

RCPP: Coming together for Conservation

The RCPP Program

The State of Vermont, in partnership with 25 organizations, agencies, businesses and non-profits, has received funding from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service through the new *Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)*. The \$16 million grant was the second largest in the country and will help landowners in the Lake Champlain Basin of Vermont and New York invest in the best conservation practices to help improve water quality.

The project will provide financial and technical assistance to agricultural and forest landowners over the next five years, to help with development and implementation of site-specific farm and forest projects that will directly improve water quality in streams and rivers that flow towards Lake Champlain. RCPP funds will also help conserve important and environmentally critical agricultural lands, and restore and protect wetlands that are crucial to absorbing runoff and slowing floodwaters.



RCPP Partnerships

RCPP provides the opportunity for expanding the many strong partnerships that already exist in the Lake Champlain Basin. RCPP brings together traditional partners such as state and federal agencies and non-profits, and adds new partners, such as dairy cooperatives and lenders, who will enable this education and assistance to more landowners, increasing participation and on-the ground projects. **Over 25 different partners are contributing more than \$20 million dollars of match to this effort!**

RCPP Innovations

RCPP brings new initiatives to the conservation field, with the *Environmental Stewardship Program* which provides incentives to go beyond regulatory requirements with valuable conservation practices like manure injection, skidder bridges and easement, and the *Wetlands Calculator*, which provides an incentive payment to increase participation in high priority wetland and floodplain restoration projects.

RCPP Facts and Figures

Funding: 80% (\$12.8m) directly to farm and forest landowners.
\$3.2m in technical assistance to help landowners
10% of the funds are targeted to the South lake watershed in New York.

Priorities: Funding for agricultural practices will be targeted to conserved farms in the Lake Champlain Basin. Wetland and forestry funds will be open to all landowners. Priority practices will be determined by on-site evaluations.

For additional information, please contact:

Marli Rupe, Agricultural Water Quality Specialist
VT Department of Environmental Conservation
Marli.rupe@state.vt.us; 802-490-6171

EQIP—Conservation Practices

\$9.98 million is allocated to Vermont and \$1.0 million to New York for conservation practices through the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP). Funding is available for agricultural and forestry water quality improvements. All agricultural funding is for development and implementation of conservation plans and improvements on *conserved* farms.

EQIP practices include:

- *Field improvements such as cover crops, gully stabilization and reduced tillage.*
- *Production area improvements such as livestock exclusion, stream crossings and small waste management practices.*
- *Forestry practices such as skidder bridges*

ACEP-ALE Easements

\$4 million is allocated in Vermont to Agricultural Conservation Enhancement Program (ACEP) Ag Land Easements (ALE). Farms which participate agree to conserve land in perpetuity, and as of 2014, are required to have and implement a conservation plan that addresses natural resource concerns on the farm. Farms that are being conserved through RCPP as well as prior conserved farms will be prioritized for EQIP funds above.



ACEP—WRE

\$1.02 million is allocated in Vermont to Wetlands Restoration Easements (WRE). Through this program, landowners are compensated for retiring land from agriculture in perpetuity, and restoring wetland functions and values.

As match to this grant, the State is developing a *Wetlands Payment Calculator* that will determine an incentive payment to accelerate landowner participation in high priority wetland, riparian and floodplain restoration projects. The State is also providing cash payments to pilot test this innovative approach.

Technical Assistance

In addition to the \$12.8 million of direct payments to farmers for the programs listed above, RCPP also provides over \$3 million in technical assistance to help landowners develop and implement these valuable conservation practices. Two conservation planners will be hired by partners to work directly with landowners, as well as one forester. In addition, funds are available to support partners who have strong relationships with local landowners, helping to accelerate the quantity and success of water quality improvements throughout the Lake Champlain basin.

The State of Vermont RCPP program is also committed to closely coordinating with the successful RCPP projects being developed by others.

- *The Vermont Association of Conservation Districts is working with small farmers to develop the nutrient management plans that will help position farmers to do additional conservation practices.*
- *The Long Island Sound RCPP project is supporting financial and technical assistance to farmers in the Connecticut River Basin of Vermont.*

A key priority of the State's RCPP is to coordinate efforts to ensure maximum implementation and efficiency on the highest priority projects.