Source water protection results when key state and local leaders and stakeholders collaborate to encourage land use practices that protect and improve water quality – for agriculture this means systems of conservation practices. USDA has a suite of voluntary programs implemented at the state and local level that provide financial assistance to willing private landowners and operators* to protect and improve soil and water quality.

This online guide is intended to provide background information and some simple steps to help connect source water stakeholders and USDA leadership at the state and local levels, to encourage a collaborative approach to protecting and improving water quality and our sources of drinking water.

**STEP 1**

**UNDERSTAND HOW KEY USDA CONSERVATION PROGRAMS CAN HELP PROTECT AND IMPROVE SOURCES OF DRINKING WATER**

Source water protection results when key state and local leaders and stakeholders collaborate to encourage land use practices that protect and improve water quality – for agriculture this means systems of conservation practices. USDA has a suite of voluntary programs implemented at the state and local level that provide financial assistance to willing private landowners and operators* to protect and improve soil and water quality.

This online guide is intended to provide background information and some simple steps to help connect source water stakeholders and USDA leadership at the state and local levels, to encourage a collaborative approach to protecting and improving water quality and our sources of drinking water.

**USDA**

**Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)**
*under the Under Secretary for Natural Resource and Environment

NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners and operators for their voluntary implementation of systems of conservation practices.

Some of their key partners include the National Association of Conservation Districts and the National Association of State Conservation Agencies.

- NRCS and source water protection programs share a common goal of protecting and improving water quality, and both are voluntary programs
  - State Conservationists have decision-making authority and considerable flexibility to offer technical and financial assistance to private landowners and operators.
  - Specific projects can bring key partners to the table to leverage resources and expertise to protect and improve watersheds that yield drinking water.

**Farm Service Agency**
*under the Under Secretary for Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services

FSA provides farm commodity, credit, conservation, disaster, loan, and price support programs.

- FSA has two important programs directly protecting sources of drinking water:
  - Source Water Protection Programs, with National Rural Water Association: This Map shows the 33 states where rural source water technicians provide technical assistance to identify priority areas, and work with local teams to develop Rural Source Water Protection plans to protect ground water sources of drinking water through adoption of voluntary practices, including conservation practices.
  - The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is a voluntary land retirement program that helps agricultural producers protect environmentally sensitive land, decrease erosion, restore wildlife habitat, and safeguard ground and surface water. CREP is an offshoot of the country’s largest private-lands environmental improvement program - the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

This is just a quick introduction. More details about NRCS and FSA organization and staff are provided in the following steps.

Note: This information presents just a limited view of USDA offices and programs that are relevant to source water protection efforts. A complete USDA organization chart can be found at: [http://usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=USDA_ORG_CHART](http://usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=USDA_ORG_CHART)