



**Natural Resources
Conservation Service**

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News Release

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USDA Invests \$225 Million in Innovative Conservation Partnerships

Addition of 88 projects brings federal, partner investment to over \$2 billion since 2014

WASHINGTON, Dec. 21, 2016 - Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today announced that 88 high-impact projects across the country will receive \$225 million in federal funding as part of the USDA's Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). In addition, partners have proposed to contribute up to an additional \$500 million to improve the nation's water quality, combat drought, enhance soil health, support wildlife habitat and protect agricultural viability.

In Arkansas, NRCS is investing more than \$8.3 million in three projects that address flood prevention, irrigation efficiency and water quality and water quantity. The projects are:

Departee Creek Flood Prevention Plan

Proposed NRCS Investment: \$180,000 (Critical Conservation Area – Mississippi River Basin)

Lead Partner: Departee Creek Watershed Improvement District

Number of Initial Partners: 8

Participating State: Arkansas (Lead State)

Project Area: Independence and Jackson counties

Departee Creek Watershed Improvement District and local partners, including beginning farmers and under-served producers, will implement a flood prevention plan and restore natural flow to Departee Creek in Arkansas. Frequent flooding results in high quantities of sediment buildup, nutrient loss and erosion along the waterway and adjacent lands. The partners will restore critical sections of the river and then develop a low water weir on a lake located mid-stream to maintain desired water levels. The work will improve wildlife habitat, limit loss of nutrients and crops, and reduce damage to personal property and roads. With successful implementation of the flood plan, the waterway also may be removed from the 303 (d) Impaired List.

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The Little Red River Water Improvement Project

Proposed NRCS Investment: \$1,200,000 (State)

Lead Partner: Little Red River Irrigation District

Number of Initial Partners: 14

Participating State: Arkansas (Lead State)

Project area: White County

The Little Red River Regional Irrigation Water District in Arkansas was formed in 1991 with a goal of creating sustainable sources of irrigation water throughout parts of White County. The Little Red River Water Improvement Project, managed by the District and 13 partners, will encourage irrigated cropland producers to implement structural irrigation practices. The project will result in a higher level of irrigation efficiency and water quality throughout the area. Wildlife habitat also will be increased on enrolled land.

Mid-south Graduated Water Stewardship Program

Proposed NRCS Investment: \$7,000,000 (National)

Lead Partner: USA Rice Federation

Number of Initial Partners: 24

Participating States: Arkansas (Lead State), Louisiana, Mississippi and Missouri

Project Area in Arkansas: Arkansas, Ashley, Chicot, Clay, Conway, Craighead, Crittenden, Cross, Desha, Drew, Faulkner, Green, Independence, Jackson, Jefferson, Lawrence, Lee, Lincoln, Lonoke, Mississippi, Monroe, Phillips, Poinsett, Pope, Prairie, Pulaski, Randolph, St. Francis, White, and Woodruff counties.

The Lower Mississippi River Valley region of the United States has long been fighting an uphill battle to retain groundwater levels, improve water quality and provide a suitable habitat for the diverse array of wildlife that inhabit the region. The Mississippi River Alluvial Aquifer serves as a vital and valuable irrigation source for rice growers throughout the region. Decades of annual withdrawals in excess of the aquifer's recharge capabilities have resulted in severely declining water levels that threaten the entire region's viability and could result in regulation for farmers. To address this, USA Rice has partnered with Ducks Unlimited and more than 20 other partners to increase conservation efforts at all levels of producers – from those who are just beginning their conservation efforts to those who are on the cutting edge of conservation innovation. In addition to offering appropriate practices/enhancements for producers, the Mid-south Graduated Stewardship project will include an innovative option for producers to enter the carbon market by adopting advanced Alternate Wetting Drying through Environmental Quality Incentives Program/EQIP 449 Irrigation Water Management practice.

With today's announcement, the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is investing a total of \$825 million in 286 projects, bringing together more than 2,000 conservation partners who have committed an estimated \$1.4 billion in financial and technical assistance. By 2018, NRCS and its partners, including Indian tribes, nonprofit organizations, state and local governments, private industry, water districts, universities and many others, will have invested at least \$2.4 billion through RCPP, which was created by the 2014 Farm Bill.

"RCPP plays a critical role in connecting partners with producers to design and implement conservation solutions that benefit both natural resources and agriculture," Vilsack said. "The Farm Bill is the largest source of federal funding for private lands conservation, and RCPP is contributing innovative conservation solutions to communities across the country."

RCPP offers new opportunities for the 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. The program is increasing investment in conservation from a diversity of partners, leading to cleaner and more abundant water, improved soil and air quality, enhanced wildlife habitat, and stronger rural economies.

Water quality and drought are dominant themes in this year's RCPP project list with 46 of the 88 projects focusing on water resource concerns. More than a fourth of the projects are focused on improving fish and wildlife habitat.

See the full list of 2017 projects spanning the country, impacting almost every state in the nation and Puerto Rico on the NRCS web site at www.nrcs.usda.gov.

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