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USDA, Partners to Invest \$720 Million in Large-Scale, Targeted Conservation Projects Across the Nation

Regional Conservation Partnership Program Pools Together \$220 Million Investment from USDA, up to \$500 Million from Local Partners to Improve Water Quality, Soil Health, Habitat and More

AUBURN, Feb. 12, 2016 – Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today announced that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and partners across the nation together will direct up to \$720 million towards 84 conservation projects that will help communities improve water quality, combat drought, enhance soil health, support wildlife habitat and protect agricultural viability. These projects make up the second round of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) created by the 2014 Farm Bill.

Through the 2015 and 2016 rounds, USDA and partners are investing up to \$1.5 billion in 199 strategic conservation projects. Projects are selected on a competitive basis, and local private partners must be able to at least match the USDA commitment. For this round, USDA received 265 applications requesting nearly \$900 million, or four times the amount of available federal funding. The 84 projects selected for 2016 include proposed partner matches totaling over \$500 million, more than tripling the federal investment alone.

“The Regional Conservation Partnership Program puts local partners in the driver’s seat to accomplish environmental goals that are most meaningful to that community. Joining together public and private resources also harnesses innovation that neither sector could implement alone,” Vilsack said. “We have seen record enrollment of privately owned lands in USDA’s conservation programs under this Administration, and the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program will be instrumental in building on those numbers and demonstrating that government and private entities can work together for greater impacts on America’s communities.”

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RCPP draws on local knowledge and networks to fuel conservation projects. Bringing together a wide variety of new partners including businesses, universities, non-profits and local and Tribal governments makes it possible to deliver innovative, landscape- and watershed-scale projects that improve water quality and quantity, wildlife habitat, soil health and other natural resource concerns on working farms, ranches and forests.

Nearly \$7 million will be invested in Alabama through two projects. The Conservation Fund has been awarded \$5.1 million for The Coastal Headwaters Forests (CHF) Partnership. The CHF will address the natural resource concerns of the Longleaf Pine Range in Alabama's Gulf Coastal Plain. By restoring longleaf pine, this project will preserve four major coastal river systems in the Gulf Coast Plain and protect habitat for the threatened gopher tortoise and approximate 600 other species related to longleaf pine habitat.

Through an existing partnership, the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program (SFLR) has been awarded \$1.6 million to address degraded plant conditions and enhancement of wildlife habitat by supporting forest restoration on African American-owned forestlands in high poverty areas of Alabama, North Carolina and South Carolina. In this region, African American family-owned forests tend to be degraded due to lack of pro-active forest management. During its 30-month pilot phase, the SFLR program was effective at building a bridge of trust between landowners and USDA programs supporting 157 EQIP applications for forestry practices with more than \$1 million in EQIP contracts directed to African American project participants.

“We put out a call for innovative and results-focused projects that will deliver the most conservation impact,” said Ben Malone, NRCS state conservationist in Alabama. “Our partners answered with creative, locally-led approaches to help producers support their ongoing business operations and address natural resource challenges in their communities, here in Alabama, and across the nation.”

Water quality and drought are dominant themes in this year's RCPP project list with 45 of the 84 projects focusing on water resource concerns.

USDA is committed to invest \$1.2 billion in RCPP partnerships over the life of the 2014 Farm Bill. Today's announcement brings the current USDA commitment to almost \$600 million invested in 199 partner-led projects, leveraging an additional \$900 million for conservation activities in all 50 states and Puerto Rico.

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USDA invested \$370 million in [115 high impact RCPP projects](#) during 2015. In New Mexico, a RCPP project with the Interstate Stream Commission and an acequia—a local communal irrigation system—has addressed long-standing infrastructure failures to significantly reduce water needs by improving irrigation efficiency. In Oregon, removal of encroaching juniper was part of the West-wide private lands conservation effort that helped obviate the need to list the Greater sage-grouse on the endangered species list.

See the [full list of 2016 projects](#).

Since 2009, USDA has invested more than \$29 billion to help producers make conservation improvements, working with as many as 500,000 farmers, ranchers and landowners to protect over 400 million acres nationwide, boosting soil and air quality, cleaning and conserving water and enhancing wildlife habitat. For an interactive look at USDA's work in conservation and forestry over the course of this Administration, visit <http://medium.com/usda-results>.

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