



Natural Resources Conservation Service
United States Department of Agriculture

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News Release

USDA Invests \$25 Million in High-Priority Watersheds to Improve Water Quality [Email This Page](#)

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Seventeen New Watersheds Added to National Water Quality Initiative

WASHINGTON, Feb. 26, 2016 – Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today announced an investment of \$25 million targeted to help agriculture producers improve water quality in high-priority streams and rivers across the country. Through the National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI), USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will help agricultural producers in 187 priority watersheds apply conservation measures that contribute to cleaner water downstream.

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“Clean water is in everyone’s interest, and the National Water Quality Initiative has been successful because it brings together multiple partners in strategic areas to work towards a common goal,” said Vilsack. “Restoring health to waterways benefits not just farmers and ranchers, but it also gives their communities safe drinking water and provides healthy habitat for fish and wildlife.”

The goal of NWQI is to implement conservation practices in sufficient quantity within a concentrated area so that agriculture no longer contributes to the impairment of water bodies within these priority watersheds. NRCS and partners work with producers and landowners to implement voluntary conservation practices, such as nutrient management, cover crops, conservation cropping systems, filter strips, terraces and buffers, that improve water quality in high-priority watersheds while maintaining agricultural productivity. Water quality-related conservation practices enhance agricultural profitability through reduced input and enhanced soil health, which results in higher soil organic matter, increased infiltration and water-holding capacity and nutrient cycling.

USDA’s targeted approach to improve water quality is working across the country. In Arkansas, conservation efforts improved the water quality to the point that portions of the St. Francis River and the Illinois River are no longer considered impaired streams by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. In coastal Mississippi, focused efforts led to Orphan Creek’s removal from the list of impaired streams, and in Louisiana, two watersheds, Big Creek and East Fork Big Creek, are on track for delisting.

This year, NRCS added 17 new watersheds to NWQI.

Since 2012, conservation systems have been placed on almost 500,000 acres in priority watersheds through NWQI, supported by \$100 million in USDA investments. Now in its fifth year, NWQI has expanded to include more small watersheds across the nation, and it builds on efforts to deliver high-impact conservation in areas such as the Mississippi River basin, Gulf of Mexico, Chesapeake Bay and Great Lakes.

In 2016, NRCS will bolster its water quality efforts by introducing a new evaluation tool in selected NWQI watersheds. The tool will help producers assess how their farm or ranch is operating, the value of conservation already in place, and to identify areas they may want to improve and practices they may want to implement to get them there.

Known as a resource stewardship evaluation, this new tool integrates many of NRCS’ planning tools, and looks holistically at an agricultural operation’s current management and conservation activities across five natural resource concerns: soil management, water quality, water quantity, air quality and wildlife habitat. With a resource stewardship evaluation, NRCS helps producers develop a conservation plan that best meets their goals and prescribes the right conservation practices.

NRCS worked with state water quality agencies and other partners to select NWQI watersheds. State water quality agencies and local partners also provide assistance with watershed planning, additional dollars and

assistance for conservation, along with outreach to farmers and ranchers. Through NWQI, these partnerships are growing and offering a model for collaborative work in other watersheds.

Deadlines for application vary by state. Contact your local USDA Service Center for more information.

Since 2009, USDA has invested more than \$29 billion to help producers make conservation improvements, working with as many as 500,000 farmers, ranchers and landowners to protect over 400 million acres nationwide, boosting soil and air quality, cleaning and conserving water and enhancing wildlife habitat. For an interactive look at USDA's work in conservation and forestry over the course of this Administration, visit <http://medium.com/usda-results> .

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