



Agricultural Act of 2014: Regional Conservation Partnership Program (Sec. 1271 of the Farm Bill)

Overview: The 2014 Farm Bill establishes a new conservation program, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), designed to support partnerships between farmers and non-farming entities to tackle various conservation and environmental issues on a regional scale. RCPP replaces four existing conservation programs: the Agricultural Enhancement Program, Chesapeake Bay watershed program, the Great Lakes program for soil erosion and sediment control, and the cooperative conservation partnership initiative.

The RCPP specifically calls out municipal water and wastewater utilities as eligible entities to form regional partnerships with farmers and provides an excellent opportunity for interested utilities to implement innovative nutrient management solutions with agricultural non-point sources to improve local water quality. The RCPP can provide utilities with a potential alternative for addressing nutrient-related water quality challenges in a more affordable manner by working with local farmers to install nutrient management practices upstream rather than installing more treatment technology at the plant, and accessing U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) funds for support. Partnering organizations must have the operational capacity to undertake a RCPP project initiative and be able to implement the project over multiple years. However, for utilities that serve a large urbanized area located in a watershed predominantly impaired by agricultural nutrient run-off, the RCPP offers a promising new mechanism to address water quality issues comprehensively and on a watershed basis.

NACWA anticipates that the USDA will begin the implementation process shortly after Congress enacts the legislation, possibly issuing a call for applications before the end of the year.

Purpose: A key purpose of the RCPP is to support collaborations between farmers and non-farming entities, including municipal water and wastewater utilities, to undertake conservation activities on working farms in order to meet or avoid the need for national, State, and local natural resource regulatory requirements.

Partnerships: The RCPP relies upon partnerships between eligible entities and multiple agricultural producers through which USDA conservation funding programs can be used to implement best management practices.

Partnership Agreements: Partnership agreements between eligible partners and producers are used as a form of contract between the parties and specify duties of a partnering organization. Specifically, a partnership agreement defines the scope of the project, lists eligible activities to be implemented; designates the agricultural lands and geographic area covered; and, explains the planning, outreach, implementation and assessment activities to be conducted.

Additional responsibilities of eligible partners include: conducting outreach and education to producers for potential participation in the program; assisting producers to apply for assistance, if requested; leveraging financial or technical assistance; assessing project effectiveness; and, reporting results.

Priority Applications: The USDA Secretary may prioritize applications that assist producers in meeting or avoiding the need for a natural resource regulatory requirement; have a high percentage of producers in the area covered by the agreement; significantly leverage non-Federal financial and technical resources and coordinate with other local, State, or national efforts; deliver high percentages of applied conservation to address conservation priorities or regional, State, or national conservation initiatives; and, provide innovation in conservation methods and delivery, including outcome-based performance measures or methods.

Funding Assistance: Several sources of program funds are available, including monies available specifically for RCPP implementation and program funds available through existing USDA conservation programs referred to as “covered programs” under the Act: the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, and the Healthy Forests Reserve Program. In addition, the Secretary can provide special five-year payments to “producers participating in projects that address water quality concerns and in an amount sufficient to encourage adoption of conservation practices and systems that improve nutrient management.”

Available funding for conservation activities goes directly to agricultural producers undertaking the conservation practices - a partnering organization cannot receive funding directly but can leverage this funding with other non-federal funds.

Critical Conservation Areas: The Secretary is required to allocate a minimum amount of funding each year to applications and projects located in designated “Critical Conservation Areas”, such as projects within the Chesapeake Bay watershed, the Great Lakes watershed or the Mississippi River basin.

Looking Ahead: While the RCPP attempts to address a variety of natural resource issues, water quality and nutrient management issues factor high on the priority list as areas of concern for congressional drafters and will likely play a dominant role in program implementation. Program elements such as prioritizing projects that help farmers avoid potential regulatory requirements and provide for outcome-based performance measures; enabling the Secretary to provide special payments over five years to producers undertaking nutrient management activities; and, targeting funds to critical conservation areas that would benefit from water quality improvement all suggest that water quality concerns will likely be a top conservation priority for RCPP partnership agreements. In addition to these program elements, the fact that municipal water and wastewater utilities are specifically called out as eligible partners indicates that fostering collaborations around water quality issues will be a paramount program objective.

NACWA will monitor the implementation of the program and provide information to its members as developments occur. For more information, contact Patricia Sinicropi, NACWA Legislative Director at psinicropi@nacwa.org.