State Conservationist Tim Beard - Quick Notes

We are officially into calendar year 2015 and NRCS, partners and customers are planning and working hard to implement practices to best conserve and utilize our natural resources. We have already met the first Environmental Quality Incentives Program ranking of eligible applications, we're seeking to enroll new acres into the Conservation Stewardship Program, and the agency is accepting proposals for Conservation Innovation Grants. Furthermore, we have implemented new Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for handling wetland determinations and are building-out training opportunities for employees and partners. This year is shaping-up to be an active year for the partnership. Below, you'll find more details about what's on the horizon for conservation and NRCS. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me or any member of our NRCS North Carolina Leadership Team.

Highlights

Programs

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)- Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced on January 14, 2015, that 115 high-impact projects across all 50 states and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, were awarded more than $370 million in federal funding as part of the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program. In turn, these projects will leverage an estimated $400 million in partner contributions to improve the nation's water quality, support wildlife habitat and enhance the environment. Resource Institute Inc., will receive $1.5 million through RCPP to leverage with partner funds to support the Western North Carolina Stream, Wetland and Water Quality Initiative project. The North Carolina Project will involve the restoration, enhancement and stabilization of streams and wetlands that have been degraded by agricultural land use throughout the geographic region of 31 North Carolina counties that make up the existing Western North Carolina Stream Initiative.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) - Field offices take EQIP applications continually throughout the year. However, to be eligible for available funds, applicants should have their applications in soon. The first cut-off period for available EQIP funds was January 16, 2015. The second cut-off is set for March 20, 2015, with a third set for May 15, 2015. All applicants should contact their local field office today to learn more about eligibility and the application process.

EQIP 2015 (Cut-Off Period)

Area	Amount Requested	Number of Applications
Area 1	$11,247,649	325
Area 2	$3,931,578	288
Area 3	$16,505,912	397

Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) - NRCS is now taking applications for up to $20 million in grants to facilitate the creation of new, innovative markets for carbon credits, providing additional revenue sources for producers to use to address natural resource conservation challenges. These grants are part of the CIG program, authorized through the 2014 Farm Bill. For 2015, approximately half of the $20 million is available for environmental markets and conservation finance projects that engage agricultural producers. In past years, CIG has helped fund the development of the basic infrastructure of these markets.

NRCS is seeking applications for projects that will build on these efforts by maturing and scaling markets and accelerating efforts to leverage private capital and investment in private lands conservation. Improved quantification tools, multi-resource crediting, and projects that substantively engage corporate or financial partners are the types of activities NRCS is pursuing. USDA is also soliciting proposals for projects to stimulate natural resource improvements, including, but not limited to, improvements in water quantity, soil health, and wildlife habitat.

As in prior years, NRCS will accept pre-proposals for initial review before inviting entities to submit full proposals. Pre-proposals are due Tuesday, February 24, 2015. The full announcement of program funding is available at http://go.usa.gov/4Kvx. To apply electronically, visit http://www.grants.gov or contact a local NRCS office.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) - NRCS is now accepting applications for 2015. The Fiscal Year 2015 budget reduced the funding for CSP to a level which will allow only 7.741 million acres of new enrollments. CSP applications must be received by March 13, 2015, for the general signup and March 31, 2015, for renewals.

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