

Louisiana Farmers and Landowners Can Jump-Start Conservation through Local Partnerships

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Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) program that was introduced in the 2014 Farm Bill allows farmers and landowners the ability to install and maintain voluntary conservation activities. The RCPP implements these conservation activities through its existing programs one of which is the *Environmental Quality Incentives Program*, popularly known as EQIP.

Voluntary conservation activities adopted through the RCPP program mitigates natural resource concerns within a watershed and/or a river basin and/or a state and/or a region. Multiple partners, including farmers, first identify natural resource concerns (i.e., nutrient runoff, sediment runoff, poor irrigation efficiency, bare soil in winter, among other concerns) and then choose cost-effective practices that mitigate these concerns. Farmers adopt voluntary conservation practices that can be on their entire farm or on part of their farm depending upon resources available for the farmer and the agency, in this case the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

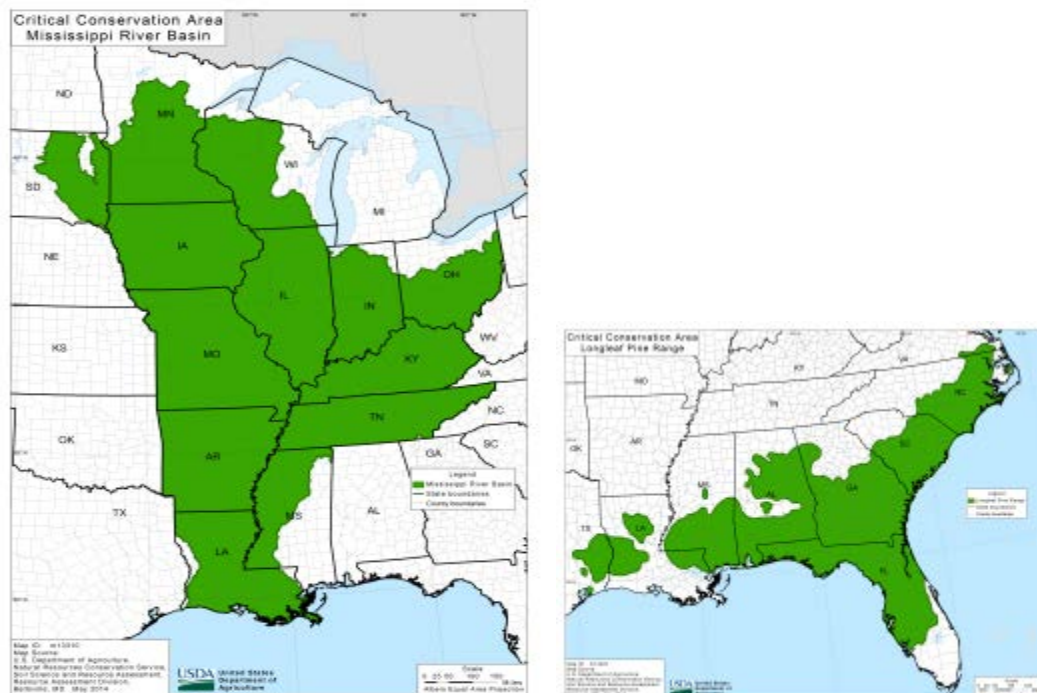


Figure1. Critical Conservation Areas, Mississippi River Basin and Longleaf Pine Range, respectively. Pictures adopted from NRCS, RCPP website.

Projects receive financial assistance through three funding pools, one, projects within critical conservation areas, two, national projects, and three, state projects. For critical conservation areas, projects can be submitted to address nutrient and sediment load concerns from private lands within the Mississippi River Basin (MRB); whereas, projects that are focused to increase longleaf pine acreage can be submitted to Longleaf Pine Range (LLPR). Green shaded areas in Figures 1a and 1b highlight the MRB and the LLPR. For state projects, projects focusing on a watershed scale within the state boundaries can be submitted for funding.

Approximately \$27 million has been invested in ten (10) Louisiana projects through the RCPP. Projects focused on issues related to soil health improvement, water quality protection, addressing water quantity issues through improvement in application efficiency, and improvement in wildlife habitat. Among the 10 projects, eight (8) are projects that were submitted to the state pool, in other words, projects involved a dedicated effort to address natural resource concerns that are in watersheds within the state boundaries. The funds invested through to the 10 RCPP projects are presented below in figure 2. State15 refers to a project funded in the year 2015.

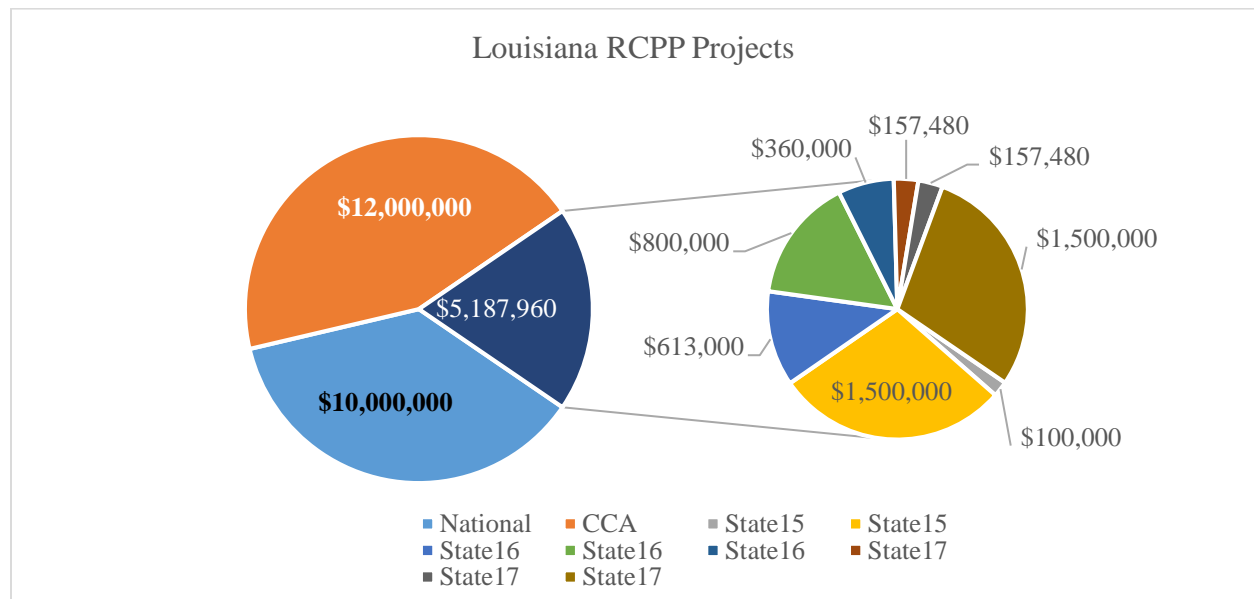


Figure 2. Louisiana RCPP projects, funding pools, and grant dollars

These RCPP projects provided an excellent opportunity for partners to come together to allocate resources to address natural resource concerns within state boundaries as well as within critical conservation areas. Farmers played a key role as either a lead partner and/or participating partner in several of these projects. One of which is the Shift Tail Canal Watershed project, funded in 2016 with Caddo Soil and Water Conservation District acting as the lead partner. The LSU AgCenter was a partner in the project to provide technical assistance to farmers regarding cost-effective management practices that address water quality, irrigation efficiency, and soil health. The project’s focus was to address soil health

and water quality protection as its primary and secondary resource concerns, respectively, through farmer participation in long-term management practices. Farmers are provided cost-share assistance to adopt the recommended practices for the life of the project.

One of the advantages of these projects is that as resource concerns are addressed through adopting the selected practices, farmers planning to participate in enhanced conservation have an advantage of scoring higher points when EQIP applications are submitted to their local NRCS field office for conservation dollars. This is because some of the resource concerns are already being addressed through recommended BMPs. Thus, it provides a win-win situation for farmers by conserving natural resources on their farms as well as making them first-in-line for conservation dollars.

With available funding for environmental programs and working lands conservation programs getting scarce, additional funds for funding agricultural land projects that focus on resource conservation need to be pursued with stronger partnerships. Given that natural resource conservation is a national priority, cost-share programs such as the RCPP that encourage voluntary conservation at watershed scale should provide an opportunity to build partnerships in conservation efforts.

Steps to a successful RCPP project

- A local partner or a Soil and Water Conservation District Board can initiate the process by involving the local NRCS District Conservationist to identify priority resource concerns within the watershed.
- Once these concerns have been identified, select management practices that are both cost-effective and are suitable to implement with the current farming practices.
- Bring other partners such as the LSU Agricultural Center research and extension faculty on-board to provide technical assistance, seed and fertilizer companies and irrigation dealers to provide discounts on inputs needed in the potential resource management plan. The partners in-kind and cash contributions can count toward matching funds required by the program.
- Prepare a preliminary management plan for the watershed and identify participating farmers, which then is used to quantify the number of acres impacted by the project.

These steps are only to provide an understanding of the process to a competitive RCPP proposal but are not meant to be interpreted as mandatory requirements for the project. The ultimate goal is to encourage farmers to join in on efforts to adopt conservation measures on a regional or watershed scale to address soil, water, and wildlife-related concerns.