

USDA, Partners Usher In a New Era in Conservation

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack has announced “a new era in American conservation efforts” with an historic focus on public-private partnership. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), created in the 2014 Farm Bill, will fund a number of conservation activities across Kansas.

“This is an entirely new approach to conservation,” Vilsack said. “We’re giving private companies, local communities, and other non-government partners a way to invest in what are essentially clean water start-up operations.”

RCPP replaces the former NRCS Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP) and Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) program. These two programs also worked with conservation partners to implement conservation using a landscape approach.

The RCPP will competitively award funds to conservation projects designed by local partners specifically for their region. Eligible partners include private companies, universities, non-profit organizations, local and tribal governments, and others joining with agricultural and conservation organizations and producers to invest money, manpower, and materials to their proposed initiatives.

“Local decision making is empowered through this program—bringing together conservation groups, cities and townships, sportsmen groups, universities, agricultural associations and others—to design conservation projects that are tailored to our needs here in Kansas,” said Eric B. Banks, NRCS State Conservationist.

Through RCPP, partners propose conservation projects to improve soil health, water quality and water use efficiency, wildlife habitat, and other related natural resources on private lands. With participating partners investing along with the Department, USDA's \$1.2 billion in funding over the life of the five-year program can leverage \$2.4 billion for conservation.

Secretary Vilsack announced Prairie Grasslands, which includes all of Kansas, as one of eight critical conservation areas (CCAs) that will compete for one third of the total available funds.

The RCPP has three funding pools:

- 35 percent directed to eight CCAs including the Prairie Grasslands Region.
- 40 percent directed to regional or multi-state projects through a national competitive process.
- 25 percent directed to state-level projects through a competitive process established by NRCS state leaders.

Kansas NRCS has established five natural resource priority concerns for which proposals will be accepted. These include soil health, water quality, water quantity, plant condition, and fish and wildlife habitat. Proposals for this program are now being accepted. Pre-proposals are due July 14, and full proposals are due September 26. For more information on applying, visit <http://www.grants.gov/web/grants/view-opportunity.html?oppId=256049>

For more information and priorities on RCPP, visit Kansas NRCS web site at

www.ks.nrcs.usda.gov. To learn about technical and financial assistance available through conservation programs, visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/GetStarted or local USDA service center. For more on the 2014 Farm Bill, visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/FarmBill.

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