

1400 Independence Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20250

Contact:
FPAC.BC.Press@usda.gov

USDA Seeks Innovative Partner-led Projects Delivering Sustainable Agricultural Solutions

WASHINGTON, March 16, 2021 – The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is seeking proposals to fund up to \$75 million in new, unique projects under the Regional Conservation Partnership Program’s (RCPP) Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFA) that take innovative and non-traditional approaches to conservation solutions at the local, regional and landscape scales. In making selections, USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will prioritize projects related to climate smart agriculture and forestry.

NRCS will fund up to 15 projects this year through AFA, where partners have more flexibility in working directly with agricultural producers to support the development of new conservation structures and approaches that would not otherwise be effectively implemented through the classic RCPP.

“Collaboration and partnership are leading to advanced conservation delivery on working lands, both rural and urban,” said Terry Cosby, Acting Chief of NRCS. *“We want to continue funding projects that harness the power of partnership and innovation to develop solutions that benefit producers while conserving our natural resources.”*

A significant portion of funds will address projects related to climate smart agriculture and forestry. These include projects related to carbon markets and new technologies. Meanwhile NRCS also strongly encourages proposals from RCPP projects that address the conservation needs of urban farmers in metropolitan areas, supporting access to healthy fresh food in historically underserved populated communities.

NRCS will execute AFAs through agreements with eligible lead partners who will be responsible for contracting directly with eligible producers and landowners to implement conservation activities on the ground.

NRCS is accepting AFA project proposals now through May 28. Proposals must be submitted through the RCPP portal at <https://nracs-sites.secure.force.com/>. Information about this request for proposals is available on [grants.gov](https://www.usda.gov/grants). A list of last year’s awarded projects can be found [here](#).

AFA projects were initially authorized under the 2014 Farm Bill, while the 2018 Farm Bill enhanced the AFA provision and authorized NRCS to award up to 15 AFA projects annually. Project types that may be suited to AFAs, as highlighted by the 2018 Farm Bill statute include:

- Projects that use innovative approaches to leverage the federal investment in conservation.
- Projects that deploy a pay-for-performance conservation approach.
- Projects that seek large-scale infrastructure investment that generate conservation benefits for agricultural producers and nonindustrial private forest owners.

The fiscal 2021 AFA funding announcement incorporates policy updates following publication of the RCPP final rule, including:

- The revised RCPP Critical Conservation Areas (announced in August 2020).
- Updated RCPP AGI waiver policy.
- Clarifying language about when RCPP activities can be carried out on public lands.
- New policy language developed for AFA easements.
- New policy language to highlight that producer “cost-share” funding related to implementation of conservation activities, like land management practices or systems, cannot be counted as partner contributions for the project.

Farmers, ranchers and private forest landowners apply for RCPP projects through project partners, like conservation districts, producer associations, water districts, state or local governments, American Indian tribes, institutions of higher education and nongovernmental organizations.

Under the Biden-Harris Administration, USDA is engaged in a whole-of-government effort to combat the climate crisis and conserve and protect our nation’s lands, biodiversity, and natural resources including our soil, air and water. Through conservation practices and partnerships, USDA aims to enhance economic growth and create new streams of income for farmers, ranchers, producers, and private foresters. Successfully meeting these challenges will require USDA and our agencies to pursue a coordinated approach alongside USDA stakeholders, including State, local, and Tribal governments.

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