Farmers and landowners in the Upper Republican Natural Resources District (URNRD) will have to act quickly if they want to participate in a program that provides substantial payments for permanently retiring irrigated ground. The deadline to apply for the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program, or AWEP, is Friday, Feb. 3.

There may be an additional sign-up deadline in mid- to late March, but that will depend upon whether, or how much, money is available after the early February sign-up is completed.

People interested in applying should contact the Imperial NRCS office at 308-882-4263, ext. 3 and the NRD at 308-882-5173 now to begin the application process.

For those unable to decide by Feb. 3, contact the NRCS and the NRD after that date to get informed about the status of the program.

Total payments to those who enrolled in the program last year average about $2,350 per acre. Enrollees in the program, which is a partnership between NRCS and the NRD, retain ownership of the land and can still farm it dry land. The NRD will hold an easement that prevents the ground from being irrigated.

Payments increase some if the ground is returned to range or turned into wildlife habitat. To qualify, land must have been irrigated at least two of the last five years and cannot currently be enrolled in any other retirement program.

Eligible land can be irrigated this year, with payments beginning in 2013. The NRCS portion of the payment is spread out over five years; the NRD portion of the payment can also be spread out over time, or paid in one lump sum.

Irrigation on acres that groundwater modeling shows have a high impact on streamflow depletion over both a 2-year and 50-year period will be given the highest priority. The extent of historical pumping will also be a factor in the scoring process.

The primary focus will be acres close to streams that have high, immediate impacts on stream flow.

The primary intent of the program is to increase stream flows to help the URNRD do its part to maintain compliance with the Republican River Compact.

Maintaining compliance with aid from the retirement program and Rock Creek augmentation project, both of which are funded by the District's occupation tax on irrigated land, helps prevent severe and sudden irrigation reductions or shutdowns to maintain compact compliance.

Last year, nearly 1,360 acres were enrolled in the program with an average, 50-year stream flow depletion factor of 88 percent and a 2-year SDF of about 68 percent.