**Highlights of NRCS & FSA Conservation Programs**

USDA Mission includes protecting soil and water quality on working and retired lands

**Key NRCS programs and initiatives of interest for protecting water quality**

NRCS provides cost-share funding to producers (farmers) to voluntarily install and maintain conservation practices, and also provides technical assistance. Per the 2018 Farm Bill, 10% of conservation program funds (except CRP) will support source water protection.

* [**Environmental Quality Incentives Program**](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/eqip) **(EQIP)**:Provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers to address natural resource concerns and deliver environmental benefits such as improved water and air quality, conserved ground and surface water, increased soil health and reduced soil erosion
  + Payment rate up to 75% for conservation practices, state-identified high priority practices may receive up to 90% payment rate
  + 1-10 year contracts
  + Structural and management practices
  + Per the Farm Bill, 50% must be used for livestock production and 10% for wildlife.
* [**National Water Quality Initiative**](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/home/?&cid=stelprdb1047761) **(**NWQI): Uses EQIP funds to help producers and landowners to implement voluntary conservation practices as part of areawide efforts to improve water quality in high-priority areas. These areas are defined primarily by subwatersheds (HUC 12). Practice implementation is focused to identified areas of the watershed most in need of treatment. NWQI also assists with practice implementation on priority source water protection areas (SWPAs), where the drinking water source is surface or ground water. In this case, NWQI addresses identified threats to drinking water, either to remediate impairments or protect clean sources.
* [**Conservation Innovation Grants**](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/cig) **(CIG)**: Are competitive grants that drive public and private sector innovation in resource conservation. CIG projects inspire creative problem solving that boosts production on farms, ranches, and private forests - ultimately, they improve water quality, soil health, and wildlife habitat. On-farm trials were added as a component to CIG in the 2018 Farm Bill.Non-Federal governmental or nongovernmental organizations, Tribes, or individuals are eligible to apply. The grants are awarded through both NRCS national and state competitive processes.
* [**Conservation Stewardship Program**](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/csp) **(CSP)**: Helps agricultural producers maintain and improve their existing conservation systems and adopt additional conservation activities to address priority resource concerns..
* [Regional Conservation Partnership Program](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/rcpp/) (RCPP): (https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/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 innovative solutions to conservation challenges and measurable improvements and outcomes tied to the resource concerns addressed.
* [**Healthy Forests Reserve Program**](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/easements/forests): Assist landowners, on a voluntary basis, in restoring, enhancing and protecting forestland resources on private lands through easements, 30-year contracts and 10-year cost-share agreements. This program focuses on benefitting threatened and endangered species and promoting biodiversity.
* [**Landscape Conservation Initiatives**](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/newsroom/?cid=stelprdb1042113)**:** These initiatives take a landscape level approach to addressing water quality and use EQIP, CSP and/or other programs to implement targeted conservation.
  + Great Lakes Restoration Initiative
  + Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative
  + Joint Chiefs’ Landscape Restoration Partnership

**Land Retirement Programs**

* **[Agricultural Conservation Easement Program](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/easements/acep/?cid=stelprdb1242695) (ACEP)**: (https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/easements/acep/?cid=stelprdb1242695) Provides financial and technical assistance to help conserve agricultural lands and wetlands and their related benefits. Under the Agricultural Land Easements component, NRCS helps Indian tribes, state and local governments and non-governmental organizations protect working agricultural lands and limit non-agricultural uses of the land.  Under the Wetlands Reserve Easements component, NRCS helps to restore, protect and enhance enrolled wetlands.

**FSA Programs Relevant to Source Water Protection**

* [**Conservation Reserve Program**](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=copr&topic=crp) **(CRP):** Available foragricultural producers to help safeguard environmentally sensitive land. Producers enrolled in CRP plant long-term, resource conserving vegetative covers that are intended to improve the quality of water, control soil erosion, and enhance wildlife habitat.
  + Contracts require a 10- to 15-year commitment to keep lands in long-term conservation cover.
  + General sign-up = bids based on national environmental benefits index (set by FSA Headquarters)
  + Continuous sign-ups for “highly desirable environmental practices”: filter strips, grassed waterways, riparian buffers, public wellhead areas. Here’s a link to a useful CRP continuous sign-up fact sheet: https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Assets/USDA-FSA-Public/usdafiles/FactSheets/2019/crp\_continuous\_enrollment\_period-fact\_sheet.pdf
  + **Wellhead Protection Program**: Land within 2000 feet of a wellhead (or state-approved wellhead protection areas in EPA Region 5) is eligible for voluntary enrollment by producers, to plant resource-conserving vegetative buffers in wellhead areas to protect sensitive groundwater sources.
  + [**Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program**](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=copr&topic=cep) **(CREP):** Federal partnership with states, NGOs (additional cost-share benefit for producers), to protect environmentally sensitive land, decrease erosion, restore wildlife habitat, and safeguard ground and surface water.
* [**Source Water Protection Program**:](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=copr&topic=swp)  updated link: https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/source-water-protection/index Joint program with National Rural Water Association to help prevent source water pollution in many states through voluntary practices implemented by producers at the local level, and assistance in the development of protection plans.

Find more information about NRCS’s Conservation Programs on their website: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs>

Find more information about FSA’s Conservation Programs on their website: <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=copr&topic=landing>