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# News Release

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## **USDA Announces \$350 Million Available to Help States, Private Partners Protect and Restore Grasslands, Wetlands, and Working Lands**

*Eligible Alabama Landowners Encouraged to Apply for Funding by January 15, 2016*

**AUBURN**, Nov. 19, 2015 – Agricultural Secretary Tom Vilsack today announced the availability of \$350 million to help landowners protect and restore key farmlands, grasslands and wetlands across the nation. The funding is provided through the [Agricultural Conservation Easement Program](#) (ACEP), created by the 2014 Farm Bill to protect critical water resources and wildlife habitat, and encourage private owners to maintain land for farming and ranching. Through the voluntary sale of an easement, landowners limit future development to protect these key resources.

“The benefits of restoring, enhancing and protecting these working agricultural lands and critical wetlands cannot be overstated,” Vilsack said. “USDA is committed to preserving working agricultural lands to help protect the long-term viability of farming across the country as well as to restoring and protecting vital sensitive wetlands that provide important wildlife habitat and improve water quality.”

ACEP's agricultural land easements not only protect the long-term viability of the nation's food supply by preventing conversion of productive working lands to non-agricultural uses, they also support environmental quality, wildlife habitat, historic preservation and protection of open spaces. Native American Tribes, state and local governments and non-governmental organizations that have farmland or grassland protection programs are eligible to partner with NRCS to purchase conservation easements.

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Wetland reserve easements allow landowners to successfully restore, enhance and protect habitat for wildlife on their lands, reduce damage from flooding, recharge groundwater and provide outdoor recreational and educational opportunities. Eligible landowners can choose to enroll in a permanent or 30-year easement. Tribal landowners also have the option of enrolling in 30-year contracts.

In Alabama, ACEP funds have been used to add 26,853 acres into easements. All of these acres were enrolled to restore and protect wetland areas that enhance water quality and wildlife habitat. For FY 2016, NRCS Alabama has been allocated \$420,000 to fund ACEP projects in the state. For eligible Alabama landowners interested in applying for ACEP, the deadline to apply is January 15, 2016.

In FY 2014 and FY 2015, NRCS invested more than \$600 million in ACEP funding to help landowners engage in voluntary conservation to provide long-term protection of an estimated 250,000 acres of farmland, grassland, and wetlands through more than 750 new easements.

To learn about ACEP and other technical and financial assistance available through NRCS conservation programs, visit [www.nrcs.usda.gov/GetStarted](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/GetStarted) or your [local USDA Service Center](#).

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