwest forests, the Southeast Sub Hub will address issues important to the Caribbean and the Midwest Sub Hub will address climate change and Lake State forests.

“This is the next step in USDA's decades of work alongside farmers, ranchers and forest landowners to keep up production in the face of challenges,” Vilsack said. “If we are to be effective in managing the risks from a shifting climate, we'll need to ensure that our managers in the field and our stakeholders have the information they need to succeed. That's why we're bringing all of that information together on a regionally-appropriate basis.”

The Climate Hubs will build on the capacity within USDA to deliver science-based knowledge and practical information to farmers, ranchers and forest landowners to support decision-making related to climate change across the country.

For more information about the USDA Regional Climate Hubs, visit http://www.usda.gov/oce/climate_change/regional_hubs.htm. For additional information about the Southwest Regional Climate Hub, visit swclimatehub.info.