



Regional Conservation Partnership Program

New Opportunities for Targeted Conservation

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) was created in the 2014 Farm Bill to consolidate several regional programs that had funded United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) work in the Chesapeake Bay, Great Lakes, and other regions.

Under the program, USDA earmarks funds through partnership agreements to pay farmers for implementing designated practices designed to address a priority natural resource concern in a region or watershed.

The program proved successful in some regions and states, but an unwieldy administrative structure reduced its effectiveness.

Congress made changes to the RCPP in the 2018 Farm Bill in an effort to address some of the problems. USDA issued an Interim Final Rule in February, 2020 to implement the changes made by Congress, and USDA could make further changes if it issues a final rule. The legislative changes should make the RCPP a more useful tool and one which should be more widely used at the regional, state, and local levels.

Expanded Purpose, Practices, Partners

The 2018 Farm Bill makes modest changes to the overall purposes of the program, including aligning RCPP projects with other national, state, and local programs, and adding protection of drinking water sources and groundwater. The new law also adds authority for RCPP projects to use practices authorized under the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (PL 566), to the programs already included – the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP).

However, in explaining its Interim Final Rule, USDA suggested it would limit its use of CRP authority for

In Summary:

In the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress:

- Expanded the purpose of the program, and the list of eligible practices.
- Provided dedicated funding for RCPP projects, and increased the share awarded by NRCS at the state level.
- Streamlined RCPP administration.
- Provided a new RCPP alternative funding/grant option that can expand the program's ability to fund infrastructure investments benefitting multiple farmers.

Taken together, the changes should make the RCPP a more useful tool to address soil health and other targeted natural resource problems at the regional scale and within states. It should also allow for expanded use of the program at the state level.

land rental contracts to short-term contracts to replace income lost during a transition to a new production system, rather than 10- or 15-year contracts typical for CRP contracts.

Other legislative changes ensure that acequias, conservation districts, land trusts, foundations, and other non-profit organizations continue to be eligible to be partners in an RCPP project, along with the state and local agencies, Indian tribes, farm organizations, cooperatives, colleges, and other entities named in the 2014 legislation.

In its Interim Final Rule, USDA included as eligible certain publicly owned agricultural land, which could allow RCPP projects to assist farmers who rent school trust land, wildlife management areas, or other publicly owned agricultural land.

USDA rules provide for various easement options (from an easement held by USDA to one held by a partner entity), different kinds of land (wetlands, grassland, farmland, and other ag land), and different levels of funding paid by USDA depending on the holder and type of easement.

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Dedicated Funding

The 2018 Farm Bill provides \$300 million per year for the RCPP for FY 2019 through FY 2023. That represents an increase over the resources spent under the 2014 Farm Bill.

Congress also changed the way RCPP funds are allocated. Congress increased to 50% (from 35%) the share of funds for Critical Conservation Area (CCA) projects, awarded at the national level for regional conservation initiatives.

USDA recently adjusted the CCA boundaries, maintaining the Chesapeake Bay, Great Lakes, Mississippi River Basin, Longleaf Pine, Prairie Grasslands, and Colorado River Basin CCAs. USDA combined the Columbia River Basin and California Bay Delta areas into an expanded Western Waters CCA, and added a Northeast Forests and Waters CCA (see map at right).

Congress allocated the other half of the funds for state and multi-state initiatives. Congress eliminated a national/multi-state funding pool which had received 40% of the funding. But instead of allocating RCPP funds to each state for state conservationists to award, USDA decided the national office would award state initiative funds, so some states may get no RCPP funds. Alaska, Hawaii, and New Jersey are now the only three states with no land in any of the Critical Conservation Areas.

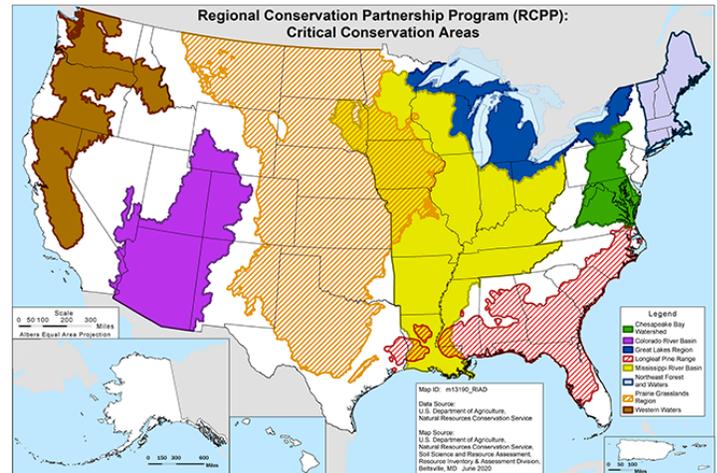
Streamlined Administration

The new Farm Bill should streamline administration of the program for USDA, farmers, and partner organizations.

Under the former RCPP, a farmer could end up with different contracts covering his or her easement (ACEP or HFRP), conservation practice (EQIP), or whole-farm

conservation system (CSP). Congress ensured the program will now operate with RCPP contracts so a single contract could cover the range of approved activities on a farm.

The new law instructs the Secretary of Agriculture to develop a “simplified competitive process” and “simplified application” for awarding RCPP partnership agreements. Most RCPP projects are for 5 years, and USDA can now renew a successful partner agreement for up to 5 more years using an expedited non-competitive process.



Partner Agreements

Although the 2018 Farm Bill does not specify a minimum contribution by partners, USDA has said it hopes to get at least a dollar-for-dollar match of RCPP dollars, and applications are judged in part on how much match they include. Other *federal* program dollars can be used as part of the match as long as they directly relate to the objective, but other *USDA* funds cannot be used as part of the match. The new law clarifies that partner organization contributions can be in the form of cash or in-kind support like staffing. It also requires USDA to announce how much of the funds awarded to an RCPP project will be used by USDA to provide technical assistance to farmers.

The 2018 Farm Bill does not allow RCPP funds to be used for the administrative expenses of partner organizations, including under alternative funding arrangement or grant agreements, although administrative expenses can count as partner match.

The 2018 Farm Bill requires USDA to provide semi-annual reports to project partners on contracts it has awarded to farmers, and an annual report on how USDA has used funds reserved by USDA to provide technical assistance (both have been issues in past RCPP projects).

For any RCPP project, the most USDA will provide (in financial and technical assistance) is \$10 million, and the minimum is \$250,000. At least 70% of the USDA funds must be for financial assistance to producers, and no more than 30% can be for USDA and partner technical assistance. Where a partner will spend part of the technical assistance, a supplemental agreement with USDA will be created to govern those expenditures.

Alternative Funding Agreements

Under most RCPP projects, project partners don't receive or hold RCPP funds. The partners provide out-



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reach, financial and technical assistance, including helping farmers apply for contracts. RCPP contracts are generally between USDA and farmers, and payments from USDA go directly to farmers.

However, the 2018 Farm Bill allows USDA to award up to 15 “alternative funding arrangement or grant” partnership agreements per year, which allow RCPP funds to be paid to partners rather than farmers. These new agreements could allow partner agencies or organi-

Assessing Watersheds

The Izaak Walton League of America’s *Save Our Streams* program trains volunteers to monitor and assess the health of local streams. The program could help RCPP project partners assess the impacts of water quality initiatives at a watershed scale. Contact the League’s Save Our Streams staff in our Gaithersburg headquarters for more information.

zations to carry out infrastructure investments like irrigation projects that benefit multiple farmers, provide performance-based payments to farmers, or implement watershed plans.

The first funding announcement under this option was issued in March, 2020. USDA said it would consider proposals for infrastructure investments that serve multiple landowners, watershed or habitat restoration

plans, or pay-for-performance or environmental market projects. USDA officials say they are looking for projects that cannot be effectively done through the regular (‘classic’) RCPP.

Conservation Outcomes

The legislation requires that partners identify the conservation benefits of a project, designate a timeline and interim milestones, and assess the conservation benefits and other outcomes achieved. That should require partners to assess and report on how the RCPP project addresses the resource concerns targeted, not just report on the number of contracts and acres. The new law requires that USDA provide guidance to partners in how to carry out those assessments,

The new law lets USDA prioritize projects that deliver a high percentage of applied conservation, and that implement projects consistent with existing watershed, habitat, or other area restoration plans – for example, state wildlife plans or watershed management plans.

Selection Criteria

In selecting RCPP projects, USDA’s August, 2020 announcement says it will look at projects that tell a compelling story of *impact on the targeted resource* (25% of criteria). USDA is looking at the level of *partner contri-*

butions, and for contributions that are value-added and amplify USDA funding (25%).

Innovation is important, including why the project could not already be done through other programs like CRP or EQIP (20%). Partnerships will need to show they have the *capacity to manage the project* and assess and report natural resource outcomes (30%). Each annual funding announcement includes specific criteria for awarding agreements.

Opportunities for State & Local Partners

The 2018 Farm Bill streamlined the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, provides dedicated funding, and provides that more of the funds will be targeted at state priorities and for eight regional initiatives. The changes should result in a program that is easier for partner organizations to apply for and use.

RCPP agreements are generally *not* structured to provide direct funding for staff or other costs to conservation organizations or agencies, although they can help partners deliver advice to farmers. They are designed to help organizations achieve their conservation goals by funneling USDA funds to farmers to achieve conservation purposes in a targeted area. The RCPP can provide opportunities for organizations and agencies to leverage other private or public funds to address a critical natural resource problem in a watershed or area.



Partner organizations that are approved Technical Service Providers may also be able to obtain USDA funding to provide, for example, conservation planning to farmers. The farmer would contract with the organization to provide the planning or other service, and USDA would reimburse the farmer for his or her payment for the service.

Soil Health & the RCPP

The multiple benefits that soil health systems provide in improving water quality, reducing soil erosion, storing carbon in the soil, reducing chemical inputs, reducing

input costs for farmers, and providing better habitat for fish and wildlife should make projects focused on soil health a great fit for RCPP funding.

USDA says it values innovation in RCPP projects. RCPP projects could address that by focusing on helping farmers put in place (and test) bundles of soil health practices that can accelerate the restoration of soil health (e.g., combining better tillage, cover crops, diverse crop rotations, and livestock practices).

Including soil health testing in every RCPP contract could provide data on the success of different combinations of practices, meeting the priority for outcome-based RCPP proposals. By demonstrating success in increasing soil health, this approach could also help ensure farmers continue the practices long after the RCPP contracts expire.

Providing soil health education and incentives for soil health planning, with a priority for reaching historically underserved farmers, could address another RCPP priority.

However, to be eligible, RCPP projects for the eight Critical Conservation Areas must address at least one of the designated “priority resource concerns” identified for the target area. Soil health solutions can address a wide variety of natural resource problems, but only one of the eight national Critical Conservation Areas (CCAs) includes “soil quality degradation” as a designated resource concern — the Colorado River Basin because of excess salts and other chemical concentrations. Every other CCA includes at least one priority resource concern that can be addressed by soil health practices, but applicants will need to explain how soil health practices will address those resource concerns.

At the state level, RCPP applications will need to ensure they are addressing at least one natural resource priority concern in the watershed or area. Partners may

want to consult a state’s soil health plan, if there is one, or the NRCS soil health strategy for the state.

Where to Start

Start with a visit to the designated Regional Conservation Partnership Program coordinator at the USDA NRCS office in your state. That person can fill you in on state priorities, the application process, past award-ees, and perhaps even potential partners. Local conservation districts should be consulted as well, for input, a better understanding of locally important natural resource concerns, and as potential partners.

Start early. Applications must be submitted through the RCPP online portal system, and it will take time to obtain access to the system. RCPP projects often include multiple partners obtaining commitments for funding from various sources, which can take time.

USDA has helpful online guides which provide more details on the application process, scoring criteria, and other requirements. Visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/rcpp/



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Izaak Walton League of America

The Izaak Walton League of America, chartered in 1922 by 54 anglers, is a national organization dedicated to the protection of America’s streams, lakes, and wetlands so future generations can enjoy the bounty of our waters. The League has over 200 local Chapters and 40,000 members.

The League’s Agriculture Program works to support and improve federal Farm Bill conservation programs that help farmers and ranchers adopt conservation systems. We work to leverage those programs at the state and local level to deliver conservation benefits where they will do the most good.

We engage business owners, outdoor enthusiasts, and League members to support state and local efforts to restore and protect rivers, lakes, and wetlands.

Follow our work and make a difference in your community by signing up for our *Soil Matters* email updates, available free at www.iwla.org/agriculture.

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