



**Natural Resources Conservation Service**

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# NEWS RELEASE

## **New Rule Improves Partner Flexibility in Regional Conservation Partnership Program**

**NASHVILLE, January 15, 2021** - The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released the [final rule](#) for its [Regional Conservation Partnership Program](#) (RCP). The rule updates USDA's partner-driven program as directed by the 2018 Farm Bill and integrates feedback from agricultural producers and others.

*"The Regional Conservation Partnership Program is a powerful program that enables us to co-invest with partners on win-win solutions that benefit agriculture and natural resources,"* said Sheldon Hightower, State Conservationist of USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Tennessee. *"The final rule contains some minor adjustments made in response to public comments, and we now look forward to continuing our work with Tennessee partners to use this unique and innovative program to extend the reach of conservation."*

RCP promotes coordination of NRCS and partner conservation activities that aid farmers, ranchers, and private landowners in Tennessee with addressing on-farm, watershed, and regional natural resource concerns.

NRCS received comments from more than 65 organizations and individuals on the RCP interim rule, which was published February 13, 2020. To integrate that feedback, the final rule adopts the interim rule with minor changes made to RCP that:

- Make explicit special considerations for historically underserved (HU) producer and landowner enrollment, including requiring partnership agreements to denote any authorizations for higher payment rates, advance payment options, or other methods for encouraging HU participation.
- Identify ranking criteria for proposals that include developing an innovative conservation approach or technology that specifically targets the unique needs and limitations of HU producers.
- Adjust the rule language to incorporate source water protection as a priority resource concern.
- Remove the list of infrastructure types that would be considered for Alternative Funding Arrangements to avoid confusion.
- Increase the emphasis on conservation benefits and objectives partners seek to achieve for the ranking of proposals.

The 2018 Farm Bill made RCP a stand-alone program with its own dedicated funding and simplified rules for partners and producers. Additionally, the 2018 Farm Bill reduced the number of funding pools and emphasized partner reporting of conservation outcomes.

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The updated program also expands flexibility for alternative funding arrangements with partners and the availability of watershed program authorities to projects outside Critical Conservation Areas.

### About RCPP

Eligible partners include conservation districts, producer associations, water districts, state or local governments, American Indian tribes, institutions of higher education, and nongovernmental organizations. RCPP applications are accepted from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. territories. When funding is available, NRCS releases an announcement for program funding that includes proposal requirements.

NRCS reviews partnership proposals according to the priorities and evaluation criteria included in the announcement and ultimately makes project selections. Upon selection of a partnership proposal, NRCS and the partner enter into a partnership agreement through which assistance to producers in the project area is provided. Partnership agreements may be for a period of up to five years.

RCPP helps producers protect working agricultural lands to ensure resilience to climate change by increasing the sustainable use of soil, water, wildlife, and related natural resources, contributing to USDA's Agriculture Innovation Agenda of reducing the environmental footprint of U.S. agriculture in half by 2050. Last year, Secretary Perdue announced the department-wide initiative to align resources, programs, and research to position American agriculture to better meet future global demands.

[View the final rule on the Federal Register.](#) For more information on how to sign up for RCPP in your state, visit your state website from [nrcs.usda.gov](https://nrcs.usda.gov) or contact your local [NRCS field office](#).

All USDA Service Centers are open for business, including those that restrict in-person visits or require appointments. All Service Center visitors wishing to conduct business with NRCS, Farm Service Agency, or any other Service Center agency should call ahead and schedule an appointment. Service Centers that are open for appointments will pre-screen visitors based on health concerns or recent travel, and visitors must adhere to social distancing guidelines. Visitors are also required to wear a face covering during their appointment. Our program delivery staff will continue to work with our producers by phone, email, and using online tools. More information can be found at [farmers.gov/coronavirus](https://farmers.gov/coronavirus).

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