

USDA Invests \$225 Million in Innovative Conservation Partnerships

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced on December 21, 2016, that 88 high-impact projects across the country will receive \$225 million in federal funding as part of the USDA's Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). In addition, partners have proposed to contribute up to an additional \$500 million to improve the nation's water quality, combat drought, enhance soil health, support wildlife habitat and protect agricultural viability.

"The National Watershed Coalition (NWC) is pleased that nine of these projects are going to be implemented utilizing the Public Law 83-566 Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act authority," says Mark Gilbert, NWC Chairman. "USDA is partnering with conservation districts and other watershed project sponsors to solve some important natural water resource issues."

Here is a brief description of the nine projects that are utilizing the Watershed Program Authority to implement the RCPP Projects:

Departee Creek Flood Prevention Plan in Arkansas: Departee Creek Watershed Improvement District and local partners, including beginning farmers and under-served producers, will implement a "shovel ready" flood prevention plan and restore natural flow to Departee Creek in Arkansas. Frequent flooding results in high quantities of sediment buildup, nutrient loss and erosion along the waterway and adjacent lands. The partners will restore critical sections of the river and then develop a low water weir on a lake located mid-stream to maintain desired water levels.

The work will improve wildlife habitat, limit loss of nutrients and crops, and reduce damage to personal property and roads. With successful implementation of the flood plan, the waterway also may be removed from the 303 (d) Impaired List. The lead partner with USDA is the Departee Creek Watershed Improvement District.

Little Colorado River Watershed In Arizona: The Little Colorado River Watershed - Navajo Nation Regional Conservation Partnership Program Project will align Navajo and federal governments, Navajo producer associations, communities, and local organizations with the mission of the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The Navajo Nation RCPP will establish a five year PL-566 Watershed Planning Team for three sub-watersheds of the Little Colorado River Basin in Arizona. The project partners – including the Navajo Nation Division of Natural Resources, the Little Colorado River Watershed Chapters Association, Navajo Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Indian Affairs - will participate in and support PL-566 planning activities.

The partners will address barriers to Navajo participation in Environmental Quality Incentives Program and other USDA programs, conduct bilingual-bicultural outreach and education to emerging producers' associations, and support youth conservation demonstration projects. The partnership will strengthen relationships among communities, producers and decision-makers and improve resource conditions in the project area, approximately 25% of Navajo Nation. The lead partner with USDA is the Navajo Nation Division of Natural Resources.

Black Rascal Creek Project in California: The Black Rascal Creek Project will provide flood protection to the communities of Merced and Franklin/Beachwood in California and surrounding prime agricultural lands, an area that has seen frequent and severe flooding. In addition to flood control, the project will address drought, water quality, soil quality and inadequate wildlife habitat. The project is sponsored by the Merced Streams Group, a partnership of Merced County, Merced Irrigation District, and City of Merced. The partners expect to triple the federal investment in the project. The lead partner with USDA is Merced County.

Colorado River Headwaters Project in Colorado: The Colorado River Headwaters Projects will address the consequences of trans-mountain diversions that supply agricultural and municipal water to Northern Colorado and the Denver Metro Area, which have had a significant impact on agriculture and aquatic resources in the headwaters of the Colorado River. Led by an array of partners representing local agriculture, local government, water providers, state agencies, conservation groups and landowners, the project will create a bypass channel to reconnect the Colorado River, make channel and habitat improvement downstream of the bypass to support healthy habitat, and improve irrigation, soil quality and water quality. When fully implemented, the Headwaters Project will directly benefit over 30 miles of the Colorado River and 4,500 acres of irrigated lands that provide sage grouse habitat and make up to 11,000 acre-feet of water available to improve the river during low flow conditions. The lead partner with USDA is Trout Unlimited.

Lower Grand River Watershed Habitat Restoration in Michigan: The Watershed Habitat Restoration - Farmland Conservation Project addresses priority resource concerns in the Lower Grand River Watershed of water quality degradation and inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife and invertebrates. The project will use innovative, creative designs to revitalize 2.5 miles of the river flowing through Grand Rapids. Indian Mill Creek and Rogue River are tributaries of the Grand River upstream from the restoration area, with watersheds that are over 40 percent agricultural.

The project also will encourage conservation practices, possibly through financial assistance or cost share funds, using new technology in managing large river systems to address resource concerns. The over twenty project partners have committed significant contributions, almost doubling the federal conservation investment, to deliver a targeted outreach campaign; provide public and private financial and technical assistance to landowners applying for Natural Resources Conservation Service programs; and coordinate monitoring efforts to document project outcomes. A participatory conservation approach of working with property owners through workshops, one-on-one interactions and bilingual materials will reach both experienced and underserved producers in critical areas.

The inclusion of many private organizations will increase knowledge of conservation practices and build capacity for developing a local workforce focused on improving water quality and providing adequate habitats for fish and wildlife. The lead partner with USDA is the Grand Valley Metro Council.

Wahoo Creek Water Quality Sites 26 & 27 in Nebraska: The Lower Platte North Natural Resources District in Nebraska, with the assistance of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, completed the Wahoo Creek Watershed Plan and Environmental Impact Statement under the authority of Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (Public Law 83-566). The watershed plan identified seventeen projects within the basin that will reduce rural and urban flooding, reduce sedimentation and scour, stabilize stream channels, enhance fish and wildlife habitat, enhance water quality, improve economic conditions and provide recreational opportunities.

Seven of these structures were completed as an environmental enhancement project with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Through this project, partners will construct two dams (Sites 26 and 27) of the remaining ten uncompleted structures as identified in the Wahoo Creek Watershed Plan to address identified flooding and water quality concerns. The lead partner with USDA is the Lower Platte North Natural Resources District.

Lower Colorado River Authority in Texas: The Lower Colorado River Authority and partners will construct an off-channel reservoir in Colorado County to increase the region's water supply and help preserve regional economies susceptible to frequent and prolonged droughts. The reservoir will provide critically needed irrigation water to farmers and Lakeside rice fields, which also provide habitat for waterfowl and water birds. The project will implement complementary Conservation Stewardship Program or CSP enhancements in Colorado, Wharton and Matagorda counties near the Texas Gulf Coast, including outreach and funding for CSP enhancements on rice lands that provide habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife and aid in water conservation. The lead partner with USDA is the Lower Colorado River Authority.

Elm Creek Watershed in Texas: The Elm Creek Watershed Plan and Environmental Impact Statement were developed and authorized by the Natural Resources Conservation Service in 1981. The watershed plan, to be updated with a supplement, consists of seven floodwater retarding structures, two floodwater dikes, accelerated technical assistance for cropland erosion control and development of upland wildlife habitat. Due to funding limitations, only three floodwater retarding structures have been built in the Elm Creek Watershed (3R, 6R, and 7R). This Elm Creek Watershed project will include construction of one floodwater retarding structure, Site 1A, and assistance to agricultural producers for erosion control, water quality improvement, brush management and upland wildlife habitat improvement. The lead partner with USDA is the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board.

Uintah County Efficiency Project in Utah: The Uintah Water Conservancy District in Utah is leading a county-wide effort to increase the quantity and improve the quality of water in the area through better management of existing and future water facilities and resources. Partners in this county-wide effort include two federal agencies, three state government entities, Uinta County, Utah State University and several canal companies. These partners will implement nine separate project "components" in this coordinated effort and organize feasible salinity projects on a large scale, eliminating the piecemeal approach of the past. The lead partner with USDA is the Uintah Water Conservancy District.