

USDA, Partners to Invest \$720 Million in Large-Scale, Targeted Conservation Projects Across the Nation

Regional Conservation Partnership Program Pools Together \$220 Million Investment from USDA, up to \$500 Million from Local Partners to Improve Water Quality, Soil Health, Habitat and More

SAVANNAH, Ga., Feb. 12, 2016 – Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today announced that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and partners across the nation together will direct up to \$720 million towards 84 conservation projects that will help communities improve water quality, combat drought, enhance soil health, support wildlife habitat and protect agricultural viability. These projects make up the second round of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) created by the 2014 Farm Bill.

Through the 2015 and 2016 rounds, USDA and partners are investing up to \$1.5 billion in 199 strategic conservation projects. Projects are selected on a competitive basis, and local private partners must be able to at least match the USDA commitment. For this round, USDA received 265 applications requesting nearly \$900 million, or four times the amount of available federal funding. The 84 projects selected for 2016 include proposed partner matches totaling over \$500 million, more than tripling the federal investment alone.

“The Regional Conservation Partnership Program puts local partners in the driver’s seat to accomplish environmental goals that are most meaningful to that community. Joining together public and private resources also harnesses innovation that neither sector could implement alone,” Vilsack said. “We have seen record enrollment of privately owned lands in USDA’s conservation programs under this Administration, and the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program will be instrumental in building on those numbers and demonstrating that government and private entities can work together for greater impacts on America’s communities.”

RCPP draws on local knowledge and networks to fuel conservation projects. Bringing together a wide variety of new partners including businesses, universities, non-profits and local and Tribal governments makes it possible to deliver innovative, landscape- and watershed-scale projects that improve water quality and quantity, wildlife habitat, soil health and other natural resource concerns on working farms, ranches and forests.

Vilsack announced the launch of the 2016 projects at Fort Stewart in Georgia, where he also highlighted a RCPP partnership led by the U. S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities to accelerate and expand forest health conservation practices in longleaf pine forests around six Department of Defense facilities in the Southeast. Through the Southern Sentinel Landscapes Conservation project USDA will invest \$7.5 million, matched by \$10 million from 20 partners, including the U.S. Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps. This project will protect and restore working forest habitats while helping

ensure military preparedness by protecting open space for training and reducing regulatory pressure on the bases by improving habitat for at-risk species on private lands.

Later today, Vilsack plans to travel to Moncks Corner, S.C., to announce the launch of the African American Forest Restoration and Retention project, also led by the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities. For this project, USDA is investing \$1.6 million, to be matched by around \$2 million from six partners. The project will support landowners through direct provision of forestry, land tenure and technical services as well as the brokering of services from other private and government providers including forestry commissions, consulting foresters, extension services and conservation organizations.

“We put out a call for innovative and results-focused projects that will deliver the most conservation impact,” Vilsack said. “Our partners answered with creative, locally-led approaches to help producers support their ongoing business operations and address natural resource challenges in their communities and across the nation.”

Water quality and drought are dominant themes in this year’s RCPP project list with 45 of the 84 projects focusing on water resource concerns.

“From the harmful impact of algal bloom in the Great Lakes region to the devastating effects of persistent drought in California, RCPP helps private landowners and producers develop solutions that work for them and meet the needs of their communities and local wildlife,” Vilsack said. “It’s encouraging to see so much interest in the program.”

USDA is committed to invest \$1.2 billion in RCPP partnerships over the life of the 2014 Farm Bill. Today’s announcement brings the current USDA commitment to almost \$600 million invested in 199 partner-led projects, leveraging an additional \$900 million for conservation activities in all 50 states and Puerto Rico.

USDA invested \$370 million in [115 high impact RCPP projects](#) during 2015. In New Mexico, a RCPP project with the Interstate Stream Commission and an acequia—a local communal irrigation system—has addressed long-standing infrastructure failures to significantly reduce water needs by improving irrigation efficiency. In Oregon, removal of encroaching juniper was part of the West-wide private lands conservation effort that helped obviate the need to list the Greater sage-grouse on the endangered species list.

See the full list of [2016 projects](#).

Since 2009, USDA has invested more than \$29 billion to help producers make conservation improvements, working with as many as 500,000 farmers, ranchers and landowners to protect over 400 million acres nationwide, boosting soil and air quality, cleaning and conserving water and enhancing wildlife habitat. For an

interactive look at USDA's work in conservation and forestry over the course of this Administration, visit <http://medium.com/usda-results>.

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