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## RCPP: Partner-led Solutions



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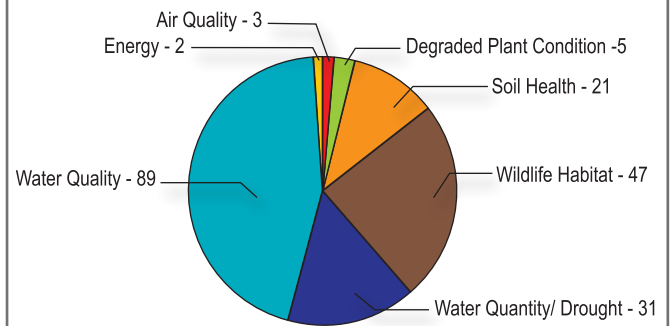
## The Regional Conservation Partnership Program

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is a partner-driven, locally-led approach to conservation led by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). It offers new opportunities for NRCS, conservation partners and agricultural producers to work together to harness innovation, expand the conservation mission, and demonstrate the value and efficacy of voluntary, private lands conservation. In three years, NRCS has invested about \$590 million in nearly 200 high-impact projects, bringing together more than 2,000 conservation partners who have contributed an estimated \$900 million in financial and technical assistance. By 2018, NRCS and partners will have invested at least \$2.4 billion. Conservation partners represent a wide variety of groups, including Indian tribes, nonprofit organizations, state and local governments, private industry, water districts, universities and many others.

RCPP projects, underway now in all 50 states and Puerto Rico, are born locally. *See Figure 3 for projects by state or territory.* These projects aim to clean and conserve water, improve the quality of soil and air, enhance wildlife habitat and result in more resilient and productive agricultural lands and stronger rural economies. RCPP brings an expanded approach to investing in natural resource conservation that empowers local communities to work with multiple partners and agricultural producers to design solutions that work best for them.

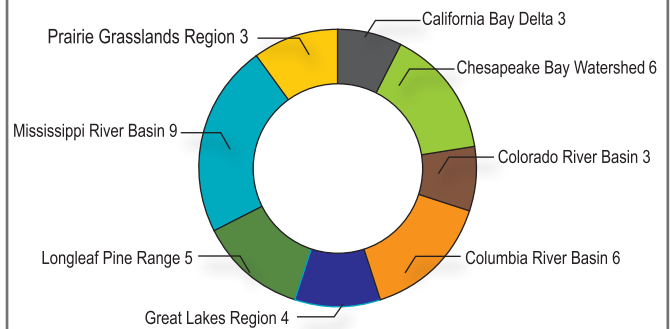
With two-thirds of the lower 48 states under private ownership, RCPP plays a critical role in connecting partners with producers to design and implement conservation solutions that benefit both natural resources and agriculture. The Farm Bill is the largest source of federal funding for private lands conservation, and RCPP is one of the important Farm Bill conservation programs contributing innovative conservation solutions to America's

Figure 1: Projects by Focus



Partners identify a primary resource concern for each project to address.

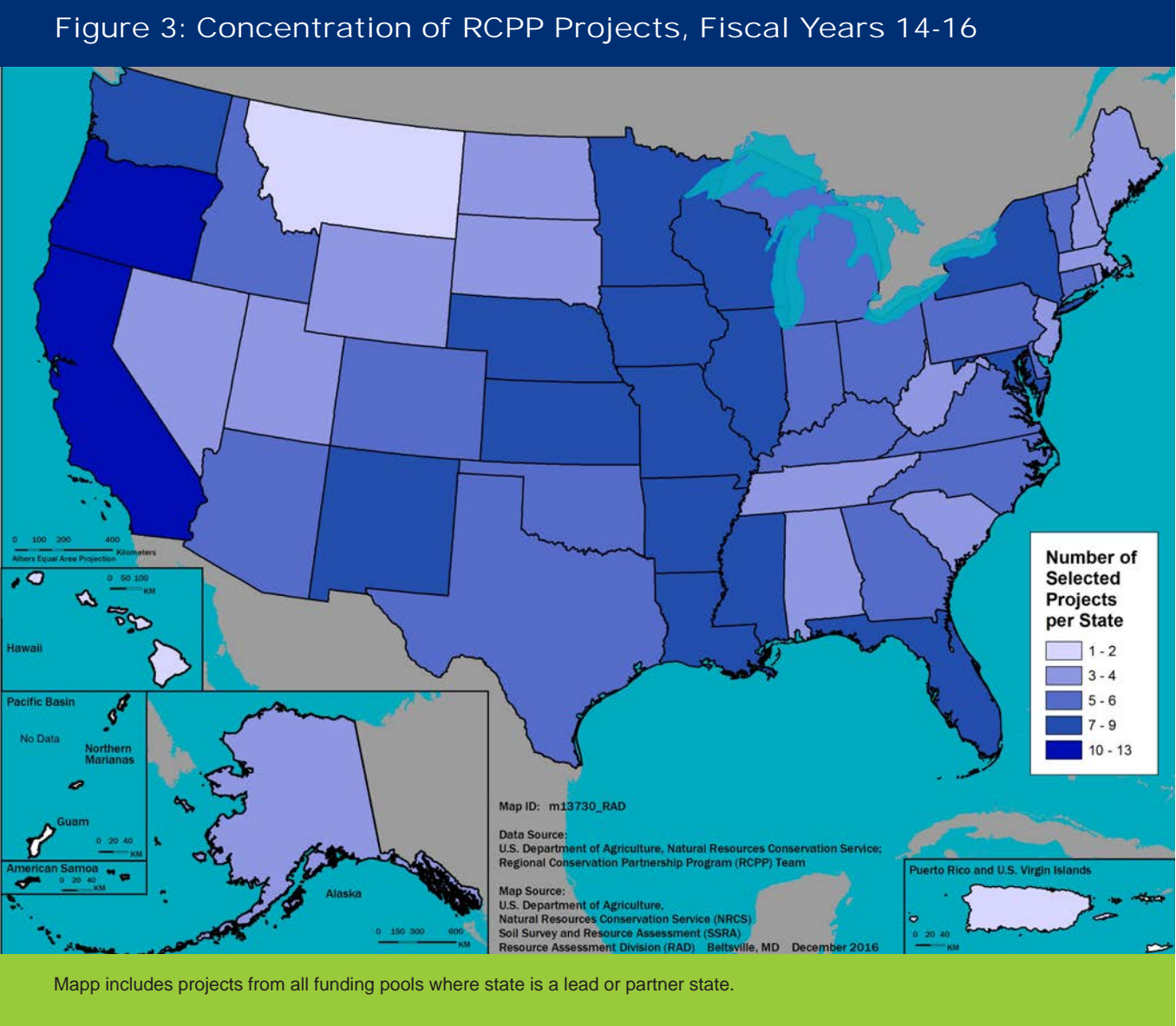
Figure 2: Projects by CCA



A portion of RCPP's funding is set aside for work in critical conservation areas designated by the Secretary of Agriculture.

communities. RCPP enables NRCS, partners and producers to work together to overcome natural resource challenges, including unhealthy forests, wildfire risks, drought and poor water quality. *See Figure 1 for focus of projects.* RCPP also recognizes and prioritizes critical conservation areas (CCAs) – regions of the country that are facing broad natural resources challenges. Thirty-nine projects are accelerating conservation efforts in places like the Chesapeake Bay and Great Lakes. *See Figure 2 for projects by CCA.*

Figure 3: Concentration of RCPP Projects, Fiscal Years 14-16



### Partnership in Action

RCPP is highly competitive. NRCS has been able to provide funding assistance to one of every five proposed projects that were submitted. Those that are selected are among the best agricultural conservation projects in the nation. The most-successful RCPP projects share four common characteristics. They innovate, leverage additional contributions, offer impactful solutions and

engage more participants. Proposed projects go through a rigorous review process, through which NRCS rates them on how they meet these characteristics. It's a competitive pool of proposals, and the ones that will have the biggest impacts receive funding. This publication highlights a few of the many successful RCPP projects underway that are changing communities and conservation across the country.

## Contributions

**RCPD brings more resources to an expanded private lands conservation effort. NRCS has a goal to match the federal investment (including cash and in-kind contributions) in resource conservation activities.**

### Project Targets Conservation to Improve Health of Saginaw Bay

Saginaw Bay is America's largest contiguous freshwater wetland system, and the bay's watershed is the largest in Michigan. The bay is also where two major migratory bird flyways – the Atlantic and the Mississippi River – intersect, and its marshes boom with waterfowl and shorebirds. The bay and other waterways in the Great Lakes basin suffer from high levels of nutrients and sediment, that come from a variety of sources. With 45 percent of the watershed in agriculture, the **Saginaw Bay Watershed Conservation Partnership** works with agricultural producers to make conservation improvements on farms that ultimately lead to cleaner water downstream.

The project, co-led by The Nature Conservancy and the Michigan Agri-Business Association, accelerates and targets conservation in this watershed to improve the health of the bay by reducing nutrients and sediment in regional waterways. NRCS is investing \$10 million, which is matched by \$10 million from partners. The project focuses efforts in six priority

watersheds within the larger Saginaw Bay watershed, where it can get the best return on investment. The project works with producers to implement the right conservation practices in the right places to have the largest returns. Some of these practices include planting cover crops, limiting tillage, establishing buffer strips and managing nutrient use.

The Nature Conservancy has worked directly with NRCS to develop scientific models that link conservation practices to ecological outcomes. Meanwhile, Michigan Agri-Business encourages local agribusinesses and crop advisors to assist NRCS when possible by helping producers apply for conservation funding and implement and manage practices on their land.

The project uses an online tool, called the Great Lakes Watershed Management System, to model, map and track implementation progress and water quality benefits. This tool enables partners to model the impact of a producer's management practices on sediment and nutrient load reductions to nearby surface waters.





Cover crops can be interseeded among cash crops to hold soil in place between harvest and planting. Photo by Michael D. L. Jordan.

## Contributions

### Partners and Producers Join Forces to Improve Lake Champlain

In recent years, blue-green algae blooms have increasingly challenged Lake Champlain, negatively impacting the quality of water in the New England lake. More than 25 organizations in the area, including the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation, are working together with producers to reduce algae blooms by accelerating the adoption of conservation practices that control runoff of sediment and nutrients. The project, called **Accelerated Implementation of Agricultural and Forestry Conservation Practices in the Lake Champlain Watershed**, is helping producers meet state requirements while at the same time improving the water that flows to Lake Champlain. The project uses a number of tools, including the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program. So far, more than 500 acres through three conservation easements have been enrolled through the program.



This project connects producers with conservation programs to improve water quality. Photo by Amy Overstreet, NRCS.

### Rare Ecosystem Gets Support through Locally-led Project

The **North Willamette Valley Upland Oak Restoration Partnership** is protecting and restoring declining upland oak ecosystems in Oregon's northern Willamette Valley. This ecosystem supports more than 200 wildlife species, including the endangered Fender's blue butterfly. Unfortunately, the majority of historic native oak habitat, has been lost to development with less than five percent remaining. Through this project, a team of federal, state and local conservation agencies and other groups are restoring oak habitat in critical areas throughout Yamhill and Polk counties. The Yamhill Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and NRCS serve as the lead partners on the project. Additional partner groups include the Polk SWCD, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Trust for Public Lands, the Greater Yamhill Watershed Council, The Nature Conservancy, and the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. Restoration efforts target areas of great ecological significance as identified by local partners.



Landowner Leo Krick is conserving native Oregon white oak habitat on his ranch. Photo by Tracy Robillard, NRCS.



## Largest Longleaf Project Underway in Alabama and Florida

Unprecedented in size and scope, the 205,000-acre **Coastal Headwaters Forest – Longleaf Conservation and Restoration Project** is the largest longleaf pine protection and restoration effort ever proposed on private lands. Located in the Gulf Coastal Plain in western Florida and southwestern Alabama, the project is conserving and restoring longleaf pine forests, a highly biodiverse but struggling ecosystem of the

Southeast. Through the project, The Conservation Fund and Resource Management, LLC, are working with partners and landowners to create a landscape-scale, working longleaf forest. Many threatened and endangered species, such as the gopher tortoise and red-cockaded woodpecker, rely on longleaf forests for habitat. Other benefits to natural resources include helping to protect a wildlife corridor that connects conservation lands in Florida to those in Alabama, control of invasive exotic species and providing outdoor recreation opportunities.



A group recently toured a RCPP project area in the Coastal Headwaters Forest. Photo by The Conservation Fund.



## Solutions

**NRCS co-invests in mobilizing creative and workable solutions to agricultural production and natural resource management challenges. These solutions benefit agricultural operations as well as local economies and communities that depend on the quality of natural resources. NRCS has a goal to invest in projects that generate near-term results that are measurable from environmental, economic and social perspectives.**

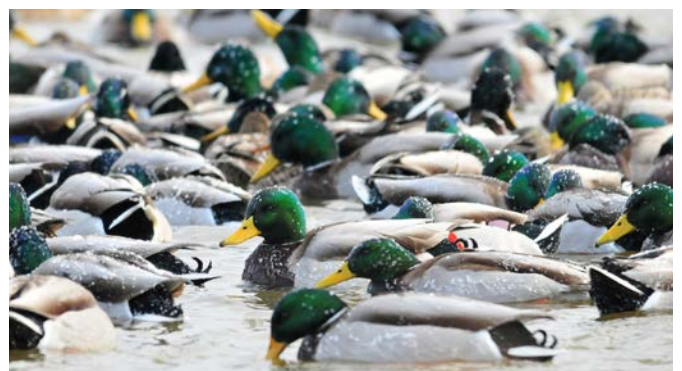
### Projects Conserve Water, Wildlife Habitat on Ricelands

When it comes to growing rice, water is key. Three RCPP projects, which bring together more than 40 partners, including USA Rice, Ducks Unlimited, California Rice Commission, the Walmart Foundation and The Mosaic Company, are helping accelerate the use of conservation on ricelands in six states. These projects, collectively called the **USA Rice-Ducks Unlimited Rice Stewardship Partnership**, aim to conserve water and wildlife habitat while sustaining the future of rice farming in the United States.

Rice farmers face an array of water quality and quantity challenges, heightening the need for locally-led conservation in California, Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana and Missouri. This partnership addresses water supply shortages and offers opportunities for practices that manage nutrients, improving water quality. Overall, these projects are creating surface water supplies of water and increasing efficiency of irrigation. Rice farms support millions of migratory birds and hundreds of different species. To put it simply: what's good for rice is good for wildlife, and working wetlands are equally good for people.

“No matter what differences there are in various places where people grow rice and manage habitat for waterfowl, we’re all facing many of the same challenges,” said Doug Miller, a Louisiana rice farmer participating in one of the RCPP projects. “There are some really great ideas evolving out of this partnership, and I think it’s important for managers to stay abreast of what’s going on.”

So far, these partnership projects have led to the adoption of conservation practices on more than 92,000 acres of rice lands.



Rice farms support millions of migratory birds, including waterfowl like mallards. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.





Staff from Ducks Unlimited and NRCS prepare to perform a pumping plant efficiency test, which will help the producer increase water conservation and profitability. Photo by Ducks Unlimited.



## Solutions

### Project Restores Community-operated Acequias, Reviving Generations-old Traditions

Many New Mexico communities rely on irrigation ditches, called acequias, as their primary water source in this arid region. These ditches were used by their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. Some acequias in the area date back more than 400 years, and they're still used today in some communities. But many acequias are in disrepair and fixing them has become too expensive for many communities. An RCPP project is working to repair them, including the **Acequia de las Joyas**. Through this project, partners improve the acequia near Nambe, N.M., using welded steel pipe and a concrete-lined watercourse to replace an aged, leaking flume structure with failing joints. The project brought together the Interstate Stream Commission, New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts, New Mexico Acequia Association and the acequia's members to sustain their traditional irrigation method. "It helps by allowing us to better use our water—our resource. In fixing our structure, we can run water more efficiently," said Doug Hefele, an officer of the Acequia de Las Joyas."



This RCPP project is bringing together partners to repair acequias, like this one near Nambe, N.M. Photos by Rey Adame, NRCS.

### Farmers Protect 100% of Tricolored Blackbird Colonies on Private Lands through RCPP Project

Tricolored blackbirds once numbered in the millions. But this California species has declined, and it was listed as endangered under the California Endangered Species Act. Through cooperative agreements with farmers in California's Central Valley, an historic 100 percent of rare tricolored blackbird colonies on agricultural fields were protected during the 2016 harvest season. Through the **Protection, Restoration, and Enhancement of Tricolored Blackbird Habitat on Agricultural Lands Project** led by Audubon California, seven farmers delayed their silage harvest. This aided about 57,000 birds on 378 acres. "More than 90 percent of the world's tricolored blackbirds live in California, so we have a special responsibility to protect them," said Samantha Arthur, conservation program manager at Audubon California. "Reaching this milestone shows what private landowners can do to help a declining species and make a big conservation impact. There are many other threatened species we hope to protect through collaborations like this."



Tricolored blackbirds nest in densely packed colonies with nests only a few feet apart. Photo by Teddy Llovet.

## Shared Priorities Bring Together Conservation, Working Lands and Troops

The departments of Agriculture, Defense and the Interior have found lots of benefits for troops, ecosystems and landowners through conservation efforts. One example is near Fort Huachuca in Arizona, where the Arizona Land and Water Trust and other conservation partners have launched an easement program, called **Fort Huachuca Sentinel Landscape Conservation**, around the base. Through conservation easements, landowners receive incentives for maintaining

intact working lands. These easements contribute to a larger footprint of habitat, which benefits a whole slew of animals, from wildlife to livestock. The partnership covers the Buffalo Soldier Electronic Testing Range, an area used by the Army, Marines and U.S. Border Patrol to train drone pilots. The army has opened the land under the range to cattle grazing, and Arizona Land and Water Trust will focus its efforts on ensuring long-term ranching can happen on the land.



The departments of Agriculture, Defense and the Interior are working together to improve habitat on lands near bases. Photo by Jessica Fraver, Arizona Land and Water Trust.



## Innovations

Drawing on all of the conservation tools, partners can creatively design projects and take advantage of innovative methods to achieve conservation goals. NRCS prioritizes projects that innovatively integrate multiple programs and conservation approaches to deliver more comprehensive solutions.

### Innovative Program Leads the Way on Water Conservation

More than 100 farms in Minnesota are part of a first-of-its-kind project, the **Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program**, which gives farmers peace of mind for using water-friendly practices on their fields. NRCS and multiple partners, including the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) and local soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs), share in the development, delivery and funding of this program.

“The certification program rewards stewards of our water and land and it gives farmers an opportunity to make adjustments to their production systems and learn more about conservation practices in the process,” said New Munich, Minnesota certified-farmer Chuck Uphoff. “It’s my hope that the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program expands to touch every agricultural acre in Minnesota.”

Through this program, producers become certified by voluntarily implementing and maintaining conservation practices that protect water. Local SWCD professionals assist producers through the certification process, which assesses every acre of the entire operation, focuses on whole-farm

conservation planning and determines only those places where conservation treatments are needed. Recently, Land O’ Lakes joined the partnership and is reaching into its retail network of 300,000 farmers to encourage them to participate in the program. Together, they farm approximately 100 million acres.

Certified producers receive regulatory certainty for 10 years, may use their certification status to promote their business and can obtain specially designated technical and financial assistance to implement practices that promote water quality. This certification also helps assure the public that producers are using conservation practices and managing their agricultural operations to protect Minnesota’s iconic lakes, rivers, streams and groundwater.

Since its start, the program has certified more than 170 farms totaling more than 91,000 acres. Together, these farms keep over 7.2 million pounds of sediment out of Minnesota rivers, reduces phosphorus application by 4,600 pounds, and saves nearly 10 million pounds of soil on farms each year. The large base of support stems from the program’s unique design, which delivers conservation via local partnerships.



This project brings together conservation districts and other partners to protect Minnesota's iconic lakes, rivers, streams and groundwater through setting up infrastructure for stewardship-minded producers. Photos courtesy of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.



## Innovations

### Project Bringing Greenhouse Gas Management Market Opportunities to Tribes

The ***Innovative Tribal Conservation and Greenhouse Gas Management Project*** is working to provide market-based approaches to conservation. The project, led by the Intertribal Agricultural Council, is working to leverage opportunities to improve resource management and realize revenue from emerging environmental markets such as greenhouse gas markets. The project also seeks to overcome challenges, such as a lack of information, training and fiscal resources as well as a history of land loss and fragmentation. This project is addressing these challenges directly through the development of a voluntary carbon offset that will be tested through pilot projects involving several different Native nations in diverse geographies.

### Applying the Right Conservation at the Right Time in the Right Amount

The ***Precision Conservation Management Project***, led by the Illinois Corn Growers Association, is an innovative service program designed to apply financial farm business planning with precision conservation technology to provide a blueprint for conservation decision-making. The project encourages producers to adopt conservation practices. Partners provide producers with assessments of financial risks and benefits, help with paperwork and manage data. The project takes this one more step by also encouraging partners analyze the data and are able to show producers the agronomic and economic benefits of those practices. “The idea is simple: we believe that the main reason that farmers elect to not implement conservation practices on their farms is due to uncertainty about how it will affect their families’ financial stability,” said Jeff Jarboe, the association’s past president. “The PCM program combines farmers’ financial goals with their conservation management interests.”



Oklahoma’s Caddo Tribe implements an intensive grazing system, which helps to improve the quality and quantity of forage and sequester carbon. Photo by Jeff Vanuga, NRCS.



A soil and water conservation district staff member performs water testing on a field in Illinois. Photo courtesy of Illinois Corn Growers Association.

## Investing in Family-Owned Forests in the South

The U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities is working to increase ownership and better management of African American-owned family forests through the ***Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program***. This project promotes forest health and productivity by supporting forest restoration

on African American-owned forestlands in high poverty regions of Alabama, North Carolina and South Carolina. The project introduces new forestry technologies, create trusted, comprehensive and replicable systems of landowner outreach and support, and develop income streams by connecting forest owners to traditional and emerging forest products markets.



South Carolina landowner Joe Hamilton is an advocate for the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation, which is one of the partners in this project. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities.



## Participation

**RCPP is a platform for partners to engage with organizations that, while they may share common resource stewardship goals, may not have experience working with producers in a given community. Successful partnerships bring a diverse array of stakeholders into a project and capitalize on their unique capabilities to make a project successful.**

### Projects Bring Back Diversity in Eastern Forests – Good for Birds, Other Wildlife and Landowners

It would be fair to say that RCPP is for the birds. Two projects, led by the American Bird Conservancy (ABC), are working to improve the health of forests in the Eastern half of the United States in an effort to help declining bird species. Healthy forests, just like healthy human populations, are sustained by a diversity of ages. But healthy, diverse forests are on the decline across the East. A lack of natural and human-induced disturbances because of fire suppression and certain timber harvest methods have led the forested landscape to become largely homogenous.

These declines have had negative impacts on many different birds, such as the golden-winged warbler and cerulean warbler, which use different types of forests during different parts of their life cycle. About three-fourths of both of these birds' habitats is privately owned, and landowners are playing an increasingly pivotal role in managing for structurally diverse forests with trees of different ages.

The ***Cerulean Warbler Appalachian Forestland Enhancement Project*** and ***Improving Forest Health for Wildlife Project*** are providing

technical and financial assistance to help landowners improve the diversity of forests that will help these two migratory birds and many other wildlife species. These projects build needed capacity for conservation by the hiring of biologists and foresters to work with landowners and providing funds to help with the adoption of forestry practices. The cerulean project targets landowners in West Virginia, Kentucky, Maryland and Pennsylvania; the golden-winged project (the second one) targets landowners in Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin.

Monitoring efforts underway show that NRCS-recommended forest management practices are resulting in occupancy from target species. These practices also benefit other wildlife as well as landowners, who have found these practices help to “reset the clock” on low-value forests by re-establishing a healthier and more valuable stand of trees.

These projects have already drawn heavy participation and interest. The cerulean warbler project has enabled landowners to implement sustainable forestry practices on 1,700 acres, and the golden-winged warbler project has about 90 landowners planning efforts for funding next year.



Through RCPP, conservation partners are working with landowners to manage for healthier forests, which benefits declining bird species like the cerulean warbler and golden-winged warbler. Photos by Kyle Aldinger and DJ McNeil.



## Participation

### Joining Forces to Reduce Nutrient, Sediment Runoff in Iowa

When it comes to clean water, many stewardship-minded farmers are leading the way. Farmers across the country are implementing conservation practices that reduce the runoff of nutrients and sediment from agricultural fields. A new project in Iowa, called the **Midwest Agriculture Water Quality Partnership**, brings together 40-plus partners and \$38 million in non-federal funds to deliver and demonstrate water quality conservation practices and technologies proven to have a significant impact on reducing runoff of nutrients and sediment.

### Groups Building Precision, Efficiency Model for N.C. Farmers

Precision and efficiency are the future of agriculture, and a new project in North Carolina, called **MBGro: North Carolina Grain Nutrient Management and Soil Health**, is working to boost both on working lands. Through this project, The Environmental Defense Fund is working with Smithfield Foods Hog Production Division to improve the sustainability of its feed grain supply chain by reducing the impacts on water quality and other natural resources because of fertilizers. Smithfield is assisting farmers who grow corn, wheat, sorghum and soy to promote the adoption of advanced nutrient management tools, technologies and practices, soil health practices and practices that trap and filter nutrients. To help implement the project, MBGro hired an agronomist to provide outreach, education and technical support. North Carolina State University is working to showcase the economic and environmental benefits of these practices, particularly the short-term nutrient and water benefits of cover crops. With this project, EDF hopes to create a sustainability model that can be replicated across the country by companies and agricultural businesses.



About 75 farmers attended the kickoff of the project near the headwaters of the North Raccoon River. Photo by Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance.



RCPP funds will go directly to farmers who implement conservation practices. Photo courtesy of the Environmental Defense Fund.

## Colorado Projects Lowering Farmers' Power Bills, Enabling More Careful Use of Water

Colorado has a special responsibility when it comes to protecting water as its snowfall becomes a source of water for 18 states and parts of Mexico. The **Pressurized Irrigation Small Hydropower Partnership Project** focuses on water quantity resource concerns in Colorado by facilitating the conversion of flood irrigation systems to center-pivot systems with integrated hydropower and retrofit existing pressurized irrigation systems to add a hydropower

component. "This project helps farmers by putting their water to work, creating electricity that lowers their power bills," said Don Brown, Commissioner of Agriculture. "We are very proud of this project and how it gives producers a way to cut their costs and use their resources efficiently." The overall hydro program is funded and assisted by 14 agencies and groups, collectively contributing \$3 million in funding and technical assistance for Colorado agricultural producers.



The first joint project to help farmers use existing irrigation water to generate electricity has been completed near Hotchkiss, Colorado. Photo by Sam Anderson, Colorado Department of Agriculture.











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