



The Regional Conservation Partnership Program in the Farm Bill

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Standing near the shores of Michigan's Saginaw Bay on Tuesday, May 27, 2014, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack and Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow [announced](#) a sign up for a new conservation program created in the 2014 Farm Bill. Such a political show of force does not often accompany a USDA sign-up announcement and it indicates a high level of priority and attention for this new program. This post takes a close look at the new program -- the Regional Conservation Partnership program -- as part of the ongoing farm bill series (all articles are available [here](#)) and building from the recent overview of the Title II Conservation programs (*farmdoc daily* [May 14, 2014](#)).

Background

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is a new program in the Conservation Title (Title II) of the Agricultural Act of 2014 (the 2014 Farm Bill) that consolidates several programs eliminated by the bill, using funds and authorities from existing conservation programs to coordinate conservation efforts across the programs and on a regional scale. The specific programs used by RCPP are: the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP); the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP); the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP); and the Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP).

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) at USDA will administer the program, accepting applications on a competitive basis for agreements with eligible partners to implement a project that will help farmers and landowners install and maintain conservation practices. Producer associations and groups, State and local governments, Indian tribes, farmer cooperatives, water districts, irrigation districts, municipal water or wastewater treatment facilities, institutions of higher education or any organization or entity with an established history of working cooperatively with producers to address conservation priorities or issues are all eligible to be partners and compete for a project agreement. A partnership agreement can be for up to 5 years with the possibility of extension at the discretion of USDA. While the project is coordinated through partners, it operates by having USDA enter into contracts directly with producers for the financial assistance from the underlying programs for installing and maintaining conservation practices, and the general terms and conditions of the covered programs apply. USDA also pays participating producers directly.

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Tuesday's announcement indicated that a total of over \$394 million will be available for fiscal years 2014 and 2015 for the program and nearly \$1.2 billion total for the five years the program will operate under the 2014 Farm Bill. The maximum available from USDA for any one project is \$20 million. Technical Assistance funding may be provided to a partner through the partnership agreement. Total program funds are allocated in three categories: 25 percent to a State competitive process; 40 percent for a national competitive process; and 35 percent for the specially designated Critical Conservation Areas (CCA). Based on the allocation percentages, NRCS notes that it expects \$138 million to be available for projects in the CCA's in fiscal years 2014 and 2015.

Critical Conservation Areas are geographical areas given priority because they have significant agricultural production and would benefit from water quality improvements or water quantity improvements and the producers in the area need assistance in meeting or avoiding regulations. Projects in a CCA are required to address the natural resource concern that is a priority for that region. USDA designated the following 8 geographical areas as CCA's for this 35 percent of available funding: Great Lakes Region, Chesapeake Bay Watershed, Mississippi River Basin, Longleaf Pine Range, Columbia River Basin, California Bay Delta, Prairie Grasslands Region and the Colorado River Basin. The natural resource concern that is a priority for the Mississippi River Basin is water quality degradation due to excess nutrients and pesticides in surface and ground waters and excessive sediment in surface waters.

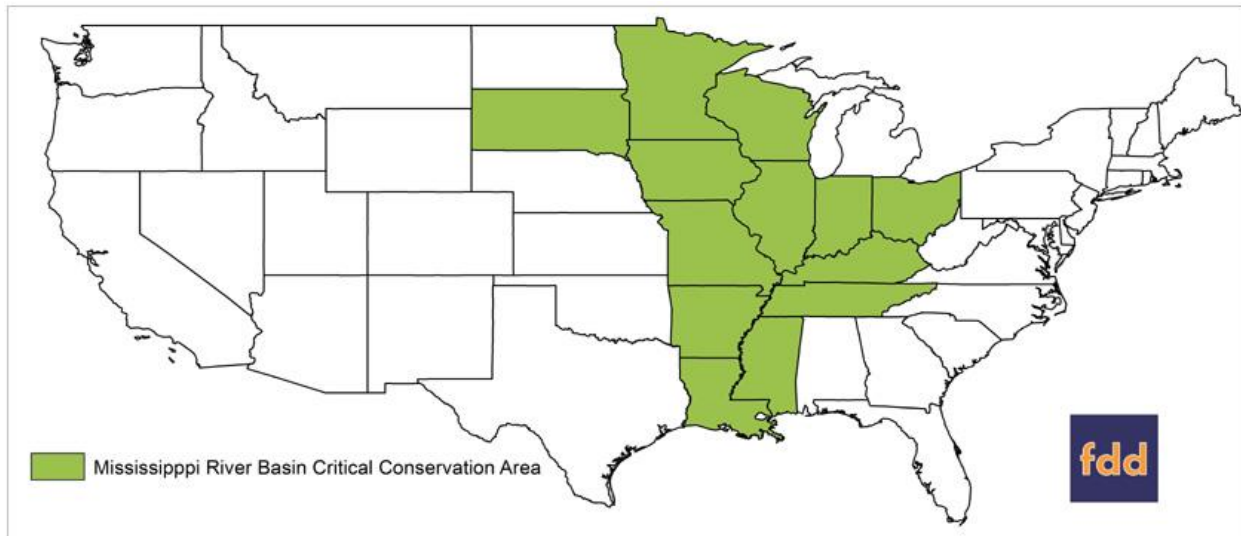
Discussion

As mentioned above, roll-out of RCPP has received a significant amount of attention. USDA is calling the program a [new era](#) for natural resource conservation efforts; a sentiment echoed by the Chairwoman regarding the [historic](#) and [landmark](#) status of the new program. Like much of the conservation title, RCPP enjoys strong bipartisan support, considered by House Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas to be a significant part of the important [reforms](#) to conservation policy and by Senator Thad Cochran (Ranking Member of the Senate Agriculture Committee) as an important [opportunity](#) for farmers, conservation and other private interests. All of these descriptions and the support they indicate stem from the design of this new program. First, the program is designed to bring in substantial private funds to leverage or supplement federal program dollars. Second, it is designed to operate on a region-wide basis, with particular emphasis on the Critical Conservation Areas, instead of the traditional individual, farm-by-farm approach. Finally, this program coordinates across multiple programs with a stated purpose of pushing innovation and advancing efforts to integrate the practices and approaches of these programs into a single undertaking.

The major feature of the RCPP is the substantial role of private partners working in cooperation with farmers and landowners. They are required to define the scope of projects, plan and implement them, including the conservation practices and activities involved, the potential operations affected, the geographic area covered and outreach and assessment. Moreover, since the program seeks to leverage federal conservation funds with private contributions to achieve large-scale natural resource conservation, partners are expected to provide a significant portion of the overall costs of the projects. Program assessment and evaluation, as well as education, outreach and hands-on assistance to producers are all significant components of the program and requirements for accepted projects. Project partners will conduct assessments of the project's effects on natural resource conservation and report to USDA the results on the ground. USDA notes that it wants projects that generate near-term results, measured by environmental, economic and social data. USDA will rely on partners to collect environmental data designed to measure the results and successes of individual projects, leaving to NRCS the responsibility to aggregate and analyze performance data to track trends and monitor progress across all projects in the program. Partners will also take responsibility for seeing that significant outreach and education to producers is conducted. Finally, partners may also assist producers in applying for financial assistance by helping them sign up for programs and funds at NRCS, as well as leveraging financial or technical assistance provided by NRCS. USDA views this as having partners facilitate the process wherever necessary and at the request of the producers.

The regional scope and scale of this program is most evident in the CCA's. Both the Mississippi River Basin (see map below) and the Prairie Grasslands Region CCA's cover 13 states each throughout the

Midwest, Great Plains and Southeast. The Longleaf Pine Range covers 9 states in the Southeast from Texas to Virginia, while the Great Lakes Region covers the 8 states bordering the lakes and the Chesapeake Bay Watershed includes 6 states. The regional focus of the program, however, is not limited to only CCA's. For the entire program, the goal is to achieve conservation on a regional scale whether the projects are in a CCA or funded through national and state competitions. USDA seeks projects that will install and maintain conservation practices and activities across multiple agricultural and nonindustrial private forest operations. USDA will give priority to project applications with a high percentage of producers in the given area who are or will be participating in the project, as well as those that coordinate with other ongoing conservation efforts.



The USDA announcement places substantial emphasis on innovation, stating that it wants to work with project partners to encourage locally-driven innovation for conservation efforts on private lands. A big part of this appears to be found in the increased coordination across the existing conservation programs covered by RCPP and the activities they assist. As mentioned above, RCPP uses ACEP, EQIP, CSP and HFRP by integrating the multiple approaches in these programs to deliver comprehensive and measurable conservation outcomes. ACEP provides authority to purchase conservation easements that restore, protect and enhance wetlands, or that protect the agricultural use and viability of farmland or that protect grazing uses on grasslands and rangelands. EQIP provides cost-share assistance to producers who implement conservation practices on their farms for soil, water and air quality, wildlife habitat and surface and ground water conservation. EQIP assistance is specifically focused on helping producers comply with regulations or avoid the need for regulations; a concept that is also very prominent in RCPP. CSP encourages producers to address natural resource concerns across their entire farm operation in a comprehensive manner through 5-year contracts providing financial assistance for conservation activities, improvements, maintenance and management. Finally, the HFRP seeks to restore and enhance forest ecosystems to help promote recovery of threatened and endangered species, improve biodiversity and enhance carbon sequestration. RCPP gives USDA the ability to coordinate these conservation activities and program authorities, seeking to improve the involvement of producers, partners and other stakeholders in developing, implementing and measuring the conservation efforts.

Conclusion

Billed as a significant shift in the design and operation of on-farm natural resource conservation, the Regional Conservation Partnership program appears to signal a new direction for this policy by shifting from individual agreements under single programs to a coordinated effort across multiple farms on a regional basis to address large-scale natural resource issues. This effort will be led by non-federal partners who are contributing substantial amounts of resources from both monetary and in-kind contributions. At its core, this new direction seeks to better help producers meet existing regulations and requirements or to avoid new natural resource-based regulations by addressing the issues before the fall of any regulatory hammer. This significant departure from traditional conservation program operation

may have far-reaching implications for farmers, natural resource conservation and the myriad policies that impact them both.

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