

# 2014 Arkansas NRCS Annual Report

CONSERVING NATURAL RESOURCES IN ARKANSAS



## Dear Friends of Arkansas Conservation,

It was another great year for putting conservation on the ground in Arkansas. Thanks to the extra efforts of Natural Resources Conservation Service employees and our conservation partners, we continued to manage heavy workloads in many counties to service existing contracts while planning for and implementing the new Farm Bill. We implemented new provisions of the Farm Bill in record time and continued to provide high quality service.

We supported locally led conservation efforts including providing Environmental Quality Incentives Program financial assistance to address local priorities and provided additional technical and financial assistance to address state and national priority resource concerns such as water quality, insufficient water, plant health, soil quality, fish and wildlife habitat and energy. Landscape Conservation Initiatives such as the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative, Illinois River Sub-Basin and Eucha-Spavinaw Lake Watershed Initiative, and the Western Arkansas Woodland Restoration Project were utilized to the fullest extent possible to help accelerate assistance.

We worked with and supported partners through the first round of Regional Conservation Partnership Program projects with four projects selected for funding that include implementation in Arkansas. We also expanded the USDA's StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity from 25 to 48 counties in Arkansas and helped alternative crop producers install high tunnels and micro-irrigation systems.

While financial assistance is helpful and desirable, our agency is built on three core strengths – 1) our conservation delivery system providing federal support with and through local conservation districts that identify local priorities; 2) our technical standards and expertise; and 3) our conservation planning process and working one-on-one with producers to help them develop plans to meet their objectives and address natural resource concerns.

We've recognized that a balance is needed between technical and financial assistance with good plans being developed ahead of contracts. During FY2014, we began getting back to the basics of conservation by expanding efforts to help producers address soil health and water management through our Healthy Land and Waters Naturally Campaign.

We added several field positions during the year, primarily program support/contract specialists to provide contract management assistance and allow our conservationists to have more time for conservation planning. For irrigated cropland, more time is being spent on irrigation water management as the key component of an effective irrigation system that includes the supply, storage, distribution, and collection/reuse components. With sound technical assistance, more pastureland producers are moving to prescribed grazing systems improving their soil, plant, and animal health. Forest producers are improving their timber stands and benefitting wildlife and water quality. With good conservation plans and sound technical assistance, producers are able to maintain or increase production in a sustainable manner.

We've also moved toward a more sustainable workload with some reductions in financial assistance while increasing technical assistance through staffing and agreements. Getting our work accomplished has depended on us maintaining effective conservation partners who continue to deliver high quality services. Working together, NRCS employees and our partners have delivered "uncommon results" once again! I've heard the Chief refer to the Arkansas Conservation Partnership as a model partnership for other states on more than one occasion during the past year.

I hope you enjoy our 2014 Annual Report and find the information useful and enlightening. We are committed to ensuring that all producers across Arkansas have access to our conservation assistance and can contribute to sustainable production agriculture and improving the health of our environment.

I really appreciate your dedication and passion in helping people help the land – YOU make all the difference!



**Mike Sullivan**  
**State Conservationist**

### **Conservation Stewardship Program**

New Contracts: 428  
Acres: 417,293  
Financial Assistance: \$12,428,292  
Previous Contracts: \$54,309,034

### **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) (includes all initiatives)**

Contracts: 1,476 Acres: 247,399  
Financial Assistance: \$47,027,560

### **EQIP Illinois River\***

Contracts: 123 Acres: 9,070  
Financial Assistance: \$3,328,910

### **Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI) (Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative)\***

Contracts: 455 Acres: 98,645  
Financial Assistance: \$23,344,187  
**(Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program)**  
Easements: 18 Acres: 3,963  
Acquisition Financial Assistance: \$7,286,169  
Restoration FA: \$1,693,568\*\*

### **EQIP National Water Quality Initiative\***

Contracts: 30 Acres: 4,646  
Financial Assistance: \$991,159

### **EQIP USDA StrikeForce\***

Contracts: 59 Acres: 4,781  
Financial Assistance: \$1,944,201

### **EQIP Water Quality Monitoring\***

Contracts: 3 Acres: 337  
Financial Assistance: \$498,364

### **EQIP Western Arkansas Woodland Restoration Project\***

Contracts: 107 Acres: 13,939  
Financial Assistance: \$2,097,497

### **Wetlands Reserve Easements (WRE)**

Easements: 30 Acres: 6,943  
Acquisition Financial Assistance: \$13,142,034  
Restoration FA: \$2,864,712

### **Conservation Technical Assistance Funding: \$7,233,327**

\* included in EQIP totals

\*\* included in WRE totals

Through Farm Bill programs, special initiatives and technical assistance, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) employees, volunteers, conservation partners, landowners and agricultural producers in every region of Arkansas addressed the state's primary resource concerns of water quality, water quantity, soil erosion, soil condition, wildlife habitat and plant condition.

Arkansas was second in the nation in the amount of financial assistance obligated with more than \$137 million and 11th in the nation in technical assistance funding with more than \$21.9 million.

Following is a brief highlight of the conservation work accomplished in Arkansas during Fiscal Year 2014.

### **Conservation Stewardship Program**

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) encourages agricultural and forestry producers to undertake additional conservation activities while improving and maintaining the existing conservation on their land. The program provides financial and technical assistance to conserve and enhance soil, water, air and related natural resources.

In FY14, 428 new contracts were developed enrolling 417,293 acres. The contracts will provide more than \$12.4 million in financial assistance to participants over the five-year contract agreements. Total CSP payments for existing contracts was more than \$54.3 million.

### **Environmental Quality Incentives Program**

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) promotes agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible goals. It provides financial and technical assistance to install or implement structural and management conservation practices on agricultural land.

The majority of general EQIP funds provided to Arkansas are used to support priority resource concerns identified by conservation districts through local work groups.

Arkansas farmers received more than \$47 million in EQIP financial assistance in FY14, funding 1,476 applications. This financial assistance will help install conservation practices to reduce soil erosion, use water more efficiently and improve grazing land, wildlife habitat and water quality on more than 247,399 acres.

Other initiatives under EQIP included Energy (39 contracts for \$1.94 million), Organic (4 contracts for \$28,761) and Seasonal High-Tunnel (40 contracts for \$304,591).

### **USDA StrikeForce Initiative**

The USDA StrikeForce Initiative is helping relieve persistent poverty in high-poverty counties by accelerating USDA assistance while working closely with Community Based Organizations. In 2014, Arkansas's StrikeForce counties increased from 25 to 48.

More than \$1.9 million in NRCS financial assistance funded 59 contracts on 4,781 acres in Arkansas's StrikeForce counties in FY14 through EQIP.

USDA has invested between \$365 million and \$501 million from FY11 to FY13 in the 25 StrikeForce counties.

This has resulted in a substantial impact on the Arkansas economy. It is estimated these investments have provided between 5,708 and 6,997 additional jobs per year for Arkansas residents, many of these in the original 25 StrikeForce counties.

### **Water Quality Monitoring**

A new project to monitor edge-of-field water quality on agricultural lands in targeted watersheds throughout the state began in 2013. Producers can use the data from water quality monitoring and evaluation to measure the effectiveness of conservation practices and systems such as nutrient management, cover crop, and irrigation water management. Evaluation of conservation practice effectiveness through edge-of-field monitoring will lead to a better understanding of nutrient and sediment loading and will assist NRCS and participants in adapting or validating the application of conservation measures.

In FY14, Arkansas landowners received \$498,364 through three contracts on 337 acres.

### **Wetlands**

Arkansas NRCS enrolled 30 easements totaling 6,943 acres of wetlands through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program Wetlands Reserve Easements (WRE) and Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP). Total easement acquisitions were more than \$13.1 million and restoration was more than \$2.86 million.

The voluntary programs offer landowners the opportunity to protect, restore and enhance wetlands on their property.

Through WRE, 12 easements totaling 2,980 acres and more than \$5.8 million in acquisitions and \$1.17 million in restoration. Through WREP, 18 easements totaling 3,963 acres and more than \$7.2 million in acquisitions and \$1.69 million in restoration. Arkansas ranks third in the nation in the number of acres enrolled with more than 235,000.

### **Earth Team**

The Stone County Conservation District was named the 2014 National Association of Conservation Districts/NRCS Earth Team district of the year. The award highlights the most effective conservation district in the nation in supporting the Earth Team program. The district takes the lead in sponsoring and providing outreach events and in mobilizing, training and utilizing 66 Earth Team volunteers who donated a total of 2,642 hours of service in 2014.

Statewide, 691 volunteers provide 19,242 hours of service – equating to a salary savings of \$433,896. Arkansas was one of only two states in the Southeast region that had 100 percent office participation.

### **Arkansas Quick Facts:**

- ◆ Number of Permanent NRCS Employees = 228
- ◆ Number of NRCS Field Offices = 61
- ◆ Acres of Cropland = 7.3 million or 21% of the state
- ◆ Acres of Pastureland = 5.1 million or 15% of the state
- ◆ Acres of forestland = 15 million acres or 44% of the state

# Woodland Restoration

## *Improving the health of Arkansas's forests*

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and United States Forest Service (FS) announced a multi-year partnership in FY14 to improve the health and resiliency of forest ecosystems across the nation.

In Arkansas, the Western Arkansas Woodland Restoration project aims to double the conservation activity on private lands in 29 counties and on the Ozark-St. Francis and Ouachita National Forests over the next three years.

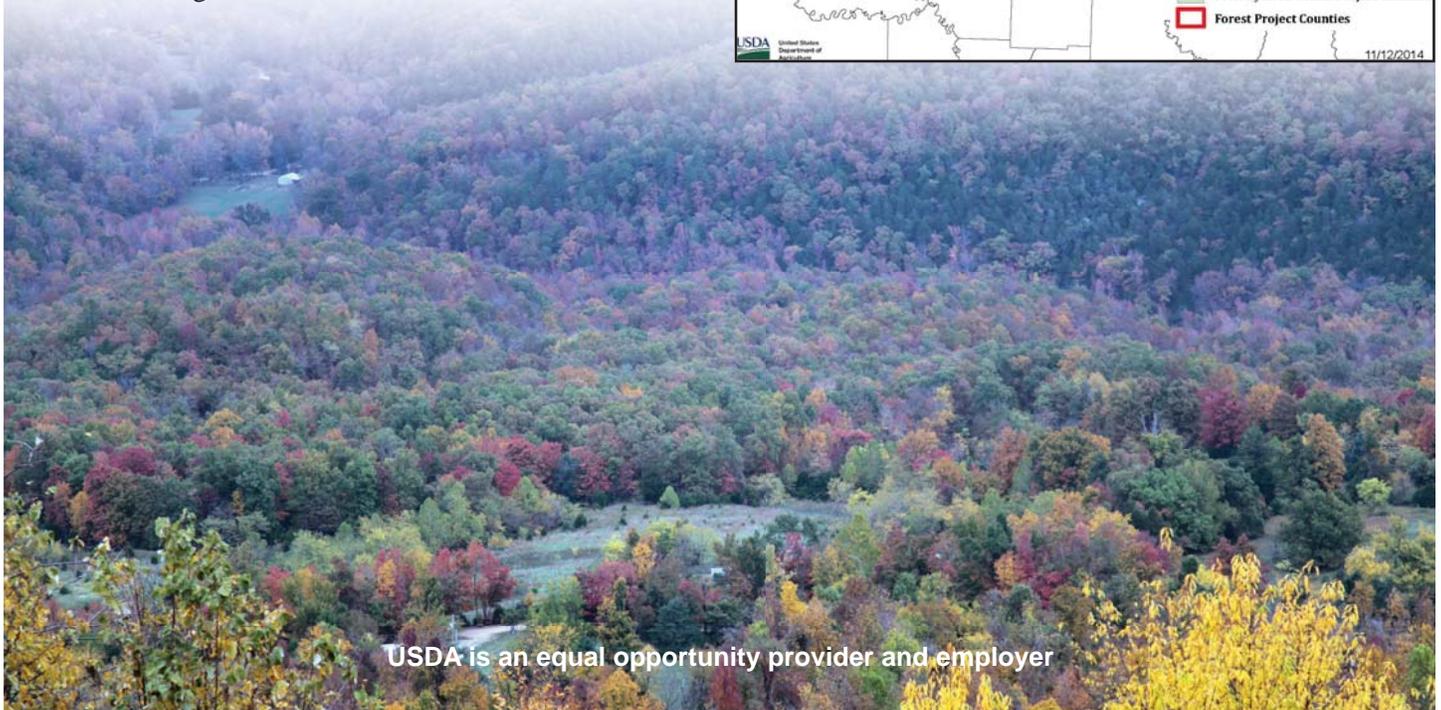
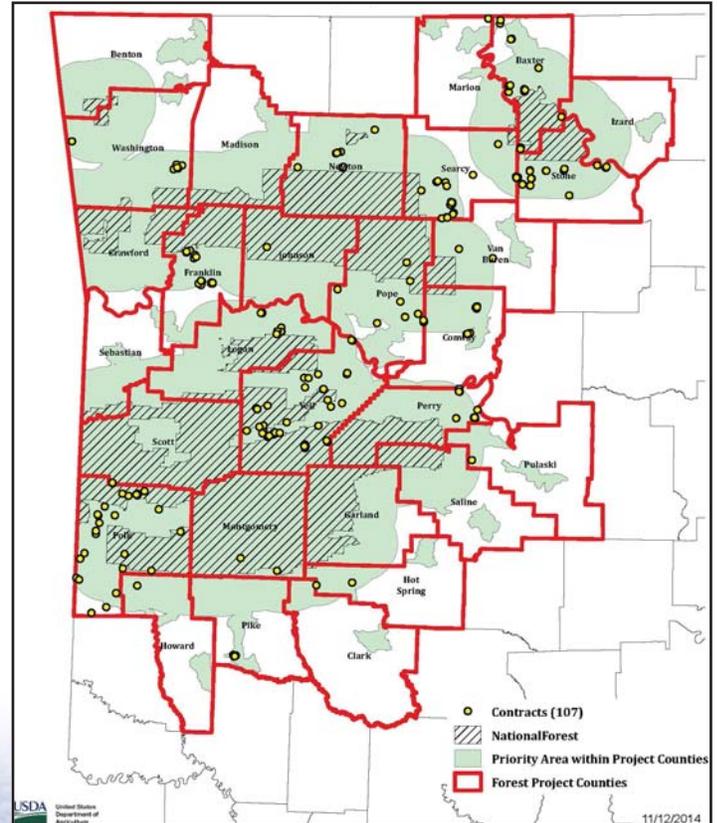
“Both of these agencies have the same goal – improving the health of our forest lands,” Mike Sullivan, NRCS state conservationist said. “The project has two components that will restore and improve forest land. The NRCS portion provides voluntary, incentive-based assistance to private forest landowners, while the Forest Service portion will focus on forest health and water quality issues on Forest Service lands.”

The project is designed to promote the voluntary installation of forestland conservation practices on private land to help restore, maintain, and enhance more open woodland structure to improve wildlife habitat, forest health, and water quality.

For NRCS and private forest landowners, in FY14 the project resulted in more than \$2 million in financial assistance being obligated through 107 contracts designed to benefit 13,939 acres.

In 2014, landowners installed more than 219,000 feet of firebreaks, 2,310 feet of diversions, 516 acres of site preparation for tree planting, 175 acres of forest stand improvement, 20 acres of prescribed burning, 8 ponds and 5 stream crossings.

The top five practices planned (based on the number of occurrences in 2014 contracts) are: 506 miles of firebreaks, 32,709 acres of prescribed burning, 16,834 acres of tree/shrub site preparation, 10,321 acres of forest stand improvement and more than 9,000 acres of tree/shrub establishment.



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