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News Release

Release No.: 0000016.15

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USDA Announces \$235 Million Available for Innovative New Conservation Partnerships

Local Coalitions Can Now Apply for Funding to Improve Soil Health, Preserve Clean Water, Combat Drought, Protect Wildlife Habitat

DENVER, Colo., May 4, 2015— Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced today an investment of up to \$235 million to improve the nation's water quality, combat drought, enhance soil health, support wildlife habitat and protect agricultural viability. The funding is being made available through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), the newest conservation tool of the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

RCPP, created by the 2014 Farm Bill, empowers local leaders to work with multiple partners—such as private companies, local and tribal governments, universities, non-profit groups and other non-government partners—along with farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners to design solutions that work best for their region. Local partners and the federal government both invest funding and manpower to projects to maximize their impact. This will be the second round of projects funded through RCPP. The RCPP program helps USDA build on already-record enrollment in conservation programs, with over 500,000 producers participating to protect land and water on over 400 million acres nationwide.

“This is a new, innovative approach to conservation,” said Vilsack. “This initiative allows local partners the opportunity to design and invest in conservation projects specifically tailored for their communities. These public-private partnerships can have an impact that’s well beyond what the Federal government could accomplish on its own. These efforts keep our land and water clean, and promote tremendous economic growth in agriculture, construction, tourism, and other industries.”

Vilsack continued, “We had tremendous interest from local partners when we first launched this program last year. In this new round of applications, we’ll be looking for even greater emphasis on expanding partnerships that break down barriers, work across boundaries, leverage resources and create new opportunities for innovation.”

Secretary Vilsack made the announcement at a signing ceremony in Denver for the Colorado Pressurized Small Hydropower Partnership Project, a 2015-funded project that focuses on water quantity resource concerns in Colorado.

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The project, which will receive \$1.8 million in NRCS support alongside local partner investments, will facilitate the conversion of flood irrigation systems to more resource-efficient pressurized irrigation systems with integrated hydropower.

“USDA continues to look for new opportunities to address drought across the West. RCPP projects like this one in Colorado highlight the work the NRCS is doing with partners to increase efficiency while supporting production,” Vilsack said.

In January, USDA delivered first round funding to 115 high-impact projects, including the Colorado project, across all 50 states and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

One of these projects, “Securing Private Working Forests to Benefit Longleaf Pine, Threatened and Endangered Species, and Military Readiness,” will restore approximately 20,000 acres of longleaf near as many as seven military installations across the country through the purchase of conservation easements. The project will enhance longleaf forests while also increasing the forested buffer around military bases. Longleaf forests produce valuable products, such as high quality wood and pulpwood for paper, that are important to rural economies. Also, these forests are home to many rare species, and by restoring the habitat on which they depend, their populations will grow.

Another project, “The Tri-State Western Lake Erie Basin Phosphorous Reduction Initiative” brings together more than 40 partnering organizations from Michigan, Ohio and Indiana to reduce the runoff of phosphorous to waterways in the western basin of Lake Erie. The lake has suffered from nutrient pollution for years, including last year’s water crisis that left 400,000 residents in the Toledo, Ohio area without water to drink, bathe or cook. From providing clean drinking water to employing thousands of people in the tourism industry, the health of Lake Erie affects nearly every aspect of life in the region. This project will target funding to the streams and rivers that have the largest impact on water quality in the lake.

In January, USDA announced \$394 million in awards in the first round of RCPP applications (which represented two years’ worth of funding for fiscal years 2014 and 2015).

Today’s announcement was made possible by the 2014 Farm Bill. The 2014 Farm Bill builds on historic economic gains in rural America over the past five years, while achieving meaningful reform and billions of dollars in savings for taxpayers. Since enactment, USDA has made significant progress to implement each provision of this critical legislation, including providing disaster relief to farmers and ranchers; strengthening risk management tools; expanding access to rural credit; funding critical research; establishing innovative public-private conservation partnerships; developing new markets for rural-made products; and investing in infrastructure, housing and community facilities to help improve quality of life.

USDA is now accepting proposals for RCPP. Pre-proposals are due July 8. For more information on applying, visit the [RCPP website](#).

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