



Natural Resources Conservation Service
230 North First Avenue, Suite 509
Phoenix, Arizona 85003
Voice (602) 280-8801
Web: <http://www.az.nrcs.usda.gov>

News Release

Contact:
Valentino Reyes, NRCS
(602) 280-8780

Mihio Manus, Navajo Nation
(928) 871-7728

Nathan Gonzalez, AZGFD
(623) 236-7230

USDA Invests in Innovative Arizona Conservation Partnerships

Additional projects brings federal, partner investment to the Colorado River Basin and drought-stricken grasslands

PHOENIX, December 22, 2016 - Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack yesterday announced that 88 high-impact projects across the country will receive \$225 million in federal funding as part of the USDA's Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) including **over \$6.3 million in Arizona for two new projects**. In addition, partners nation-wide have proposed to contribute up to an additional \$500 million to improve the nation's water quality, combat drought, enhance soil health, support wildlife habitat and protect agricultural viability.

Water quality and drought are dominant themes in this year's RCPP project list with 46 of the 88 projects focusing on water resource concerns. More than one-fourth of the projects are focused on improving fish and wildlife habitat.

With yesterday's announcement, there have now been a total of seven RCPP projects awarded to conservation partners in Arizona over three years. Four of these projects are state-focused projects with the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGFD) to assist their grassland restoration efforts and three focus on the Colorado River Basin Critical Conservation Area (CCA) to help improve water quality and quantity in the Colorado River Basin

"I'm excited about the success we've had and continue to have with RCPP in Arizona," said Keisha Tatem, NRCS state conservationist for Arizona. "With this new round of funding, we will be able to support a project with the Navajo Nation that brings together multiple partners to take a strategic watershed approach to address landscape level conservation and infrastructure needs. We are also able to expand our work with Arizona Game and Fish Department to restore degraded grassland and savannah habitat and to provide reliable water sources for wildlife. I think that speaks volumes to the types of innovative opportunities that this program creates."

NRCS funded the **Little Colorado River (LCR) Watershed - Navajo Nation Regional Conservation Partnership Program** for **\$4,826,250** to implement a two-fold effort. The partnership will establish a five year watershed planning effort for three sub-watersheds of the LCR basin. In addition, the partnership will also explore and implement techniques to improve the delivery of Environmental Quality Incentives Program on the Nation. The Navajo Nation Division of Natural Resources will lead the effort in conjunction with the Little Colorado River Watershed Chapters Association, Navajo Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

“The Navajo Nation is pleased to hear the announcement by the NRCS,” said President Russell Begaye of the Navajo Nation. “The Begaye-Nez Administration came into office to develop partnerships and to bring opportunities to the Nation for our elderly, youth, and veterans. This award will allow the Nation, together with its partners, to develop plans to improve the Upper and Lower Black Creek Watersheds. Improving our watersheds provides us the opportunity to live in balance with the land that our elders fought so hard to protect for us and to develop infrastructure with sustainability of our resources.”

“There are many individuals and entities to thank for their hard work in submitting a successful application,” said President Begaye. “Delegate Walter Phelps has been a persistent and effective advocate for watershed planning. I thank the Little Colorado Chapters Watershed Association, the Soil and Water Conservation Districts, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Division of Natural Resources and several of its Departments. Finally, I thank Division Director Bidtah Becker for her instrumental leadership in providing the necessary direction to bring so many entities together.”

The **AZGFD** will lead the **Northern Arizona Grassland Restoration** project to continue restoring grassland habitats for a wide variety of species, including golden eagles, California condors, pronghorn antelope, elk, neo-tropical songbirds and potentially help in the recovery of the black-footed ferret. NRCS funding for this effort is **\$1.5 million**.

“We are honored to receive this support from the NRCS once again,” said AZGFD Director Larry Voyles. “This award allows us to continue our critical work with our partners and supports essential, on-the-ground wildlife and habitat conservation efforts in Arizona.”

For more information on the program or to see the full list of 2017 projects, visit the [RCPP website](#).

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