Investing in North Carolina - 2016

Created by the 2014 Farm Bill, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is a partner-driven, locally-led approach to conservation. It offers new opportunities for USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to harness innovation, welcome new partners to the conservation mission, and demonstrate the value and efficacy of voluntary, private lands conservation.

In 2016, NRCS is investing up to $220 million in 84 high-impact projects that impact every state in the nation, including four in North Carolina. This investment, which builds on the $370 million invested for 2014 and 2015, will help conservation partners and agricultural producers conserve natural resources, leading to cleaner and more abundant water, healthier soil, enhanced wildlife habitat and many other benefits.

African American Forest Restoration and Retention

Proposed NRCS Investment: $1.6 million (CCA)
Lead Partner: U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities
Number of Partners: 6
Participating State(s): Alabama, North Carolina & South Carolina **(lead state)**

Through an existing partnership, the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program (SFLR), this project will address degraded plant conditions and enhancement of wildlife habitat by supporting forest restoration on African American-owned forestlands in high poverty regions of the Southeastern United States. In this region, African American family-owned forests tend to be degraded due to lack of pro-active forest management. During its 30-month pilot phase, the SFLR program was effective at building a bridge of trust between landowners and USDA programs supporting 157 EQIP applications for forestry practices with more than $1 million in EQIP contracts directed to African American project participants. The project will support landowners through direct provision of forestry, land tenure (heirs' property) and technical services as well as the brokering of services from other private and government providers including forestry commissions, consulting foresters, extension services and conservation organizations.

MBGro: NC Grain Nutrient Management & Soil Health

Proposed NRCS Investment: $500,000 (State)
Lead Partner: Environmental Defense Fund (EDF)
Number of Partners: 8
Participating State(s): North Carolina

Environmental Defense Fund is collaborating with Smithfield Foods Hog Production Division to improve the sustainability of its feed grain supply chain by reducing the water quality and greenhouse gas impacts of nitrogen fertilizer use and improving soil health. Smithfield is assisting farmers that grow corn, wheat, sorghum and soy to promote the adoption of advanced nutrient management tools, technologies and practices; soil health practices such as no-till and cover crops; and practices that trap and filter nutrients.

Smithfield calls this initiative MBGro and hired an agronomist to provide extensive outreach, education and technical support to growers in Smithfield's grain sourcing region. EDF assists Smithfield in selecting the practices to promote, ensuring MBGro is based in sound science, designing watershed projects and tracking outcomes. Other partners will show the economic and environmental benefits of the practices. The project's goal is to engage 165,000 corn and wheat acres as well as at least 40,000 soy acres in one or more fertilizer optimization, soil health and nutrient filtration initiatives.

Southern Sentinel Landscapes Conservation

Proposed NRCS Investment: $7.5 million (National)
Lead Partner: U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities
Number of Partners: 20
Participating State(s): Georgia **(lead state),** Mississippi & North Carolina

This project will protect and restore 17,500 – 21,500 acres of longleaf and other working forest habitats on private lands important for at-risk species. The goal of this multistate effort – Mississippi, Georgia and North Carolina - is to reduce the likelihood that target species will be listed under the Endangered Species Act and to demonstrate the compatibility of working lands management with at-risk species conservation. These sites and species address shared conservation interests of the Departments of Agriculture, Defense, and Interior on proposed or potential Sentinel Landscapes. The proposed project advances goals of the Range-wide Conservation Plan for Longleaf Pine, the NRCS Longleaf Pine Initiative, and each state's Forest and Wildlife Action Plans, while also contributing to military installation compatible-use buffers. By focusing on the overlapping interests of three federal Departments, this proposal delivers more measurable benefits to At-Risk Species than if the agencies followed separate paths. This proposal builds on the RCPP award the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities received in 2014.

Western NC Stream & Water Quality Initiative

Proposed NRCS Investment: $1 million (State)
Lead Partner: Resource Institute, Inc.
Number of Partners: 3
Participating State(s): North Carolina

Partners will identify, design, construct and monitor projects that will restore, enhance and reestablish streams and wetlands that have been degraded by agricultural land use throughout Western NC. Projects will be conducted using the latest technological approaches in stream and wetland restoration and water quality BMPs. The project objective is to provide measurable improvements in the quality of water resources in this region by reducing erosion, increasing aquatic habitat availability and diversity, restoring stream functions, promoting riparian and wetland areas and increasing the amount of protected land along stream corridors. By improving function and increasing the amount of protected lands, riparian buffers and wetlands, the project will help reduce the overall load of non-point source agricultural pollutants entering water bodies in the region. This outcome will benefit resource users in the watershed, as well as help producers reduce or avoid the need for regulation of agricultural land use.