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USDA Awards \$25 Million in Conservation Innovation Grants

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack recently announced \$25 million in Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) awarded to 58 entities across the nation for projects that test and prove innovative approaches to conserving America's private lands.

Kansas was home to one recipient who will demonstrate innovative approaches to improving soil health, increasing pollinator and wildlife habitat, addressing livestock manure management, producing on-farm energy savings and fostering water quality trading markets. Grant winners pay 50 percent of all project costs.

Kansas will lead the following project along with Missouri: Kansas State University, Development and Adoption of No-till and Minimum Tillage Vegetable Production Systems in the Midwest

"Conservation Innovation Grants will help spur creativity and problem-solving in our nation's farms, ranches, and forests," said Eric B. Banks State Conservationist for the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). "Conservation grants allow the best minds in America to develop unique and innovative solutions that will help make conservation more efficient in the future."

Other projects that will involve Kansas are:

1. The Curators of the University of Missouri, Validate, Improve and Regionalize Phosphorus (P) Indices to Reduce P Loss Across the Heartland Region, States: MO, IA, KS, NE
2. University of Arkansas, Identify Methods to Refine Phosphorus Indices and Synthesize and Extend Lessons and Outcomes from Three Regional Indexing Efforts, States: DE, MD, NY, PA, VA, WV, IA, KS, MO, NE, AR, FL, GA, KY, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX

New this year was a special emphasis on water quality trading markets demonstrating how farmers and ranchers can help municipalities and other point sources overcome high pollution control costs. Twelve entities received grant funds for this this purpose.

"We believe there are states around the nation that are on the cusp of having thriving water quality trading markets," Vilsack said. "These grant awards will help develop projects that involve farmers and ranchers while they are helping to improve water quality."

In a water quality trading program, point sources buy environmental benefits or “credits” from landowners who install specific conservation practices. Water quality trading is a market-based approach that enables facilities to achieve needed pollution controls through the purchase of credits for a particular pollutant. Farmers can produce water quality credits by implementing conservation practices that reduce nutrients or sediment losses, and generally at a much lower cost than a municipal treatment facility. The goal is to achieve water quality improvements more cost-effectively by bringing together willing buying and sellers.

NRCS administers CIG as part of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Grants are awarded to state and local governments, federally recognized Indian tribes, non-governmental organizations and individuals. NRCS uses CIG to invest in innovative, on-the-ground conservation technologies and approaches with the goal of wide-scale adoption to address water quality and quantity, air quality, energy conservation, and environmental markets, among other natural resource issues.

For a complete list of CIG awardees and more information about NRCS conservation programs online, visit: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov>.