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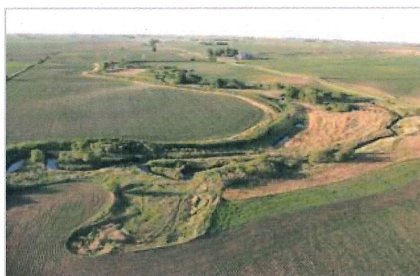
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Vilsack Signs Conservation Partnerships



DANIEL LOOKER
01/14/2015 @ 9:21pm
Business Editor

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Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack visited a watershed near Phoenix, Arizona, Wednesday to announce more than 100 projects nationwide through the 2014 Farm Bill's new Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

USDA will provide more than \$370 million to projects that are also supported by private companies and state and local governments. About half of the funds will be targeted toward improving water quality with nearly a fourth aimed at protecting wildlife.

"This is an entirely new approach to conservation efforts," said Vilsack. "These partnerships empower communities to set priorities and lead the way on conservation efforts important for their region. They also encourage private sector investment so we can make an impact that's well beyond what the federal government could accomplish on its own."

The project in Arizona that Vilsack called out will clean and conserve water along the Verde River, a tributary of the Colorado River.

In Iowa, the RCPP will provide \$3.5 million for the state's Targeted Demonstration Watersheds Partnership Project. With the funding, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) and its 20 project partners, will be able to increase available resources through existing demonstration projects in key watersheds, conduct farmer-to-farmer outreach, and assist farmers in implementing conservation practices.

"The projects will focus on the adoption of conservation practices that are most beneficial to reducing nutrient loading in up to nine watersheds," said Iowa Agriculture Secretary Bill Northey. "This effort is tied directly to the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy and will serve as models for future work and focus on farmer-to-farmer outreach and education."

USDA will also provide \$2 million to Cedar Rapids for an RCPP project. The Middle Cedar Partnership Project will focus on working with local conservation partners, farmers, and landowners to install best management practices such as cover crops, nutrient management, wetlands, and saturated buffers to help improve water quality, water quantity, and soil health in the Cedar River Watershed.

"There is an urgent need to address nitrates concentrations and extreme flood events in the Cedar River," said Jay Mar, state conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service in Des Moines. "This project will lay the foundation for needed improvements and bring together a diverse group of conservation partners."

In Minnesota, there are two National and one Critical Conservation Area RCPP projects. Here's a brief description.

ABC: Improving Forest Health for Wildlife Resources in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Lead partner: American Bird Conservancy.

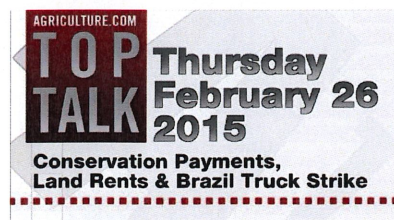
Building on a strong existing partnership with NRCS, American Bird Conservancy (ABC) seeks to improve forest management on nearly 12,000 acres of nonindustrial forest land in order to provide essential habitat for the golden-winged warbler and other potential threatened and endangered (T&E) species. Partners will implement additional forest management on at least 52,000 acres of public and private lands. Goals of the project include achieving a better distribution of forest habitat to benefit potential T&E species, increasing the population of golden-winged warblers on private lands, and, ultimately, avoiding its listing under the Endangered Species Act. The listing decision is scheduled for 2017.



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Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program National Demonstration Project**Lead Partner:** Minnesota Department of Agriculture

In 2013, the Minnesota certification program kicked off in four small watershed pilot project areas, offering producers who demonstrate superior water quality conservation management a 10-year certification by the State of Minnesota and regulatory certainty that will be in compliance with any new state water quality laws and rules that take effect during the certification period. This project will establish and administer a state-level agricultural water quality certification program for export and adoption by states throughout the country. Success will be gauged both by the establishment of the state-wide program and also on a farm-by-farm basis, ensuring successful mitigation and prevention of water quality risks within each operation in the program.

Red River Basin of the North Flood Prevention Plan**Lead Partner:** Red River Retention Authority

This project uses all of NRCS' authorities - EQIP, ACEP, CSP, and PL-566 to reduce flooding, ponding, and excess water on farmlands, thereby increasing the resiliency of agriculture, as well as to reduce nutrient loads in this region of Minnesota and North Dakota. Once completed, six to eight discrete projects will store approximately 50,000 acre-feet of flood water. The long-standing partnership across state boundaries includes the Red River Retention Authority, which has the power to raise revenue.

The projects with funding announced Wednesday were chosen from more than 600 proposals. They represent the first round of some \$1.2 billion in grants that USDA will make for RCPP under the five-year life of the 2014 Farm Bill.

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