



MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional Commission
From: Patrick L. Mauney, Executive Director
Date: October 20, 2020
Subject: USDA NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program

You may recall discussion of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grant through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) from last October. At that time, the Commission authorized staff to work with partner organizations to develop an application to the program. Ultimately, the partners determined that an application in 2019 was not feasible, but have continued discussions throughout 2020.

While the final proposal is still in development, the focus of the RCPP proposal for the Rappahannock-Rapidan region is to establish a pool of NRCS funding to assist landowners and producers implement best management practices that can improve water quality, reinvigorate farm productivity, profitability, and viability, enhance wildlife habitat, and provide long term conservation of rural agricultural land. Any project would be voluntary.

Under the 2018 Federal farm bill, \$300 million per year is available for RCPP funded projects. RCPP proposals may request up to \$10 million in funding over a five-year period, which is matched by partner contributions. It is estimated that a RCPP grant proposal for the RRRC region could request \$3 million, though potential partners continue to evaluate the mix of projects and practices that could be included in the proposal. Most of the funding would be administered by USDA NRCS.

In addition to partnering to develop the grant application, RRRC staff also possess experience in Federal/State grant management that would be applicable to a successful application and award. Project partners have identified RRRC as a strong candidate to serve as lead partner and grant administrator for the proposal. In such a capacity, RRRC would be responsible for reporting and communicating with NRCS staff on project status and metric coordination and would be eligible to receive Enhancement Technical Assistance funds (up to 7% of grant award) to provide project management, outcomes tracking, outreach and communications. Other project partners noted above be responsible for “on the ground” implementation of projects and best practices in coordination with voluntarily participating landowners. RRRC will not be responsible for providing any partner funding related to on the ground projects.

Applications are due by November 30, 2020.

The RCPP “promotes coordination of NRCS conservation activities with partners that offer value-added contributions to expand our collective ability to address on-farm, watershed, and regional natural resource concerns. Through RCPP, NRCS seeks to co-invest with partners to implement projects that demonstrate innovative solutions to conservation challenges and provide measurable improvements and outcomes tied to the resource concerns they seek to address.”

To date, RRRC staff and various partner agencies have held preliminary discussions about a potential application for an RCPP grant focused on the Rappahannock-Rapidan region. These partners include USDA NRCS, Piedmont Environmental Council, John Marshall Soil & Water Conservation District, Friends of the Rappahannock, American Farmland Trust, American Battlefield Trust and the Smithsonian Institution’s Virginia Working Landscapes (VWL) initiative. Staff at the Culpeper Soil & Water Conservation District have been apprised of, and given feedback on, the possible project, as well.

The attachment included here provides an overview of the RCPP program. Please note that the application deadline listed on the attachment is from last year, but the program information remains the same.

REQUESTED ACTION: Consider authorization of RRRC staff to continue work with partner agencies on RCPP grant and for RRRC to be identified as lead partner in the application

Regional Conservation Partnership Program

Natural Resources Conservation Service



USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service offers voluntary Farm Bill programs that benefit both agricultural producers and the environment.

Overview

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) promotes coordination of NRCS conservation activities with partners that offer value-added contributions to expand our collective ability to address on-farm, watershed, and regional natural resource concerns. Through RCPP, NRCS seeks to co-invest with partners to implement projects that demonstrate innovative solutions to conservation challenges and provide measurable improvements and outcomes tied to the resource concerns they seek to address.

Benefits

RCPP makes available a variety of NRCS conservation activities to help partners, ag producers, and private landowners address local and regional natural resource challenges.

How It Works

Partners apply to NRCS for RCPP project awards. Once projects are selected, NRCS works with partners to set aside a certain pool of funding for an awarded project. Producers, landowners, and partners then enter into producer contracts and supplemental agreements with NRCS to carry out agreed-to conservation activities.

Who is Eligible?

Only eligible organizations interested in partnering with NRCS on conservation projects can develop applications for the RCPP competition. The lead partner for an RCPP

project is the entity that submits an application, and if selected for an award is ultimately responsible for collaborating with NRCS to successfully complete an RCPP project.

See the RCPP funding announcement for details about what types of organizations are eligible to apply.

RCPP projects must be carried out on agricultural or nonindustrial private forest land or associated land on which NRCS determines an eligible activity would help achieve conservation benefits.

Conservation Activities

RCPP projects may include any combination of authorized, on-the-ground conservation activities implemented by farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners. These activities include:

- Land management/land improvement/restoration practices
- Land rentals
- Entity-held easements
- United States-held easements
- Public works/watersheds.

How to Apply

Interested partners must apply through the RCPP portal (nracs.my.salesforce.com). Applications are being accepted through December 3, 2019.

Once RCPP projects are selected, producers and landowners can apply to participate in projects that cover their geographic area. Interested producers should visit their local USDA Service Center to see if their land is included in the scope of any existing RCPP projects.

What's New in the 2018 Farm Bill

RCPP is now a standalone program with its own funding—\$300 million annually.

NRCS may award up to 15 Alternative Funding Arrangement projects, which are more grant-like and rely more on partner capacity to implement conservation activities.

RCPP now has two funding pools—Critical Conservation Areas and a State/Multistate pool.

RCPP partners must develop and report on environmental outcomes.

More Information

For more information, visit nracs.usda.gov/farmbill or farmers.gov.

Find your local USDA Service Center at farmers.gov/service-locator.

Natural Resources Conservation Service

