

**Administration and Status of the Regional Conservation
Partnership Program**

2019 Report to Congress

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
December 2019

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I. Executive Summary

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) was first authorized by Subtitle I of Title XII of the “Food Security Act of 1985,” as amended by section 1271 of the “Agricultural Act of 2014,” (2014 Farm Bill). RCPP was reauthorized by the “Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018,” (2018 Farm Bill) in December 2018. Through RCPP, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) seeks to coinvest with partners to implement projects that demonstrate innovative solutions to conservation challenges on a regional or watershed scale.

Between 2014 and 2018, NRCS awarded 375 RCPP projects. These projects involve over 3,000 partnering entities, including 1,038 not-for-profit groups and more than 300 for-profit businesses with ties to the agriculture sector. Financial commitments to projects selected from fiscal years 2014–2018 total over \$2 billion, with more than half (\$1.27 billion) coming from non-RCPP sources. Over a typical 5-year project life, each RCPP agreement is expected to provide extensive natural resource benefits as well as economic benefits since RCPP funds are expended through contracts with agricultural producers and construction contractors providing positive economic impacts throughout rural economies.

Section 2706 of the 2018 Farm Bill amends the “Food Security Act of 1985,” and directs the Secretary of Agriculture to report to the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry of the United States Senate, and the Committee on Agriculture of the U.S. House of Representatives on the summary of the progress made towards achieving the conservation benefits defined for the projects and any other related outcomes of the projects. The previous RCPP report covered the 2014/2015 and 2016 competitions. This report summarizes NRCS’s administration of RCPP, provides a focused look at RCPP in 2017 and 2018, highlights changes to the program in the 2018 Farm Bill and gives an implementation update, and spotlights a handful of RCPP success stories. While only a small number of RCPP contracts have expired, many projects have already generated tremendous conservation success stories across the Nation.

II. Introduction

RCPP was conceived as an innovative program that merged partner and stakeholder conservation priorities with NRCS conservation programs to carry out projects that increase conservation outcomes beyond those that could be achieved by either partners or NRCS in isolation. Through RCPP, NRCS uses multiple program authorities to further the conservation, restoration, and sustainable use of soil, water, wildlife, and related natural resources on eligible land on a regional or watershed scale. RCPP’s conservation partners include nonprofit organizations, State and local governments, Indian Tribes, utility districts, private industry, water districts, universities, and many others. RCPP is effectively a supporter of public and private partnerships and the program has successfully harnessed an array of financial resources and technical capabilities of these new partners.

RCPP projects currently underway in all 50 States and Puerto Rico address a diversity of natural resource concerns, including water quality and quantity, soil erosion and soil health, wildlife habitat, flood mitigation, and air quality. The ideal RCPP project proposes solutions to natural resource challenges in a watershed or region. Many existing RCPP projects include efforts to monitoring the outcomes of conservation activities using partner capabilities. This information

will be critical to improving our collective understanding of how to use conservation funding more efficiently and effectively in the future.

III. How RCPP Works—the 2014 Farm Bill Version

For its first iteration, RCPP was delivered through annual announcements of program funding (APFs). These APFs identified annual priorities and established the proposal process, program requirements, and deadlines. Partners proposed projects and successful partners entered into a partnership agreement with NRCS. RCPP funding came from a combination of standalone RCPP funding and “donations” of seven percent of the funds and acres available under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP).

Other key features of the 2014–2018 RCPP:

- RCPP was implemented through the authorities, rules, and policies of the following “covered” programs:
 - EQIP (7 CFR Part 1466)
 - CSP (7 CFR Part 1470)
 - HFRP (7 CFR Part 625)
 - ACEP (7 CFR Part 1468)
 - For critical conservation areas (CCAs) only, the “Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act,” (Public Law 83-566; 16 U.S.C. 1001 et seq.), excluding section 14 (watershed rehabilitation) of the act (16 U.S.C. 1012)
- The funds and acres made available for RCPP were allocated as follows:
 - 25 percent of funds and acres to projects within individual States;
 - 40 percent of funds and acres to national projects;
 - 35 percent of funds and acres to projects in CCAs identified by the USDA Secretary.
- Eligible partners were required to define the scope of the project, provide a significant portion of the overall funding for the project, work with NRCS to plan and implement the project, conduct outreach and education to producers, conduct an assessment of the project’s effects, and report results at the conclusion of the project.
- NRCS was given authority to adjust nonstatutory rules of covered program authorities when the agency found it appropriate to more effectively achieve the goals and objectives of an RCPP project.

NRCS and partners were guided in the first iteration of RCPP by the following four pillars:

- 1) **Solutions.**—Investing in projects that generate measurable environmental, economic and social results.
- 2) **Contributions.**—Leveraging NRCS’s investment to at least double the total investment in conservation projects.
- 3) **Innovation.**—Implementing projects that integrate multiple conservation approaches to deliver comprehensive and measurable solutions.
- 4) **Participation.**—Maximizing the number of partners and participants, both those with a proven track record and those new to NRCS, to participate in and contribute to projects.

IV. Competition and Award Process

Competition is an important RCPP principle. The number of partners with proposals for targeting NRCS conservation dollars exceeds the available RCPP funding. Competition allows NRCS to evaluate all proposed projects to select those that best embody the four RCPP pillars mentioned above.

Under the first iteration of RCPP, NRCS used a two-phase application process consisting of a preproposal and full proposal process. Proposals were screened for eligibility and reviewed for conformance with the basic eligibility requirements published in the funding announcement. A national technical team made up of technical and program experts in a variety of subject matters, reviewed CCA and national funding pool proposals. NRCS State Conservationists established technical review teams to review State funding pool proposals. The review teams evaluated proposals against the funding announcement criteria and ultimately produced rankings of proposals. The NRCS National Leadership Review Board evaluated results from the technical reviewers and made recommendations to the NRCS Chief for the national and CCA funding pools. State Conservationists made recommendations to the Chief for the State funding pool.

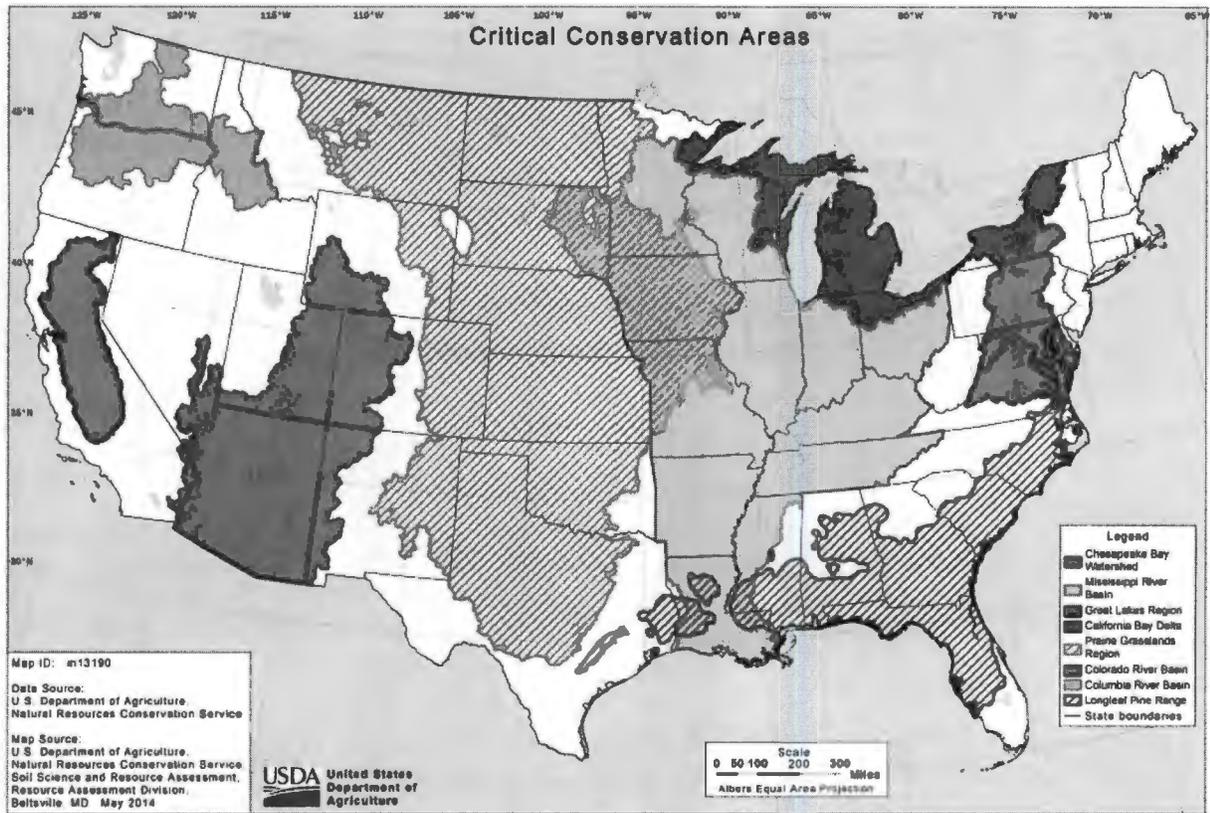
After the announcement of project awards, the lead NRCS State Conservationist and the lead partner negotiated the details of projects for inclusion in a partnership agreement. Partnership agreements included project-specific deliverables and the financial assistance and technical assistance funds needed for project success.

V. Critical Conservation Areas

As required by statute, CCAs were designated in geographic areas based on the degree to which areas:

- Included multiple States with significant agricultural production;
- Were covered by existing regional, State, binational, or multistate agreements or plans that have established objectives, goals, and work plans and are adopted by a Federal, State, or regional authority;
- Would benefit from water quality improvement, including through reducing erosion, promoting sediment control, and addressing nutrient management activities affecting large bodies of water of regional, national, or international significance;
- Would benefit from water quantity improvement addressing natural resource issues related to ground or surface water, or to promote water retention or flood prevention;
- Contain producers that need assistance in meeting or avoiding the need for a natural resource regulatory requirement that could have a negative impact on the economic scope of the agricultural operations within the area.

Eight CCAs were designated in 2014, as shown on the map below. These CCAs continue to be used under the 2018 Farm Bill:



RCPP CCAs and Associated Resource Concerns:

RCPP Critical Conservation Areas	Priority Resource Concerns
Great Lakes Region (IL, IN, MI, MN, NY, PA, OH, WI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water quality degradation • Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates
Chesapeake Bay Watershed (DE, MD, NY, PA, VA, WV)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water quality degradation • Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates
Mississippi River Basin (AR, IA, IL, IN, KY, LA, MN, MO, MS, OH, SD, TN, WI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water quality degradation • Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates • Excess/insufficient water/drought
Longleaf Pine Range (AL, FL, GA, LA, MS, NC, SC, TX, VA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates • degraded plant condition • Water quality degradation
Columbia River Basin (ID, OR, WA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excess/insufficient water/drought • Water quality degradation • Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates

RCPP Critical Conservation Areas	Priority Resource Concerns
California Bay Delta (CA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excess/insufficient water/drought • Water quality degradation • Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates
Prairie Grasslands Region (CO, IA, KS, MO, MN, MT, ND, NE, NM, OK, SD, TX, WY)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates • Degraded plant condition • Excess/insufficient water/drought
Colorado River Basin (AZ, CA, CO, NM, NV, UT, WY)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excess/insufficient water/drought • Water quality degradation • Soil quality degradation • Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates

Section 1271E of the “Food Security Act of 1985,” was amended by the 2018 Farm Bill statute and includes the following reporting requirement for RCPP to address CCAs:

“(6) in the case of a project within a critical conservation area under section 1271F, the status of each priority resource concern for each designated critical conservation area, including—
 (A) the priority resource concerns for which each critical conservation area is designated;
 (B) conservation goals and outcomes sufficient to demonstrate that progress is being made to address the priority resource concerns;
 (C) the partnership agreements selected to address each conservation goal and outcome; and
 (D) the extent to which each conservation goal and outcome is being addressed by the partnership agreements.”

For this report, NRCS is unable to report findings related to paragraph 6. However, to meet the requirement of the 2018 Farm Bill, NRCS is developing conservation goals and outcomes for CCAs and their associated priority resource concerns. The first iteration of RCPP did not emphasize outcomes to the extent that the 2018 Farm Bill program does, so developing outcomes-related reporting for the 2014–2018 projects is not feasible.

The following data summarizes requests and awards for RCPP projects within CCAs for fiscal years 2017 and 2018.

CCA Preproposal applications

Fiscal Year	California Bay Delta	Chesapeake Bay Watershed	Colorado River Basin	Columbia River Basin	Great Lakes Region	Longleaf Pine Range	Mississippi River Basin	Prairie Grasslands Region	ALL CCAs
2017	1	4	7	3	4	2	5	8	36
2018	2	5	12	4	3	7	8	2	43
TOTAL	3	9	19	7	7	9	13	10	79

CCA Final proposal selections (Appendix II is a list of all 2017-2018 CCA projects)

Fiscal Year	California Bay Delta	Chesapeake Bay Watershed	Colorado River Basin	Columbia River Basin	Great Lakes Region	Longleaf Pine Range	Mississippi River Basin	Prairie Grasslands Region	ALL CCAs
2017	1	2	2	2	1	1	2	6	17
2018	1	3	2	4	1	3	4	2	20
TOTAL	2	5	4	6	2	4	6	8	37

CCA Funding

Fiscal Year	California Bay Delta	Chesapeake Bay Watershed	Colorado River Basin	Columbia River Basin	Great Lakes Region	Longleaf Pine Range	Mississippi River Basin	Prairie Grasslands Region	ALL CCAs
2017	\$10,000,000	\$4,185,000	\$12,198,912	\$2,520,171	\$7,500,000	\$7,500,000	\$5,342,000	\$25,418,050	\$74,664,133
2018	6,990,000	16,050,000	8,002,000	15,794,000	890,000	14,060,000	9,517,000	5,817,000	77,120,000
TOTAL	16,990,000	20,235,000	20,200,912	18,314,171	8,390,000	1,560,000	14,859,000	31,235,050	151,784,133

VI. Program Participation

Applicant Interest

Partner interest, funding demand, and resulting NRCS fund commitments for FY 2014–2018 resulted in a total of 33 percent of all proposals submitted being selected for a project. This figure was significantly higher in the last 2 years of 2017 and 2018 for project selections.

RCPP Selected Projects (FY 2014–2018)

Fiscal Year	Proposals	Selected Projects	Percent Selected
2014/2015	540	115	21.3
2016	268	82	30.6
2017	146	87	59.6
2018	168	91	54.2
Totals	1,122	375	33.4%

RCPP Partner Characteristics

RCPP has attracted wide interest from a diverse group of entities. Lead partners must qualify under program rules as an eligible entity. Lead partners are ultimately responsible for completing project deliverables and delivering partner contributions. The following table shows the characteristics of lead and supporting partners as identified in awarded proposals in 2017 and 2018:

Partner Type	Total Partners
Agricultural association	73
Conservation district	272
County government	44
Farmer cooperative	10
Federal Government	107
For profit organization or entity	178
Institution of higher education	90
Indian Tribe	33
Local government	109
Municipal water or wastewater treatment entity	24
Not-for-profit organization or entity	472
State Government	244
Water district with water delivery authority to agricultural producers	26
Total	1682

VII. Summary of Producer Participation

RCP 2014–2018 allowed for 5-year agreements, with the possibility of a single, 1-year extension. Most partners opted for the full 5-year agreement length. Partnership agreements tended to emphasize outreach- and planning-related activities in the early years, with obligations to producer contracts and easements typically scheduled for later years.

Accordingly, producer contract results are preliminary for application periods that occurred in 2017 and 2018. The following data is tabulated from information provided by lead partners and local NRCS State offices on a project-by-project basis. They are reported principally for illustrative purposes, as both project agreements and resultant NRCS contacts are in their early stages.

Currently, all 2017 and 2018 projects report having entered into covered program contracts (EQIP, CSP or ACEP) with landowners and land managers. The number of contracts, conservation practices, and acres to benefit for the 2017 and 2018 projects are listed below. These figures will increase as these projects mature.

Activity	Progress Reported
<u>NRCS Contracts</u>	
Covered program contracts reported	4,884
Number of practices contracted to address project resource concerns*	415
Acres to benefit from contracted activity	24,836,019

* These are the number of distinct practices tied to the contracts shown. Duplicate practices identified in all 2017-2018 RCP 2014–2018 contracts were removed.

Funds Administration

The 2018 Farm Bill [“Food Security Act of 1985,” (the 1985 Act), as amended by Sections 2701 through 2707 of the “Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018,” (the 2018 Act)] requires NRCS to report on the means by which the USDA Secretary is tracking adherence to any applicable provisions for payment eligibility. All 2014–2018 RCPP projects are administered through the covered programs and their associated contracts and easements. RCPP-EQIP, RCPP-CSP, RCPP-ACEP and RCPP-HFRP contracts and easements are all processed through long-standing NRCS program administration software that contains quality assurance mechanisms to ensure that participating producers are compliant with the Highly Erodible Lands and Wetland Conservation Farm Bill provisions. In addition, NRCS’s contracting software ensures that participating producers in RCPP-EQIP contracts do not exceed the \$450,000 payment limitation for EQIP participants.

At this time, there have been no equitable relief or appeal requests submitted by producers participating in an RCPP project.

The 2014 Farm Bill included authority (also included in the 2018 Farm Bill) for NRCS to waive the adjusted gross income (AGI) limitation for RCPP participants, if it determines the waiver is necessary to achieve the goals of the program. Below is a summary of AGI waiver requests and approvals as of mid-October 2019.

AGI Waivers Requested

Project Approved in Year	Total Number Requested	Approved	Withdrawn	In Progress
2014	34	30	2	2
2016	11	5	4	2
2017	34	28	3	3
2018	14	12	2	0
Total	93	75	11	4

VIII. 2018 Farm Bill RCPP

Changes to RCPP

The 2018 Farm Bill made many substantive changes to RCPP, including:

- RCPP is now a standalone program with its own funding, \$300 million annually. Moving forward, landowners and agriculture producers will enter into RCPP contracts and RCPP easements.
- NRCS’ ability to enter into alternative funding arrangement (AFA) has been enhanced. NRCS may award up to 15 AFA projects, which rely more on partner capacity to implement conservation activities.
- Three funding pools have been reduced to two. The national pool was eliminated. Partners must apply to either the CCA or State/multistate funding pool.
- An emphasis has been placed on project outcomes. All RCPP projects must now develop and report on their environmental outcomes.

- NRCS has the authority to noncompetitively renew existing projects.

Successful RCPP projects will embody the following core principles: Impact, partner contributions, innovation, and partnerships and management.

- **Impact.**—RCPP applications must propose effective and compelling solutions that address one or more natural resource priorities to help solve natural resource challenges. Partners are responsible for evaluating a project’s impact and results.
- **Partner Contributions.**—Partners are responsible for identifying any combination of cash and in-kind value-added contributions to leverage NRCS’s RCPP investments. It is NRCS’s goal that partner contributions at least equal the NRCS investment in an RCPP project. Substantive partner contributions are given priority consideration as part of the RCPP application evaluation criteria.
- **Innovation.**—NRCS seeks projects that integrate multiple conservation approaches, implement innovative conservation approaches or technologies, build new partnerships, and effectively take advantage of program flexibilities to deliver conservation solutions.
- **Partnerships and Management.**—Partners must have experience, expertise, and capacity to manage the partnership and project, provide outreach to producers, and quantify the environmental outcomes of an RCPP project. RCPP ranking criteria give preference to applicants that meaningfully engage historically underserved farmers and ranchers.

The new RCPP, as stated above, will not be administered through the covered programs (e.g., EQIP, CSP, ACEP) as in the first iteration of the program. RCPP conservation activities will now be based on the covered program authorities. These conservation activities will be administered through distinct RCPP contracts and easements and watershed agreements that generally have different characteristics and flexibilities from their associated covered programs. The five RCPP activity types are—

- Land management/land improvement/restoration practices.
- Land rentals.
- Entity-held easements.
- United States-held easements.
- Public works/watershed projects.

A single RCPP project application can propose to employ any combination of these activity types as part of an RCPP project.

RCPP Regulation

The 2018 Farm Bill requires NRCS to develop a regulation for RCPP. An interim final rule is in development and is scheduled for publication in early 2020. Upon release of the interim final rule, NRCS will accept public comments on the contents of the rule.

RCPP Renewals

NRCS initiated the RCPP renewals process for FY 2020 in August 2019. Through RCPP renewals, NRCS can reward the most successful 2014–2018 projects with a noncompetitively

awarded new agreement. For FY 2020, NRCS has set aside up to \$50 million for renewals. To apply for a renewal, RCPP lead partners were asked to submit a worksheet that reflected the performance on their existing projects. In November 2019, NRCS announced tentative renewals of 18 projects. Those 18 lead partners were then required to submit a streamlined proposal to ensure that their existing projects can be carried out under the new program rules and policies. RCPP partners not selected for a renewal can apply again in future years (provided their existing project does not expire in the interim) or apply through the competitive program.

The Fiscal Year 2019 Funding Announcement

The FY 2019 RCPP funding announcement—the first incorporating program changes in the 2018 Farm Bill—was released on September 3, 2019, and was widely distributed through website communications, distribution emails, and grants.gov. The RCPP Portal opened to partners to submit applications on October 1, 2019. The funding opportunity was open for 90 days, with proposals due on December 3, 2019. It is anticipated that award selections will be announced in spring 2020 and that new projects will begin in summer 2020.

Appendix I—RCPP Projects Funded by Funding Pool by State, FY 2014–2018

Lead State	Critical Conservation Areas	National	State	Total Projects
Alabama	3		3	6
Alaska		2	2	4
Arizona	3	1	6	10
Arkansas	4	2	6	12
California	6	3	8	17
Colorado	2	1	5	8
Connecticut		2	3	5
Delaware			5	5
Florida	3	3	4	10
Georgia	1	4	7	12
Hawaii			4	4
Idaho		3	7	10
Illinois	3		6	9
Indiana		1	4	5
Iowa	1	2	3	6
Kansas		3	4	7
Kentucky	1	1	10	12
Louisiana		1	9	10
Maine		3	3	6
Maryland	4		3	7
Massachusetts		1	4	5
Michigan	5	1	3	9
Minnesota	1	2	2	5
Mississippi			5	5
Missouri	2	1	5	8
Montana			4	4
Nebraska	2		5	7
Nevada		2		2
New Hampshire		1	5	6
New Jersey			5	5
New Mexico	3	3	7	13
New York	2		4	6
North Carolina		5	5	10
North Dakota	1		5	6
Ohio	1		5	6
Oklahoma		1	2	3

Lead State	Critical Conservation Areas	National	State	Total Projects
Oregon	9	8	4	21
Pennsylvania	3	1	2	6
Puerto Rico		1	2	3
Rhode Island			4	4
South Carolina	2		2	4
South Dakota	1	1	3	5
Tennessee		1	3	4
Texas	3	2	4	9
Utah	3	1	4	8
Vermont		1	4	5
Virginia	2	1	4	7
Washington	2	5	4	11
West Virginia	1	1	4	6
Wisconsin	2	2	6	10
Wyoming		1	6	7
Totals:	76	75	224	375

APPENDIX II—2017-2018 CCA Projects

Fiscal Year	Project Name	Lead State	Lead Partner Account	CCA Name
2017	Black Rascal Creek Project	CA	Merced County	California Bay Delta
2018	McMullin On-Farm Flood Capture Phase 2 Expansion	CA	Raisin City Water District	California Bay Delta
2017	Engaging Small AFOs in the NM Planning Process	VA	Sustainable Chesapeake	Chesapeake Bay Watershed
2017	WV_s Aquatic Passage: Working Farms	WV	Trout Unlimited, Inc.	Chesapeake Bay Watershed
2018	Chesapeake Bay Farm Stewardship and Preservation	VA	Sustainable Chesapeake	Chesapeake Bay Watershed
2018	Implementing BMP's & CNMP's on PA Preserved Farms	PA	Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture - Bureau of Farmland Preservation	Chesapeake Bay Watershed
2018	CCCD Partnership for Chesapeake Bay Water Quality	PA	Chester County Conservation District	Chesapeake Bay Watershed
2017	LCRWCA - RCPP	AZ	Navajo Nation Division of Natural Resources	Colorado River Basin
2017	Colorado River Headwaters Project	CO	Trout Unlimited, Inc.	Colorado River Basin
2017	Uintah County Efficiency Project	UT	Uintah Water Conservancy District	Colorado River Basin
2017	Ute Indian Tribe Water Conservation	UT	Ute Indian Tribe	Colorado River Basin
2018	Palo Verde Valley Water Conservation RCPP	CA	Palo Verde Resource Conservation District	Colorado River Basin
2018	Efficient Water Man. for People and Wildlife (VR)	UT	Washington County, UT	Colorado River Basin
2017	TSID MC Pipeline/RCPP On Farm/Renewable Energy	OR	Three Sisters Irrigation District	Columbia River Basin
2018	East Fork Hood River Watershed Restoration Project	OR	East Fork Irrigation District	Columbia River Basin
2018	Wallow Lake Irrigation Modernization	OR	Farmers Conservation Alliance	Columbia River Basin
2018	Upper John Day River Flow and Protection Project	OR	Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon	Columbia River Basin
2018	Lower Crooked River Strategic Restoration	OR	Crooked River Watershed Council	Columbia River Basin
2017	Low Grand River Wshd Hab Rest / Fmland Consv Proj	MI	Grand Valley Metro Council	Great Lakes Region
2018	Maple Watershed Fish Habitat Improvement	MI	Institute of Water Research	Great Lakes Region
2017	Coastal Headwaters Forest Partnership - 2	AL	The Conservation Fund	Longleaf Pine Range

2018	Coastal Headwaters Longleaf Forest - AL	AL	The Conservation Fund	Longleaf Pine Range
2018	The Ocala to Osceola Wildlife Corridor	FL	North Florida Land Trust	Longleaf Pine Range
2018	Georgia Gopher Tortoise Conservation Initiative	GA	US Endowment for Forestry and Communities	Longleaf Pine Range
2017	Departee Creek Flood Prevention Plan	AR	Departee Creek Watershed Improvement District	Mississippi River Basin
2018	Jacoby Creek Partnership	OH	Tecumseh Land Trust	Mississippi River Basin
2018	Baraboo River Watershed II	WI	Sauk County Conservation, Planning, and Zoning Department	Mississippi River Basin
2018	Advanced Precision Ag for Sustainable Conservation	KY	Security Seed & Chemical, Inc.	Mississippi River Basin
2018	MRB-BIG BEND ENHANCING WATER-SOIL-HABITAT QUALITY	IL	Marshall-Putnam Soil and Water Conservation District	Mississippi River Basin
2017	Elm Creek (1250) Watershed RCPP	TX	Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board	Prairie Grasslands Region
2017	LCRA Regional Conservation Partnership Program	TX	Lower Colorado River Authority	Prairie Grasslands Region
2017	Wahoo Creek Water Quality Sites 26 & 27	NE	Lower Platte North Natural Resources District	Prairie Grasslands Region
2017	Prairie Pothole Working Lands Partnership	SD	Ducks Unlimited, Inc.	Prairie Grasslands Region
2017	OPJV Grassland Restoration Incentive Program	TX	National Wild Turkey Federation	Prairie Grasslands Region
2017	Canadian River Watershed Restoration Project	NM	Ute Creek SWCD	Prairie Grasslands Region
2018	NRCS-NFWF Pecos Partnership	NM	National Fish and Wildlife Foundation	Prairie Grasslands Region
2018	Papillion Creek Site WP-1 Dam	NE	Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District	Prairie Grasslands Region

Appendix III—Highlighted RCPP Projects

As stated elsewhere in this report, only a small handful of the 375 RCPP projects awarded to date have completed their conservation efforts. In many of these projects it is too early to measure the true conservation successes unfolding across the Nation through RCPP partnerships. The eleven snapshots below are included to provide examples of the successful collaborative conservation projects underway using RCPP funding. These 11 projects are still active but have already yielded conservation stories worth telling.

Arkansas – Improving Irrigation Efficiency on Rice Fields

In 2017, NRCS provided a \$7 million RCPP award to USA Rice for implementation of the Mid-South Graduated Water Stewardship project. The NRCS funding was matched by \$8.6 million in partner contributions. The project addresses both water quantity and quality issues through the improvement of irrigation strategies of rice producers across Arkansas, Louisiana, Missouri, and Mississippi.

USA Rice and partners chose to dedicate the NRCS funding for the project to both structural practices (such as land leveling and implementation of water control structures), as well as to management practices (such as irrigation efficiency).

During the winter of 2018–2019, producers captured rainfall on approximately 8,725 acres. Based on scientific estimates, if these acres had been tilled in the fall and left to drain over winter, a total of 4,351 tons of soil would have eroded from fields. However, conservation work on those 8,725 acres led to a loss of only an estimated 1,302 tons of soil. These conservative calculations equate to rice producers reducing soil losses by 70 percent and preventing the equivalent to 200 dump trucks of soil from entering waterways in the first year of the project’s implementation.

Land leveling of rice fields ensures flat fields that increase water use efficiency while reducing runoff and soil erosion. A total of 650 acres of rice fields have been land-leveled through this RCPP project. On these 650 acres, a conservative estimate of two-acre-inches of irrigation water was saved, with a maximum 16 acre-inches of water savings possible, depending on any additional irrigation practices used by the producer. The conservative savings equate to filling 51 Olympic-sized swimming pools with irrigation ground water and returning it to the aquifer.

This project has also been successful in engaging 32 producers who qualify as historically underserved, the majority of which were beginning farmers. This was accomplished through a significant outreach effort on the part of NRCS and the project partners.

California – Protecting Tricolored Blackbirds

A Merced, California, dairy family is playing a key role in protecting imperiled Tricolored Blackbirds, a species federally listed as a bird of conservation concern and as a State of California threatened species.

A large colony of the birds has been nesting at Diamond J Dairy for several years, and Luciana and Wiebren Jonkman halted their silage harvest in March to allow the birds to complete their nesting cycle. Now the colony, which peaked at 25,000 birds, is nearly ready to take flight. “At least 10 percent of this entire species is nesting on this one Merced farm,” said Aaron Rives,

NRCS soil conservationist. “Without the help of the farmers, this species could be set back for years. And once it’s gone, that’s forever.”

Most Tricolored Blackbirds reside in California’s Central Valley, with populations estimated at 1.5 million birds in the early 1930s. Areas that were once wetlands and open fields became developed into some of the world’s most productive farmland, causing Tricolored Blackbird populations to decline. Because these birds are colonial nesters, thousands of birds may impact, and be impacted by, farming operations near their nests. By delaying harvest, farmers allow eggs to hatch and young birds to grow old enough to leave the nest, which can take up to 45 days after hatching.

Knowing that farmers were key to helping recover this species, Audubon California applied to RCPP. A 3-year project was awarded in 2016, with NRCS providing \$1.1 million. California Audubon and other partners offered an additional \$900,000 in partner contributions.

Through the RCPP program, the California Audubon created a protocol for farmers and ranchers like the Jonkmans to report colonies in grain fields. In turn, agriculture producers can receive compensation for the unharvested crop that usually is unusable once the birds leave.

“We are grateful for the tricolored blackbird restoration project,” said Luciana Jonkman. “We are a first-generation farming family, and we know that sustainability is vital to our farm families and our community. At Diamond J we are constantly looking for opportunities to partner with the community, the state, and the federal resources. I hope that folks will see this as a huge win-win for conservation and dairy food security in the state of California.”

While Jonkman noted that the compensation for delaying harvests in the fields with the blackbird colonies doesn’t cover their expenses completely, she added, “We made that decision at the snap of a finger...It doesn’t have to be a lose-win situation.”

The Jonkmans consider themselves beginning farmers and ranchers. She said it’s important to share these positive stewards-of-the-land stories. “Essentially we are first-generation farmers and we need to have a sustainability story that everyone in the general public can relate to,” Jonkman said. “We believe it’s a privilege to provide food for the public and we want to keep that right. Conservation is just part of our story.”

The last Tricolored Blackbird population estimate was done in 2017, when there were 178,000 birds, with over 70 percent of the birds found on dairy farms. In addition to the RCPP easements, two NRCS wetland projects have also provided nesting sites for nearly 20,000 birds. In 2018, the RCPP project saved all known California Tricolored blackbird colonies from decimation if the farmers had harvested their crops.

With the help of NRCS and partners at the California Audubon, Western United Dairymen, California Farm Bureau, and DairyCares, farmers’ participation in this program has resulted in nesting success for tens of thousands of birds.

Florida – Building the Ocala to Osceola Wildlife Corridor

The North Florida Land Trust is teaming with conservation groups and government agencies to create an innovative greenway known as the Ocala to Osceola Wildlife Conservation Corridor, or “O2O.” The corridor is needed to link protected areas—Ocala National Forest, Camp Blanding

Joint Training Center, and Osceola National Forest—that are separated by roughly 600,000 privately owned acres that are at risk for development.

The O2O connects habitat for wide-ranging animals like the Florida black bear and protects imperiled species like the red-cockaded woodpecker, eastern indigo snake, and gopher tortoise. The Ocala National Forest includes 387,000 acres of the world’s largest contiguous sand pine scrub forest with four wilderness areas. North of the national forest, there are almost 50 miles of private lands through which wildlife negotiate passing, particularly, Camp Blanding Joint Training Center and the Florida National Guard Center. Camp Blanding is an island of pristine flatwood, sandhill, and forested wetlands that are home to 40 Federal- and State-listed animal and plant species. The National Guard Center near Starke protects 73,400 acres in the heart of the O2O.

The O2O partnership received an RCPP award for \$3.56 million in 2018 to purchase conservation easements and create wildlife habitat on private lands within the corridor. The O2O aims to conserve 10,000 acres by 2020 and 150,000 acres by 2040.

The RCPP project is using two covered programs to meet project goals:

- The HFRP funds acquisition of conservation easements in the O2O and provides financial assistance for wildlife habitat restoration and management.
- EQIP provides financial and technical assistance to private landowners for conservation practices and habitat improvement.

RCPP supports the coordination of partners across the landscape, both private and public, to protect imperiled species and restore significant habitat.

Georgia – Forest Conservation to Support Gopher Tortoise Habitat

An RCPP project led by the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, funded in 2015 at \$12 million, achieved the permanent protection of more than 14,700 forestland acres in Georgia’s Coastal Plains region. Comprised of three properties, the land is now protected with conservation easements and is part of three new State wildlife management areas (WMAs), providing increased public recreational opportunities, protected habitat for the threatened gopher tortoise, restoration of the longleaf pine ecosystem, and support for local timber-based economies.

Through the RCPP project, NRCS acquired HFRP conservation easements on the three properties. HFRP has not been directly funded by Congress in recent years, but NRCS has authority to enroll HFRP easements through RCPP. HFRP helps landowners restore, enhance and protect forestland resources on private lands through conservation easements and financial assistance.

The three properties protected through HFRP are:

- 4,361 acres in Webster County, now managed as the new Lanahassee Creek WMA.
- 3,375 acres in Bulloch and Bryan counties, now part of the new Canoochee Sandhills WMA.
- 7,050 acres in Jeff Davis County, now managed as the Bullard Creek WMA.

“This type of collaboration is exactly what the RCPP program was intended to foster,” said Carlton Owen, the Endowment’s president and chief executive officer. “The forests on these

properties will be managed for multiple uses, supporting rural economies, providing unparalleled recreation opportunities and helping conserve gopher tortoises and other at-risk species.”

Illinois – A Business Case for Conservation

Illinois Corn Growers Association has developed Precision Conservation Management (PCM), a farmer service program helping farmers adopt conservation practices in a financially responsible way, as a response to the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy. PCM aims to meet the management needs of farmers by making possible the integration of agronomic information with financial and environmental analytics. Through collaborations with more than 30 partners and the development of a farmer-friendly data collection platform, PCM offers one-on-one technical support, data analysis, and an environmental evaluation through the Field to Market's Fieldprint Calculator 3.0.

The project was made possible through an RCPP project led by IL Corn. In 2015 they were awarded \$5.35 million in RCPP project funds, matched by an additional \$13.5 million from other partners to help fund the program. Currently, PCM staff work with 250 farmers in 16 Illinois counties and 10 Kentucky counties, representing approximately 250,000 acres of row crop agriculture. As a commodity crop program, IL Corn has the objective of ensuring that PCM data represents most Midwest farming operations and can be applicable to the broader farm population.

“Farmers sometimes have difficulties making good conservation decisions, when there is very little information on the economic benefits of implementing conservation practices,” said Shannon Allen, Illinois RCPP Coordinator for NRCS. “This PCM project is providing the economic information to farmers so they can make an informed decision.”

By joining PCM, farmers agree to allow IL Corn to collect and anonymize data in a way that demonstrates how conservation practices affect both farm income and local resource concerns. One advantage of PCM to individual farmers is the robust support system available through the specialists’ network. The PCM specialists’ offices are centrally located in local soil and water conservation district and NRCS offices so that they have access to conservation and technical resource systems.

PCM staff work directly with farmers to input management data into the PCM Farmer Portal, a secured and encrypted data platform. Data is then used to generate a comprehensive, sustainability-focused resource analysis and assessment plan (RAAP) that provides direction to the farmer in evaluating and considering changes to production practices. Currently, the focus of PCM’s assessment includes tillage, cover crops, and nutrient management. RAAP reports additionally provide meaningful comparisons to allow an individual farmer to contrast themselves with results of farmers with different farming practices. The PCM specialist works closely with the farmer to review the results of the RAAP and to identify practices the farmer might consider adopting. Based on the farmer’s business and conservation interests, the specialist helps make connections with a wide variety of technical support and local incentive opportunities (e.g., NRCS cost share; cover crop incentives offered by Illinois Corn Growers Association and agricultural retailers).

Once conservation practice recommendations have been determined, PCM specialists then connect the farmer with their NRCS district conservationist to move forward with Farm Bill program applications. PCM data is used to generate a variety of reports that are made available

to farmers across the Midwest to assist with financially sound conservation decision-making. For more information about the project, analysis and results, visit ilcorn.org/PCM.

Iowa – Clearing Things Up for Cedar Rapids

The Middle Cedar watershed in east central Iowa is designated as one of the nine priority watersheds in the State’s Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy, due to its high annual loadings of nitrogen and phosphorous. The City of Cedar Rapids, at the southeast corner of the watershed, draws drinking water from shallow alluvial wells under and around the Cedar River. More than 70 percent of the drinking water produced by the Cedar Rapids Water Treatment facilities goes to large industrial users like PepsiCo, Cargill, General Mills, and Archer Daniels Midland. There would be devastating economic effects to the region if Cedar Rapids was unable to continue providing safe, high-quality water for industrial and residential consumers. There is an urgent need to address the increasing concentrations of nitrates in the Cedar River.

Responding to the increasing nitrate levels in its drinking water supplies, as well as increased frequency of extreme flooding events, the City of Cedar Rapids in 2015 led 15 partners in creating the Middle Cedar Partnership Project (MCP) and applied to RCPP. The project was awarded \$1.6 million, which was leveraged by \$1.6 million in contributions from project partners. The 5-year project connects downstream water consumers with upstream agricultural producers to improve water quality, reduce flood risk, and improve soil health.

Initially the partnership focused on five subwatersheds in the larger Cedar River region and built on two State-funded water quality projects already underway. The first phase of the project—led by the Iowa Soybean Association—developed watershed plans throughout the region. In the next phase, efforts have focused on farmer implementation of conservation practices to address the nitrate issue in the watershed. Partners focused on landowner and producer outreach to encourage greater adoption of high impact conservation practices through joint outreach efforts.

The project provides farmers with funding and technical assistance to install conservation practices such as a nutrient management, cover crops, no-till, strip-till, denitrifying bioreactors, and saturated buffers. In its first 3 years of implementation, the NRCS entered into 54 contracts for over \$1.4 million with farmers and landowners in the Middle Cedar watershed.

Early results show that the project is working. Fields planted with cover crops in the fall have averaged 32 percent lower nitrate concentrations moving off farm fields than fields not planted with cover crops, as measured over three growing seasons (2014–16) and a variety of weather conditions. Over 17,000 acres of cover crops are under contract through the MCP, with contractual commitments extending to into 2020.

Denitrifying bioreactors are edge-of-field ditches filled with wood chips that effectively reduce nitrate concentrations in water running through tile lines and then into local waterways. In the Middle Cedar, bioreactors are reducing nitrate concentrations by 42 percent on average for tile water flowing through bioreactor woodchips.

Drainage water management, saturated buffers and no- and strip-till farming are other practices installed by Middle Cedar farmers through the MCP. Time will tell if this innovative partnership can help resolve Cedar Rapids’ drinking water challenges. The engagement of downstream municipalities working together with upstream farmers and landowners is a promising, low-cost approach to treating drinking water.

Michigan – Protecting Water Quality in Michigan’s Fruitbelt

In Leelanau County, Michigan, Al and Mark Steimel’s roots run deep on their 76-acre prime fruit-growing farmland. The farm was recently protected with a conservation easement through an RCPP project awarded in 2016 to the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians. The project’s goal is to restore and protect tribal fisheries and 3,000 acres of productive farmland through agricultural conservation easements.

The Steimels land is adjacent to other protected farms and conservation easements held by the Leelanau Conservancy. These blocks of preserved lands help to keep agriculture viable in the county and provide critical habitat blocks critical to maintaining water quality for the fisheries.

Farming in Leelanau County is a \$35 million economic driver for the county, which produces 20 percent of the Nation’s tart cherries and 5 percent of the Nation’s sweet cherries. Farming in the county provides 1,600 local jobs where every \$1 earned by farmers leads to \$1.29 in revenue for local businesses. The farms provide buffers to critical natural habitat and can protect water quality.

The scope of conservation efforts in the Leelanau area is increasing. The RCPP project, which includes over 20 partners, is targeting at least an additional seven conservation easements, as well as fish passage projects to enhance the fishery.

Minnesota – Just Rewards for On-Farm Water Quality Conservation

In 2015, NRCS awarded \$9 million in RCPP funding to support development and expansion of the Minnesota Water Quality Certification program, a State-led effort to reward agricultural producers who practice good conservation and are proactive stewards of the land.

For producers looking to get certified as water quality stewards in Minnesota, there can be considerable challenges. Some producers need to change tillage practices or retrofit or buy equipment. Dairy and turkey farmers may need to try new approaches such as incorporating manure into the soil rather than just spreading it.

On one farm participating in the RCPP project, Alan and Brenda Kaiser, who farm a no-till operation in Stearns County, modified their operation by experimenting with cover crops, an intensified irrigation management system, and pest and nutrient management.

The Kaisers grow 560 acres of corn and soybeans, run a 750-hog-capacity finishing operation, and raise 20 head of beef cattle. Through an RCPP-EQIP contract, they experimented with a three-species, 125-acre cover crop trial.

Using both RCPP-EQIP and RCPP-CSP, the Kaisers switched to no-till corn, converted to a low-pressure irrigation system, started managing irrigation water and nutrient application, and implemented a prescribed grazing approach, along with building an animal waste storage facility and an animal mortality facility.

The Kaisers have used these RCPP contracts to reduce the financial risk of trying new practices, all in an effort to make their farm more profitable and improve their natural resource. After initial fluctuations, including a dip in corn yield for a couple of years, the Kaisers believe that reduced labor and fuel costs are offsetting decreased corn yields. They spend less time in the field and they save on machinery wear-and-tear.

The biggest gains may be coming from soil health improvements. Alan Kaiser said, “I think just the health of the soil. That’s hard to prove or hard to put a worth on. The easiest way to see it is to just go out there and dig a shovelful and look at all the (mycorrhizal fungi) in the soil. Otherwise, the ground that’s tilled all the time, it’s just dirt.”

Mark Lefebvre, the Stearns County Soil & Water Conservation District nutrient management specialist, who worked with the Kaisers, agreed. “The soil structure is better. It’s more friable. It’s in cubes, almost,” Lefebvre said.

Through this partnership between NRCS and the State of Minnesota, the Kaisers received their water quality certification in 2016, a just reward for good conservation.

New Hampshire – Partners Working Together in the Beebe River Watershed

The 2014–2018 iteration of RCPP consisted of three funding pools—national, CCAs, and State. State RCPP projects tend to be smaller in scope and funding, but still address critical conservation needs of producers and partners. A good example is the Beebe River Aquatic Connectivity and Habitat Project, led by Trout Unlimited in New Hampshire. The project received just over \$500,000 in 2016 to help wild brook trout return to upland tributaries in central New Hampshire’s Beebe River watershed.

For decades, the Beebe River had a problem—wild brook trout spawning in five tributaries were able to access the river’s main stem, but impassable crossings on the main access road obstructed fish passage back upstream.

The work funded by RCPP and partner contributions involved removing five undersized culverts and bridges that impeded fish passage and replacing them with steel and plank bridges on the main access road through the property. In addition, five miles of road were reconstructed and ditched, 1,200 feet of road were relocated away from the river, and 50 culverts were installed. In addition to improved fish passage, these efforts improved forest management and provided flood mitigation to communities downstream.

Another partner in the project, the USDA Forest Service, provided funding through its Forest Legacy Program to ensure permanent protection of the lands in the Beebe River watershed through working forest conservation easements that guarantee public recreational access for hunting, hiking, biking, cross country skiing.

The collaborative spirit on display by partners in the Beebe River watershed embodies the goal of RCPP—bringing partners together through projects that enhance conservation outcomes beyond those that could be achieved by any one partner. In the case of the Beebe River, the benefits are clear. The restored stream crossings reconnect fish access to nearly six miles of spawning and rearing locations, reduce water temperatures for cold-water fish, and link 15 miles of aquatic habitat. The conserved land in the watershed will continue to be managed as a working forest—ensuring jobs and revenue will stay in the region. Thanks to these efforts, and generous support from the communities and partners, generations of people and wildlife will be able to continue enjoying this special place into the future.

Vermont – Partnership for Water Quality in the Lake Champlain Watershed

In April of 2015, the first year of RCPP implementation, NRCS provided a \$16 million award (note—subsequent RCPP competitions limited awards to \$10 million) to the State of Vermont for a partnership project to protect water quality in the Lake Champlain Basin. Lake Champlain

is the sixth largest naturally formed lake in the United States. A majority of its 8,234 square miles of watershed drains into Vermont, with drainage also going into New York and Quebec. Partially due to its large and diverse watershed, Lake Champlain is impaired by phosphorus pollution from a variety of sources. Vermont agricultural runoff is estimated to be the most significant cause of phosphorus impairment, contributing more than 40 percent of the phosphorus load entering the Lake.

The RCPP project makes available conservation easements and land conservation practices to reduce nutrient runoff in the Lake Champlain watershed. Producers who agree to place a perpetual easement on their lands are then able to access RCPP-EQIP funding to address water quality and soil erosion.

As of early 2019, the project has resulted in 85 RCPP-EQIP contracts with producers, enrolled 23 farmland easements (encompassing over 4,000 acres of agricultural land) and three wetland easements, developed 25 farm viability/conservation plans, and even established a small farm certification program and the Vermont Environmental Stewardship Program. These successes reflect conservation advances that can be made through a substantial investment of partnership funding in pursuit of a targeted, singular goal—in this case, improved water quality in the Lake Champlain watershed.

One parcel protected through the RCPP project is the 258-acre Donegan farm. Specific water quality protection language was written into the deed language, placing a 50-foot riparian buffer zone along 9,700 feet of a tributary draining into Lake Champlain. This buffer zone will serve to trap runoff and sediment from entering the stream. The landowner also agreed to develop and implement a whole-farm conservation plan.

Wisconsin – An Innovative Urban-Rural Conservation Partnership in Milwaukee

The Milwaukee River, a major tributary to Lake Michigan, is plagued by degraded water quality, due in part to high levels of phosphorous, sediment, and bacteria from stormwater runoff. In 2016, the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD) and partners created the Milwaukee River Watershed Conservation Partnership (MRWCP), which is designed to work with farmers and landowners upstream of Milwaukee to help address the river's water quality challenges.

The MRWCP received a \$1.5 million RCPP award in 2016. Twenty-four partner organizations are contributing funding and resources to leverage the RCPP award.

The RCPP project is focused on water quality and soil health. Practices like no-till farming, grassed waterways, and cover crops are being implemented by farmers. These practices have beneficial impacts on both water quality and soil health, building organic matter, and increasing water retention in soils.

Throughout the project, outreach has been a critical component to educate farmers and landowners on the benefits of conservation practices and how upstream conservation efforts can have local and downstream water quality benefits. MRWCP has engaged agribusiness entities in putting on demonstration workshops and agricultural innovation field days, and in helping with conservation practice installation. The MRWCP also encourages producer-led groups in Ozaukee, Sheboygan, and Washington counties to promote information sharing on conservation practices and their impacts on soil and water conditions in the watershed.

Another component of the project helps landowners acquire easements on priority agricultural lands in the watershed. Agricultural conservation easements preserve agricultural lands in perpetuity, ensuring that working lands remain working and that they cannot be developed into impervious surfaces.

As of January 2019, MRWCP partners have contributed \$2 million to leverage the awarded RCPP funding. NRCS has obligated \$460,500 of the \$1.5 million to landowners who have designed and installed practices, on nearly 3,000 acres so far. Additional conservation practice implementation is planned throughout 2019 and 2020.

Three agriculture land easements were protected in 2018 and 2019 through the MMSD's Working Soils Program with cost share funding from NRCS. By the end of 2021, the programs are scheduled to preserve seven additional agriculture land easements.

The MRWCP is a sterling example of how RCPP funding can stimulate the establishment of a coalition of diverse partners, both upstream and downstream, to address natural resource challenges facing urban and rural communities.

More information on the project, events and results can be found by visiting the website <https://www.mmsd.com/what-we-do/flood-management/working-soils>.

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