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USDA Commits \$20 Million to Innovative Conservation Projects *Proposals sought for water quality, outreach and conservation finance*

Auburn, March 7, 2016 – Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today announced the availability of up to \$20 million in competitive grants through the Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) program. The program aims to spark the development and adoption of cutting-edge conservation technologies and approaches for farmers, ranchers and other landowners.

"The Conservation Innovation Grant program has an impressive track record of fostering innovative conservation tools and strategies," said Vilsack. "Successes in the program can translate into new opportunities for historically underserved landowners, help resolve pressing water conservation challenges and leverage new investments in conservation partnerships with farmers, ranchers and other stakeholders."

Administered through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), CIG is part of the [Environmental Quality Incentives Program \(EQIP\)](#) and is designed to focus on innovative conservation projects that promote science-based solutions to benefit both producers and the environment. Projects may include on-farm pilot projects and field demonstrations, and are funded to accelerate the transfer and adoption of promising technologies to landowners in order to address critical natural resource concerns.

Since 2009, USDA has invested over \$145 million to fund nearly 400 national and regional CIG awards. The CIG program spurs development of new tools and practices to improve things like on-farm energy and fertilizer use as well as market-based strategies to improve water quality or mitigate climate change. In 2016, USDA is seeking applications for innovative conservation projects to benefit historically underserved agricultural producers, improve and protect water quality, and demonstrate the effectiveness of public private partnerships for conservation, sustainable agriculture and forestry.

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Up to \$2 million of this fiscal year's CIG funding has been set aside for projects targeted to historically underserved and veteran farmers and ranchers, beginning farmers and ranchers, and those with limited resources. In 2015, for example, the Minnesota Food Association was awarded funds to assist with the transfer of proven conservation technologies used in organic systems to historically underserved producers in Minnesota and Wisconsin, and to assist those producers with implementing conservation practices by addressing land tenure issues and accessing NRCS programs.

USDA is also seeking CIG proposals for projects to stimulate natural resource solutions to protect or improve the quality of ground and surface water. Last year, Tolani Enterprises (TLE), received a CIG award to conduct a three-year national pilot project to demonstrate the environmental, agricultural, economic and sociocultural effectiveness and benefits of solar energy systems for pumping irrigation water. The project was designed to encourage the adoption of such systems among Navajo, Hopi and other American-Indian tribes. The early results have been so promising that the solar-powered system has already been adopted by many Navajo farmers.

In 2015, NRCS made eight CIG awards for projects in the burgeoning field of conservation finance and impact investing. For 2016, USDA is seeking projects that develop additional innovative investment strategies that leverage private capital for private lands conservation. CIG funding may be used to help mitigate risk associated with new conservation investment vehicles, through the use of approaches such as first loss strategies, price floors, guarantees, buyer of last resort mechanisms or other credit enhancements. Successful proposals will demonstrate a likelihood of success and clear metrics for conservation outcomes warranting the use of public funds to support risk mitigation strategies.

CIG awards are made through a nationally competitive process. Projects may be single or multi-year, but cannot exceed three years. Projects must involve EQIP-eligible agricultural producers or landowners. At least 50 percent of the total cost of CIG projects must come from non-federal matching funds, including in-kind contributions.

A fact sheet summarizing other top CIG projects is available on the [NRCS CIG website](#).

Applications for CIG projects are due by May 10, 2016. More information is available on the [NRCS CIG website](#). This year's application process includes two other significant changes: an increase in the maximum award amount to \$2 million, up from \$1 million in 2015, and a streamlined single proposal process.

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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 <https://medium.com/usda-results>.

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