

ARKANSAS CONSERVATION NEWS

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

Second Quarter
2019

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2019

Cover Crops + IWM = Success



The Benefits of Soil Health

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Helping People Help the Land

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From the State Conservationist



We continue to work with our conservation partners on putting conservation on the ground as we await information on how USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will implement changes to existing programs under the 2018 Farm Bill. The 2018 Farm Bill was enacted on December 20, 2018. Through the Farm Bill, NRCS helps producers improve their operations and conserve natural resources through a wide array of conservation programs. The 2018 Farm Bill continues its strong support for conservation efforts through reauthorization and expanded flexibility. Once the evaluation phase of changes the Farm Bill made to conservation programs is complete, we'll work to implement those changes as quickly as possible.

I want to congratulate our Arkansas NRCS Civil Rights Advisory Committee on their selection to receive the NRCS Team/Group Civil Rights Award for 2018. Our Team was selected for demonstrated commitment to diversity awareness as a group in Arkansas. Their service as the Arkansas Civil Rights Advisory Committee, work on outreach activities with historically underserved populations, and work with schools and youth groups for environmental education was commended by NRCS Chief Matthew Lohr.

Recently, Chief Lohr gave our agency his vision for NRCS. He is a fifth-generation farmer with a strong passion for conservation. He is committed to

working with private landowners and he knows the unique and important issues that affect farmers, ranchers and foresters across the country. The Chief wants NRCS to be as effective as possible for all the people we support in getting conservation on the ground and holding them and their needs at the forefront of our work every day.

He shared with each member of our agency his three priorities. They are:

1. Implement and deliver the 2018 Farm Bill to our nation's farmers, ranchers, and private foresters.
2. Streamline our processes and program delivery to best serve our customers.
3. Better understand customer needs and improve overall customer service.

These priorities are meant to help us continue growing in our mission of helping people help the land. With a strong commitment to conservation in the 2018 Farm Bill, and the BEST Conservation partnership and employees in the Nation, I am confident that Arkansas NRCS will continue to see big successes in conservation on private lands addressing priority resource concerns.

We'll continue our focus on resource concerns such as water quantity, soil health, water quality, and wildlife habitat to help improve the lives of farmers, ranchers and foresters, and the communities in which they live and work.



Mike Sullivan, State Conservationist

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The Arkansas Conservation News is published quarterly by the Arkansas Natural Resources Conservation Service.

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Assistance Available to Help Arkansas Landowners Restore Wetlands

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is accepting applications for enrollment in the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) to help landowners protect and restore wetlands across the state and in two special project areas.

The funding is provided through the Wetlands Reserve Easements (WRE) portion of ACEP, created by the 2014 Farm Bill and reauthorized in the new 2018 Farm Bill to protect critical water resources and wildlife habitat. Through the voluntary sale of an easement, landowners limit future development to protect these key resources.

WRE applications may be submitted at any time to NRCS; however, applications for the current funding round must be submitted by April 12, 2019. Landowners statewide should visit their local USDA field service center to apply.

Funding is also available in two special Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI) projects. They are:

- Cache River Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP): The purpose of this project is to improve water quality and restore forested wetlands to reduce non-point source pollution affecting the Cache and White Rivers. The project area is in portions of Monroe, Prairie and Woodruff counties.

- Batture Lands WREP: The purpose of this project is to achieve more sustainable land and water management in the active floodplain of the Lower Mississippi, thus providing significant ecological, economic and societal benefits. The project area includes the portions of Chicot, Crittenden, Desha, Lee, Mississippi and Phillips counties inside the Mississippi River levee.

“Wetland reserve easements provide habitat for fish and wildlife, improve water quality by filtering sediments and chemicals, reduce impacts from flooding, recharge groundwater, and provide opportunities for educational, scientific and outdoor recreational activities,” said Mike Sullivan, NRCS state conservationist in Arkansas.

Eligible landowners applying for WRE easements can choose to enroll in a permanent or 30-year easement. Tribal landowners also have the option of enrolling in 30-year contracts.

To learn about WRE and other technical and financial assistance available through NRCS conservation programs, visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/GetStarted or your local [USDA Service Center](#).





Western Arkansas & SE Oklahoma Woodland Restoration Project Builds on the Success of Prior Projects

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will invest more than \$12 million this year to mitigate wildfire risk, improve water quality and restore healthy forest ecosystems through 13 targeted projects on both public and private lands, including one in Arkansas. Since 2014, USDA has invested \$213 million in 69 Joint Chief's Landscape Restoration Partnership projects, which focus on areas where public forests and grasslands intersect with privately-owned lands.

The Joint Chief's Landscape Restoration Partnership enables the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the U.S. Forest Service (FS) to leverage technical and financial assistance collaboratively alongside agricultural producers and forest landowners in Arkansas to help reduce wildfire threats, protect water quality and supply, and improve wildlife habitat for at-risk species.

"With the help of USDA, producers can improve their forestry operations while realizing many other benefits, including mitigating impacts from wildfires, improving water quality, and wildlife habitat," said Mike Sullivan, NRCS state conservationist in Arkansas.

Building on the success of two prior Joint Chief's projects in Arkansas, partners will continue to restore forest health with a focus on enhancing shortleaf pine forest ecosystems.

"This project illustrates how USDA agencies can work together to address resource concerns on both private and public lands," said Norman Wagoner, FS forest supervisor for the Ouachita National Forest.

This USDA investment will build on improving the health and resiliency of forest ecosystems in Arkansas where public forests and grasslands connect to privately-owned lands. Forest landowners in Western Arkansas have until May 3, 2019, to apply for financial assistance for the voluntary installation of conservation practices to help restore, maintain and enhance more open woodland. Some of the conservation practices available include forest stand improvement (thinning), prescribed burning, firebreaks, tree and shrub planting and

streambank and shoreline protection.

"This Joint Chief's collaboration will continue to assist us, and other local partners, to meet the challenges that come with protecting large landscapes with diverse ownerships, forests and their watersheds, from the impacts of wildfires and other threats, while improving wildlife habitat and protecting water resources," said Joe Fox, Arkansas Forestry Commission state forester.

The Western Arkansas and Southeastern Oklahoma Woodland Restoration Project located in Western Arkansas, aims to connect diverse acres of restored open hardwood and pine woodland across boundaries within the Ouachita and Ozark-St. Francis National Forests that span Arkansas and Oklahoma. The project will reduce forest vulnerability to harmful insect infestations, including the southern pine beetle, red oak borer, and bark beetle. Forest restoration activities will also support habitat for the threatened leopard darter and northern long-eared bat, monarch butterflies and other pollinators. Other benefits include protecting and improving water quality for nearly one million people who depend on clean drinking water in the project area.

Total FY 2019 Funding—\$1,830,500 NRCS—\$1,650,000 Forest Service—\$180,500

During the new three-year projects, landowners will work with local USDA experts and partners to apply targeted forestry management practices on their land, such as thinning, hazardous fuel treatments, fire breaks and other systems, to meet unique forestry challenges in Arkansas.

For full project descriptions and information on completed projects, visit the Joint Chief's Landscape Restoration Partnership website at <https://go.usa.gov/xEhja>.

Ag producers and forest landowners interested in a project to mitigate wildfire risk should contact their local USDA service center to see if their land is eligible. More information is available online at <https://go.usa.gov/xEsyY> or visit www.nrcs.usda.gov.



Forest landowner Richard Gifford in Perry County participated in the previous Western Arkansas Woodlands Restoration Program. He credits the success of his forest land to the partnership of NRCS, Arkansas Forestry Commission and the U.S. Forest Service. See how Mr. Gifford used the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership initiative at <https://youtu.be/K8Zc60je2mk>. Photo by Christopher Willis



Irrigation Water Management

Irrigation Water Management (IWM) consists of a variety of tools and techniques that answer the questions of how much and when to irrigate. The following lists some of the common techniques.

Computerized Hole Selection (CHS) for Furrow Irrigation—

This irrigation enhancement consists of calculating hole sizes for polypipe tubing using computer software such as Phaucet or Pipe Planner to determine the optimal size hole per furrow in order to improve irrigation efficiency and decrease the quantity of irrigation water needed per season. This is done by applying the water at an optimal rate per furrow based on the length of the furrow and the soil characteristics. The water should reach the end of all the furrows at the same time ensuring even irrigation and allowing the pump to be turned off before water runs out of the field. CHS for furrow irrigation uses 25% less water.

Steve Stevens, Desha County, uses polypipe with holes sized to evenly distribute the water on every acre of his 3000+ acres of row crops. This computerized hole selection results in 25% less water used and tens of thousands of dollars saved in pumping cost every year. He has used EQIP funding to monitor the success of computerized hole selection as well as other conservation practices.

CHS for Multiple Inlet Rice Irrigation (MIRI)—utilizes polypipe tubing installed through the rice paddies down the middle or side of a field from the water source. Adjustable gates are installed for water outlets for each paddy. The CHS software determines the number and size of openings for the gates. The holes or gates are adjusted so that each levee floods up at about the same time. The water level is kept 1”-2” below the levee gates or spills to catch rainfall during the irrigation season. MIRI has the additional benefits of a quicker flood for improved fertilizer and herbicide efficiency, reduced irrigation pumping time and cost, reduction of stretching of rice, and reduction of the chance of over-topping the levees. CHS with MIRI reduces water usage by 25-40 percent.



Computerized hole selection for multiple inlet rice irrigation. Photo by Creston Shrum

Intermittent Flooding of Rice Fields—also known as Alternative Wetting and Drying (AWD) is an advanced form of MIRI. Mark Isbell, of Isbell Family Farms, uses alternative wetting and drying for growing his rice. This practice allows the rice paddies water level to draw down to less than 1” deep before pumping the water back on the field. This allows

the fields to harvest any rain that falls during the summer months. This savings can be 25-40% of the normal water used depending on the summer rains. In addition to water savings and reduced pumping costs, this also reduces green-house gas emissions from the rice fields.

Pumping Plant Automation—is a system for monitoring and controlling irrigation events. It can be as simple as a timer for the pump. Or it can be very complex and integrate water level gauges, pumping plant timers, soil moisture sensors, flow meters, and weather stations in order to automatically control pumping plant operation or give the user notification of when to turn off the pump. Irrigation can be extremely efficient but water will continue to be wasted unless the pump is turned off when enough water is supplied.

Flow Meters—do not actually save water. However, they answer the question how much water is being applied. Measuring irrigation flow contributes to better management and scheduling irrigation events. Measurements are needed to evaluate the performance of an irrigation pumping plant. Flow meters are essential to quantifying irrigation water use and evaluating the effects of management changes or conservation measures.



Surge Irrigation—is the intermittent application of water in furrow irrigation for the purpose of improving distribution uniformity along a furrow. The use of a programmed automated valve is used with polypipe that has been planned with set sizes. Surge irrigation can improve application efficiency up to 50 percent compared to conventional systems.



Micro-irrigation—can play a key role in irrigation water management by delivering water directly to the plant roots where it can be readily used. Typically this is accomplished through drip tape installed in the soil near the plant’s roots. Though this is generally used on smaller farms, the principles are transferable to a large scale operation.

For additional information, contact Walt Delp, state conservation engineer, at walter.delp@ar.usda.gov, or call at 501-301-3141. For more info on irrigation, visit <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/water/manage/irrigation/>.





Arkansas NRCS State Conservationist's Partnership Award Winners announced at Annual AACD Meeting

The State Conservationist's Partnership Awards were presented on Feb. 13 during the Arkansas Association of Conservation Districts (AACD) annual meeting in North Little Rock.

Mike Sullivan, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) state conservationist in Arkansas, presented the awards during AACD's luncheon. The award recognizes a non-federal partner organization or individual who made outstanding contributions towards NRCS programs, accomplishments, and mission in Arkansas between Oct. 1, 2017 and Sept. 30, 2018. This year's winners are:

- **Organization:** Dr. Mark Cochran accepted the 2018 Arkansas State Conservationist's Partnership Award in the Organization Category on behalf of the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture. The UA Division of Ag and NRCS have had a strong and productive partnership for decades. This excellent association has accelerated the adoption of conservation practices across the state and helped advance the areas of water quality and nutrient management, water conservation, irrigation water management and soils.
- **Individual:** Ryan Diener, Quail Forever's Arkansas state coordinator, was chosen for his sound knowledge provided to NRCS, Quail Forever, AGFC Private Land biologists, and Arkansas producers regarding wildlife habitat improvement practices implemented through NRCS programs. His guidance has helped NRCS Arkansas put even more conservation on the ground.
- **Individual:** Canton Ford, Faulkner County Conservation District's district coordinator, has been instrumental in coordinating efforts to develop and seek funding to address water quality, erosion, nutrient loading, and other critical conservation concerns. He has worked with the City of Conway, the Lake Conway-Point Remove Watershed Alliance, Conway and Faulkner County

Conservation Districts, Poultry Integrators, NRCS, and others to address the nutrient loading of Brewer Lake and the Cadron Creek watershed.

"Congratulations to all our partnership award winners," said Sullivan. "We have great support from our conservation partnership and many others working together to enhance conservation assistance to farmers, ranchers and foresters. More than 250 different partners help make NRCS landscape initiatives successful. We are blessed to work in the state of Arkansas, where the conservation partnership is alive and well."

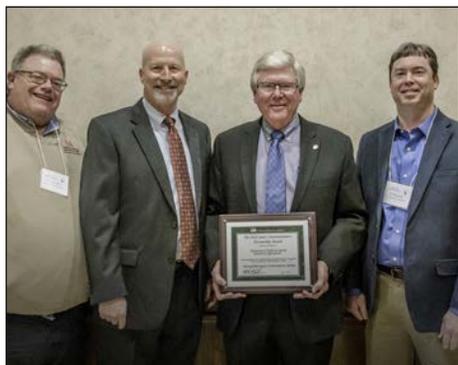
NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to help producers adopt a variety of conservation practices on their land. NRCS staff help producers with a conservation plan and provide funding to cover part of the costs for adopting the practices. These practices are designed to benefit both the species and the agricultural operation.

For more information on AACD, visit www.aracd.org. To learn more about assistance opportunities, landowners should contact their local USDA service center or for more information on NRCS, visit www.nrcs.usda.gov.



Under Secretary Bill Northey served as keynote speaker at the plenary session. He spoke on the importance of locally led conservation and customer service. He also commented on addressing groundwater problems, feral swine, and Joint Chiefs' Forestry projects all as efforts warranting additional attention through locally led approaches. Photos by Christopher Willis

Arkansas NRCS State Conservationist's Partnership Award



Organization: The University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture receives the State Conservationist's Partnership Award from Mike. Pictured are: Mike Daniels, Mike, Dr. Mark Cochran and Chris Henry.



Individual: Ryan Diener, Quail Forever's Arkansas state coordinator, receives the Arkansas NRCS State Conservationist's Partnership Award from Mike Sullivan. Also pictured is Debbie Moreland.



Individual: Canton Ford, Faulkner County Conservation District district coordinator, receives the Arkansas NRCS State Conservationist's Partnership Award from Mike Sullivan.



USDA Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation Bill Northey addresses AACD Annual Meeting

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation Bill Northey visited Arkansas February 12 to address the annual meeting of the Arkansas Association of Conservation Districts in North Little Rock. During his presentation, he thanked the conservation districts for all that they do for locally led conservation efforts. He also thanked them for their work with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in putting conservation on the ground.

He announced that USDA would be hosting a listening session for initial input on the 2018 Farm Bill. USDA was seeking public input on the changes to existing programs implemented by the USDA's Farm Service Agency, NRCS and the Risk Management Agency. Each agency would take stakeholder input into account when making discretionary decisions on program implementation.

"Truly this is a Farm Bill that improves farm safety net programs, protects federal crop insurance, and preserves strong rural development and research initiatives," Under Secretary Northey told the group. "At USDA, we are eager to hear from our

stakeholders on policy recommendations, so we can start working on implementing these important Farm Bill provisions."

Following his presentation, Under Secretary Northey met with Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson at the State Capitol, representatives of the Arkansas agriculture industry, and other agriculture leaders.



Under Secretary Bill Northey speaks as AACD President Martha Manley looks on.
Photo by Christopher Willis

USDA National African American History Month Observance held in Little Rock



Charley Hunter, Jefferson County district conservationist (far right), hosts the National African American History Month Observance in Little Rock. The theme was "The Black Migration: Land Retention and the Black Farmer." Photo by Christopher Willis

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the National Organization of Black NRCS Employees (NOPBNRCSE) Arkansas Chapter, held their National African American History Month Observance on February 28. This year's theme was "*The Black Migration: Land Retention and the Black Farmer.*"

Guest speakers during the event included Daniel Perry, agricultural statistician with USDA National Ag Statistics Service in Little Rock; Kanika Davis, risk management specialist with USDA Risk Management Agency in Jackson MS; Ryan Davis, director of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock's Children International program; and Monica Rainge, director of land retention and advocacy for the Federation of Southern Cooperatives in

East Point, GA.

Jena Moore, NRCS Arkansas assistant state conservationist for programs (ASTC) was presented with the Chester S. Durley Award by Mike Sullivan, NRCS Arkansas state conservationist and Erica Westbrook NOPBNRCSE President in honor of Outstanding Service and Contributions to NRCS. Moore is the first female African American ASTC for Programs.

Chester S. Durley (1915–1987) was Arkansas's first full-time African American USDA Soil Conservation Service (SCS now NRCS) employee and Soil Conservationist in Arkansas (in the Marion field office). He earned a B.S. degree at Arkansas Agricultural Mechanical and Normal College at Pine Bluff (now the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff) and a MS degree from

Michigan State University. In 1966, SCS promoted Durley to District Conservationist where he served until his retirement in 1979. Durley was an active role model and left a profound legacy in his West Memphis community.



NRCS State Conservationist Mike Sullivan, left, presents Jena Moore, ASTC for Programs, with the Chester S. Durley Award. Photo by Christopher Willis



Delta Producer Benefits Through the Use of Cover Crops

More and more farmers and ranchers are using conservation practices to improve the health of the soil on their operations. How are they doing that? By using soil health management systems that include cover crops, diverse rotations and no-till. Sam Pirani is a believer in soil health and cover crops. Sam, a fourth-generation farmer in Crittenden County, grows soybeans, rice, corn and cotton on 4,000 acres.

“My great grandfather, Antonio Pirani, came from Italy, moved to Arkansas and got started in farming,” he said. “He had several brothers and from them, several other generations of Piranis began farming in the Delta.”

Sam originally got into cover crops by watching a USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Rainfall Simulator demonstration at a producers’ meeting in Marion. He saw during the demonstration how to get better water infiltration with cover crops. The NRCS Rainfall Simulator provided a demonstration of how conservation practices such as no-till and cover crops benefit soil health and improve the water cycle on soil by increasing infiltration and reducing runoff and sedimentation.

“Everyone in this area is seeing how conservation practices are helping to reduce soil erosion,” Pirani said. “We’re flat ground here in the Delta. Cover Crops help reduce the amount of soil that erodes away into the watershed. The verdict is still out, because we’re still learning about cover crops. In this area, sandier soil seals off. When we irrigate it or we get a big rain, a lot of it can wind up in a ditch. I’ve noticed that we get better infiltration on fields where we have produced cover crops and I feel like the plants retain water for longer.”

Cover crops provide a protective “blanket” through the winter months. They have the potential to provide multiple benefits in a cropping system. They prevent erosion, improve soil’s physical and biological properties, supply nutrients, suppress weeds, improve the availability of soil water, and break pest cycles along with various other

benefits. Cover crop roots penetrate the soil and make the soil more porous. The roots also give a place for microbes and worms to exist. The species of cover crop selected, along with its management, determine the benefits and returns.

“The cover crop trend is starting to catch on here in Crittenden County and the word is starting to get out,” said District Conservationist Wade Hamilton.

“We had three Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative projects here and cover crops was in every one of them. When farmers have it in their contract, they will do it. After they’ve done it a couple of times, they begin to see a change in the soil. It could be an erosion, infiltration or compaction

change. They’ll see something and begin to adapt to cover crops more and more.”

Pirani has adapted many conservation practices on his operation to make it more productive.

“We do land leveling on our fields and irrigation water management, including PHAUCET (Pipe Hole and Universal Crown Evaluation Tool). We’ve been using PHAUCET for a long time and I wouldn’t water without it. You’ll use less water because you won’t have to over water one area; you’ll water your fields more evenly.”

PHAUCET was designed by NRCS engineers in Missouri to calculate existing irrigation system performance and define alternatives for improving

irrigation efficiency.

Hamilton said Pirani is also participating in nutrient management, reduced tillage, flooding for ducks, pump automation, soil moisture monitors and will start utilizing surge valves this season.

“With all the conservation practices he’s doing, he’s got almost a complete package,” Hamilton said. “I mean, I would say it’s just about as good as you could do on a field.”

NRCS conservation programs help farmers, ranchers and foresters reduce soil erosion, enhance water supplies, improve water quality, increase wildlife habitat, and reduce damages caused by floods and other natural disasters.

“NRCS is just an avenue to be able to help you get started doing conservation practices,” Pirani added. “For me, it was a perfect fit. It was something I wanted to do. They gave me an opportunity to be able to do it with their assistance. I just want to thank Wade, Soil Conservationist Elisha Throesch, Program Support Specialist Kolby Jones, and Irrigation Water Management Specialist Phillip Gahr. They really make it easy for a farmer who shows interest in getting into these programs. They show you what you need to do to get signed up and I just appreciate their help.

For more information on no-till practices and incorporating cover crops into your farming practices, contact an NRCS district conservationist at your local USDA service center.



Sam Pirani



Left to right, Kolby Jones, Wade Hamilton, Sam Pirani, and Elisha Throesch in front of Pirani’s irrigation water management system. Photos by Reginald Jackson



Improving Water Quality in the Illinois River Watershed

A Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) project in Washington County, Ark., is improving water quality and sediment loss along the Illinois River.

Nathan Ogden, who runs cattle on 392 acres between Hickory Creek and the Illinois River, signed up to install conservation practices through Growing Conservation in the Illinois River Watershed Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

Through the contract, Ogden installed fence along the frontage of Hickory Creek and the Illinois River to exclude livestock from entering the stream to protect the streambank and riparian areas.

“Additional fencing was added to create more pasture for grazing to provide adequate amounts of forage which helps protect the soil and reduce nutrient and sediment loss from the fields,” said Josh Fortenberry, an NRCS soil conservationist in Benton and Washington counties.

Ogden’s conservation plan also

called for cross-fencing, livestock pipeline, heavy use areas and tire tanks so he could begin rotational grazing. “Watering facilities with heavy use areas were designed to allow access to water in each pasture to reduce livestock travel,” Fortenberry said.

NRCS and the Illinois River Watershed Partnership entered into a partnership agreement to assist producers in portions of Benton and Washington counties through the project.

The primary resource concern addressed by the project is water quality, with plant and soil health, wildlife management, and energy efficiency being secondary.

From 2015 to 2018, conservation practices were installed on more than 1,152 acres through 25 contracts. NRCS provided more than \$756,459 to assist farmers.

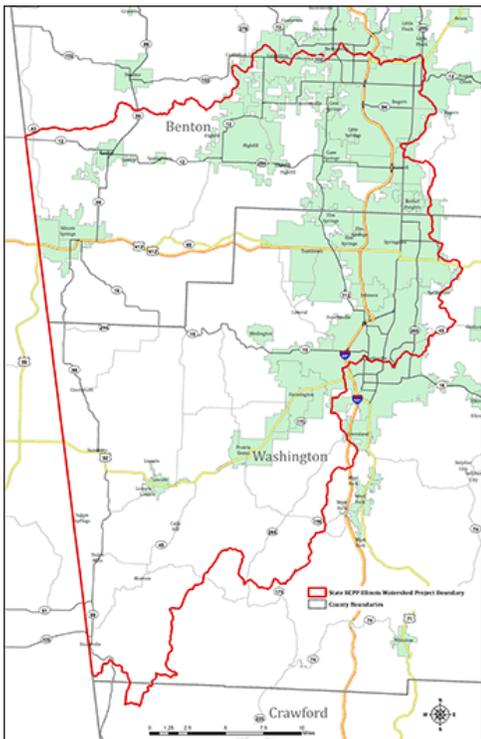
To learn more about NRCS programs contact your local field office or visit <https://go.usa.gov/xPCVY> to find your local field office.



Washington County Soil Conservationist Josh Fortenberry, right, discusses rotational grazing with landowner Nathan Ogden on his operation near the Illinois River.

Photo by Creston Shrum

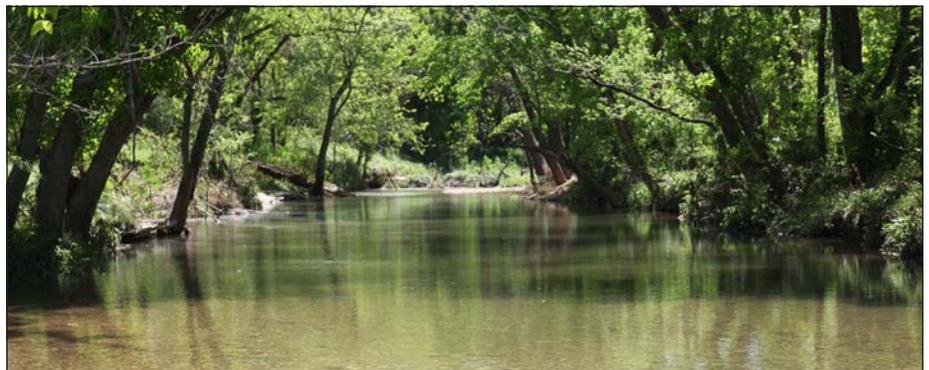
Illinois River Watershed RCPP Project Sign up Announced



Farmers and landowners in portions of Benton and Washington counties in Arkansas have until April 30, 2019, to submit applications to receive financial assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to implement conservation practices in the Growing Conservation in the Illinois River Watershed Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) project. Applicants can sign up at their local USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service field service center.

“The Illinois River RCPP project is being implemented with our conservation partners to accelerate conservation treatment to improve water quality, plant and soil health, and enhance wildlife habitat,” said NRCS State Conservationist Mike Sullivan.

Some of the conservation practices available include streambank protection, prescribed grazing, nutrient management and tree and shrub establishment.





Earth Team Volunteers Assist Dallas County Forestry Contest

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Earth Team volunteers pitched in for the annual Dallas County Forestry Competition held March 8 at the Fordyce Civic Center.

The event was coordinated by Group Leaders Cecilia Roark, NRCS district conservationist at the Fordyce Service Center, and Sheila Stephens, Dallas County conservation district secretary. Assistance was also provided by NRCS Forester Josh Smith and the Arkansas Forestry Commission's Dallas and Cleveland County Offices.

The event drew 51 students from eight area high schools including Drew Central, Hampton, Harmony Grove, Hermitage, Rison, Smackover, Warren, and Cossatot River.

"The annual Dallas County Conservation District Forestry Contest is an excellent training tool for the students in preparing for the FFA district and state contest," said Roark. "The seniors have an opportunity to compete for a \$4,000 college scholarship if they major in a forestry or conservation degree program. The scholarship is awarded to the senior who scores the highest overall score in all five categories."

The competition categories included equipment identification, compass and pacing, wood products, tree identification, and timber cruising. Ryan Sorrells of Harmony Grove was the overall winner and received the Paul Watkins Jr. Scholarship of \$4,000 toward a four-year college degree in forestry or a conservation-related field.

USDA Earth Team volunteers play an integral role in the success of this annual



Harmony Grove High School took first place in the competition. Ryan Sorrells, center, won the Paul Watkins Jr. Memorial Scholarship. Photo by Christopher Willis

event. This year, 26 volunteers worked a total of 156 hours during the competition, monitoring the student activities, rotating students between stations, and helping with competition grading.

Volunteers included members of the Dallas County Conservation District Board: Roy Johnson, David Brazele, Donny White, and Brenda Garrett. Roy Johnson expressed his motivations for serving as a volunteer saying, "I like to see the youth in the local area involved in forestry conservation. I have served on the Dallas County Conservation District board over 20 years and I am proud to be a part of conservation in Dallas County."

The volunteer group also included NRCS retiree Pat Henry. "I enjoy being an Earth Team volunteer and assisting the Dallas County Conservation District Forestry Contest and other conservation districts in scoring. I remember when I competed on judging teams in FFA and I know it means a lot to these students.

Some may use this knowledge on their

career path. I also enjoy getting to see old friends and meeting new friends and the food is always great!"

This event is an excellent example of the importance of conservation partnerships. The day's success would not have been possible without the partnership between NRCS, the Dallas County Conservation District, and the Arkansas Forestry Commission. It also highlights the contributions to conservation in Arkansas available through the NRCS Earth Team program.

NRCS field service centers work with their area coordinators to determine the ways volunteers can best assist us in achieving our mission.

National Volunteer Week is April 7-13. The NRCS Earth Team theme is "Volunteers Improve Today For Tomorrow." To learn more about the Earth Team program and to volunteer visit www.ar.nrcs.usda.gov or email the State Volunteer Coordinator Mendy Rice at mendy.rice@ar.usda.gov.





Funding Opportunity for Partnership Projects

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Arkansas is seeking opportunities to partner with likeminded natural resource conservation partners to provide direct technical services. Approximately \$5 million in funding is available.

Proposals are requested from eligible entities, non-profits, governmental or non-governmental organizations and institutions of higher learning for competitive consideration of funding for projects that last from one to three years.

Projects considered can provide technical services related to any of the following Arkansas state resource priorities: water quantity, water quality, plant health, soil health or wildlife. Special consideration will be given to projects emphasizing:

- a. Advance implementation/adoption of irrigation water management/techniques.
- b. Monitor, report, evaluate ground water levels in critical groundwater areas or groundwater study areas.
- c. Evaluate the economics of conservation practices including the cost versus benefit of various irrigation water management strategies and irrigation conservation practices
- d. Implement strategies to communicate the value of working lands conservation.
- e. Development and implementation of an outreach and training program to NRCS clients to assist them in using USDA FPAC web-based systems such as Client Gateway, Farmers.gov, and other web-based tools. These tools are designed to help our clients obtain assistance from USDA agencies to apply for conservation programs, manage existing program contracts, complete and submit forms; request on-farm assistance; and obtain information on conservation such as soils information, program eligibility and helpful links.
- f. Development and implementation of an Urban Agriculture outreach, demonstration, and training program to assist exiting potential NRCS clients who are interested in sustainable food production systems. NRCS conservation practices such as seasonal high tunnels, cover crops, irrigation systems, nutrient

management and pest management should be emphasized. Other elements could include specialty crop production techniques, soil health, and marketing strategies in the urban environment.

- g. Document benefits/outcomes of conservation in the Illinois River Watershed Initiative special area project.
- h. Assess current Working Lands for Wildlife projects and other wildlife initiatives to document current results, evaluate program delivery methods and provide recommendations for improvement. Species currently being addressed include Bobwhite Quail, migratory and shore birds; pollinators and feral swine.
- i. Implement strategies to address program participation barriers for producers with heir property by identifying impacted producers and providing recommendations for USDA resolution to promote increased participation.
- j. Water Quality monitoring in MRBI and NWQI watersheds and other small watersheds to evaluate effectiveness of implemented practices such as tailwater recovery systems. Monitoring can include biological, in stream, and edge field. (Priority watersheds are Cache, Middle Cache, Lower St. Francis, and Upper Lower St. Francis.)

k. Development of conservation planning tools.

The complete announcement for this funding opportunity can be found on [grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov) by searching for USDA-NRCS-AR. MULTI-19-GEN0010077. All standard forms necessary for application submission are posted on <https://www.grants.gov/forms/forms-repository.html> or http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/grants/grants_forms.html.

Applications must be received by NRCS by 4 p.m. CST, May 24, 2019. Applications sent via express mail, overnight courier service, or the United States Postal Service must be sent to the following address: USDA-NRCS, Amanda Mathis, Room 3416, Federal Building, 700 West Capitol Avenue, Little Rock, Arkansas 72201. Applications sent electronically must be sent through www.grants.gov or to amanda.mathis@ar.usda.gov with a copy to Karen.thompson2@ar.usda.gov.

NRCS Accepting Applications for North Arkansas Quail Focal Landscape Project in 14 Arkansas Counties

Farmers and landowners in 14 Northern Arkansas counties have until May 17, 2019, to submit applications to receive financial assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to implement conservation practices in the North Arkansas Quail Focal Landscape Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) project.

The counties in the project area are Baxter, Benton, Boone, Carroll, Fulton, Izard, Madison, Marion, Newton, Randolph, Searcy, Sharp, Stone and Washington counties. Applicants can sign up at their local USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

field service center.

“The quail focal landscape project is being implemented with our conservation partners to accelerate conservation treatment to create early succession habitat to benefit quail, pollinators and other wildlife in northern Arkansas,” said NRCS State Conservationist Mike Sullivan.

Some of the conservation practices available include prescribed burning, forest stand improvement, forage and biomass planting and tree and shrub establishment.

Additional information about the RCPP project, area map, fact sheet and conservation practices, are available at

www.ar.nrcs.usda.gov. To locate the local field office, visit <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/main/national/contact/local>.





NRCS Regional Conservationists' COS Addresses ALCDC Conference



Myron Taylor, NRCS Regional Conservationists' chief of staff. Photo by Christopher Willis

Arkansas Land and Community Development Corporation (ALCDC) held its Annual Winter Farmers Conference on February 22 in Fargo. The conference agenda included information designed to provide resourceful information for sustainable economic recovery and renewal of rural and urban farms, underserved and unserved communities.

Myron Taylor, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Regional Conservationists' chief of staff in Washington, D.C., was the featured guest speaker. He told the audience about the importance of conservation programs and initiatives, the importance NRCS is placing on customer service and NRCS Chief Mathew Lohr's priorities.



NRCS State Conservationist Mike Sullivan, left, gave special recognition to Grazing Lands Specialist Jeremy Huff as the 2018 Pastureland Conservationist of the Year during the Arkansas Grazing Lands Conference.

White River RCPP Project in Carroll County Announced

Farmers and landowners in Carroll County, Ark., have until April 30, 2019, to submit applications to receive financial assistance through EQIP to implement conservation practices in the Carroll County White River RCPP project.

Applicants can sign up at the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Berryville Field Service Center at 909 Freeman Switch Rd #C in Berryville, Ark.

Conservation practices available through the project are animal mortality facility; roof and covers; and heavy use area protection.

Additional information about the RCPP project, area map, fact sheet and conservation practices, are available at www.ar.nrcs.usda.gov. To locate the local field office, visit <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/main/national/contact/local>.



Arkansas NRCS Solicits Conservation Innovation Grant Proposals

Approximately \$300,000 in funding is available through the Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) program to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies within Arkansas.

CIG, a component of EQIP, is used to apply or demonstrate previously proven technology. It does not fund research projects. CIG is an effort to address some of the state's most pressing natural resource conservation needs. Project proposals should demonstrate the use of innovative technologies or approaches to address a natural resource concern. Project results are expected to improve and create conservation technologies, management systems and innovative approaches (such as market-based systems).

For FY 2019, Arkansas NRCS will consider offering grants in the following areas: nutrient and sediment reduction in impaired watersheds; high tunnels; organic; irrigation; soil health; and adoption of cover crops in rice rotations. Applications should be for single or multi-year projects, not to exceed 3 years.

Individual grant awards may not exceed \$75,000. Selected applicants may receive CIG grants of up to 50 percent of their total project cost. CIG recipients must provide a non-federal funding match or cost-share amount at least equal to the amount of federal funding requested. For example, if an applicant requests \$50,000 in CIG funding, at least \$50,000 in non-federal cost-share or matching funds must be committed by the applicant.

The announcement for this CIG funding opportunity can be found at: www.grants.gov. The announcement number is USDA-NRCS-AR-CIG-19-GEN0010102.

Applications must be submitted in grants.gov or emailed to AR-Programs@usda.gov by 5 p.m. May 31, 2019. No applications will be accepted by mail.

For more information, contact Lori Barker, state CIG program manager, at (870) 523-8986 or lori.barker@ar.usda.gov. The request for proposals and related forms are located at www.grants.gov.

Volunteers



join us AS WE celebrate EARTH TEAM VOLUNTEERS

Make a Difference in Arkansas Conservation! Join the NRCS Earth Team!

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is looking for motivated volunteers, ages 14 and up, to help in county field offices.

The Earth Team provides a variety of opportunities: full- or part-time; outdoor or indoor activities; and as an individual or part of a group. There is something for everyone. You can gain valuable work experience while helping protect Arkansas's natural resources.

What is the Earth Team?

Earth Team volunteers help the agency fulfill its commitment to support farmers and ranchers in their voluntary conservation efforts to keep working lands working, boost rural economies, and increase the competitiveness of American agriculture.

The Earth Team offers numerous volunteer opportunities for students, retirees, veterans and others who care about conservation and are seeking to make a difference in their communities.

With 61 offices in communities statewide, volunteers are needed in virtually every county.

What will You be doing?

As an Earth Team volunteer, you will be working side by side with professional conservationists to plan and deliver conservation on private lands. Duties vary based on interests and availability and include clerical work and field study. You will share your skills, learn new ones, meet new people and be part of a dedicated conservation effort.

The Earth Team will provide you with experience in a variety of different natural resource fields including: conservation, soil health, water quantity, water quality, tree planting, and more.

Where will the Earth Team take you?

Several Arkansas NRCS employees began their careers as Earth Team volunteers. Join today and gain valuable knowledge and workplace experience that will help build your resume. If you're considering a career in natural resources, consider joining the Earth Team to kick start your career!

For more information on the Earth Team, contact Mendy Rice, state volunteer coordinator, at mendy.rice@ar.usda.gov or visit: www.nrcs.usda.gov/earthteam.

April 7-13, 2019

Volunteers improving today for tomorrow.

#NationalVolunteerWeek

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.



USDA Seeks Public Comments on Conservation Practice Standards



Matthew Lohr

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) announced today it is seeking public input on its existing national conservation practice standards as part of implementing the 2018 Farm Bill. NRCS offers 150-plus conservation practices to America's farmers, ranchers and forest landowners to help them meet their business and natural resource needs on their working lands.

"With the help of NRCS, agricultural producers across the country are taking voluntary steps to improve their operations while benefiting natural resources," NRCS Chief Matthew Lohr said. "As part of our process of implementing the 2018 Farm Bill, we are asking agricultural producers, conservation partners and others to provide feedback on our practice standards in an effort to refine and enhance them."

NRCS is requesting public comments on how to improve conservation practice standards that support programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), which help producers cover part of the costs for implementing these practices. The comment period ends April 25, 2019. More information can be found in the [Federal Register](#).

These standards provide guidelines for planning, designing, installing, operating and maintaining conservation practices.

2018 Farm Bill

As part of implementing the 2018 Farm Bill, NRCS is

reviewing conservation practices by:

- Evaluating opportunities to increase flexibility while ensuring natural resource benefits.
- Seeking avenues for the optimal balance between meeting site-specific conservation needs and minimizing risks of design failure and associated construction and installation costs.
- Ensuring, to the maximum extent practicable, the completeness and relevance of the standards to local agricultural, forestry and natural resource needs, including specialty crops, native and managed pollinators, bioenergy crop production, forestry and others.

Providing Comments

Comments may be submitted using any of the following methods:

- Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>. Follow the instructions for submitting comments.
- Mail or hand-delivery: Public Comments Processing, Attention: National Environmental Engineer, Natural Resources Conservation Service, United States Department of Agriculture, 1400 Independence Avenue SW, Room 6130-S, Washington, DC 20250.

NRCS will use comments as part of updating standards. For more information on how NRCS is implementing the Farm Bill, visit farmers.gov/farmbill.

IMPORTANT SIGN-UP DATES TO REMEMBER

April 12.... Wetlands Reserve Easements (Page 3)

April 25... Conservation Practice Standard Comment Period (Above)

April 30 .. Illinois River Watershed RCPP (Page 9)

April 30 .. Carroll County White River RCPP (Page 12)

May 3..... Western Arkansas—SE Oklahoma Woodland Restoration 2019-2021 (Page 4)

May 17 North Arkansas Quail Focal Landscape RCPP (Page 11)

May 24 Proposals for Technical Services Grants (Page 11)

May 31..... Conservation Innovation Grant [State] (Page 12)

