

# Arkansas Forests and Drinking Water Collaborative NRCS Funding Call Notes

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## Acronyms:

NRCS: [Natural Resources Conservation Service \(Arkansas\)](#)

RCP: [Regional Conservation Partnership Program](#)

HUC: Hydrologic Unit Codes

CCA: Critical Conservation Area

CSP: [Conservation Stewardship Program](#)

EQIP: [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#)

ACEP-WRE: Agricultural Conservation Easement Program-Wetland Reserve Easements

HFRP: [Healthy Forests Reserve Program](#)

BMP: Best Management Practices

RFP: Request for Proposals

PL 566: [Public Law 566](#) Watershed Program for Arkansas flood management and prevention

**Introduction** (*Kitty Weisman, Coordinator of Southeastern Partnership for Forests and Water*)

The [SE Partnership for Forests and Water](#) and the [Arkansas Forest and Drinking Water Collaborative](#) focus on collaborative forest, drinking water, and watershed stewardship and protection. We have support from the [US Forest Service](#) through a Landscape Scale Restoration Grant and the [US Endowment for Forestry and Communities](#) to help state partners identify priority watersheds for forest and drinking water stewardship and develop local funding mechanisms for forested source watershed management. Today we've arranged this zoom meeting to highlight USDA's [New Farm Bill](#) requirements for source water protection, and learn about how one NRCS funding program, the RCP, can help us achieve our goals in Arkansas.

**NRCS Funding and New Farm Bill Source Water Protection Requirements** (Dianne Schlenker, Arkansas NRCS)

- [NRCS](#) has six active RCP projects in Arkansas with two new projects – Buffalo River Watershed Partnership & East Arkansas Delta Regional Conservation
- [The Farm Bill](#) includes the new RCP funding program which is a stand-alone program providing \$300 million annually. There are two funding pools, state and multistate, and critical areas

- The Farm Bill now has requirements that ten percent of funding be used for source water protection priority practices and activities, which is an opportunity now to apply for funding that benefits forest landowners and drinking water source watersheds
- The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is the upcoming NRCS funding program that will be available to apply for soon – the Request for Proposals (RFP) isn't out yet but is anticipated sometime at the end of July. The RCPP RFP will be available on [Grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov). There is a 60-90 days turn-around from the release of the RFP to the deadline for submittal. The RCPP program is not going away, so even if your proposal isn't ready this year, it's a great idea to get started now for the following year.
- RCPP four key principles: Impact, Partnership and Partner Contributions, Innovation; and Project Management. In order to be a successful RCPP applicant, the project must bring an array of financial and technical capabilities, demonstrate experience working with agricultural producers and propose innovative, sustainable, and measurable approaches to achieving compelling conservation goals
- The NRCS aligns with RCPP's goals and policies and they provide substantial help with applications. Applicants can ask for a maximum of \$10 million and a minimum of \$250,000. The agreement is for five years and you will need letters of support from partners and their contribution amounts and activities that the funding will support
- Where to start: Identify 12-digit HUC with a known water quality resource concern (example: 303d list) where you would like to work. Can include any source water protection areas in the HUC 12's and watersheds listed on the state's list of priorities with nutrient reduction strategy or other state or regional plan. There must be a clear link between the primary resource concerns in the watershed and the ability of conservation in the area. Projects are most successful by including local partners and interests
- Identify the resource concerns for the Critical Conservation Area, which can include: water quality degradation, inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates, excess/insufficient water/drought
- Funding is for landowners to implement conservation practices on their land to address identified resource concerns
- NRCS uses the term "Producers" to indicate which landowners are eligible for NRCS funding. Producers include farmers, ranchers, landowners of nonindustrial private forest land or agricultural lands
- There are five kinds of eligible RCPP activity types: land improvement, management, & restoration; land rental; easements (federally-held); easements (held by eligible entity); flood prevention & management (public works/watersheds) ([Public Law 566](#))
- NRCS funding programs that guide which funding and practices can be used in an RCPP project include: EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program), CSP (Conservation Stewardship Program), ACEP (Agricultural Conservation Easement Program) – Wetland Reserve Easements, HFRP (Healthy Forest Reserve Program), CRP (Conservation Reserve Program), ALE (Agricultural Land Easements)
- RCPP funding requires a matching partner contribution (can be a combination of cash and in-kind resources). The desired matching contribution one-to-one ratio (matching each NRCS dollar with equal partner contributions), but if you can't achieve that it shouldn't

discourage you from applying. The lead partner is responsible for securing all partner contributions.

- [How to apply for RCPP](#) – the RCPP application is now online. You will need to work with your local NRCS staff to prepare your application. Applicants will need to do an eAuthorization to submit online. You will also need a [SAM number](#) and a [DUNS number](#)
- RCPP project applications need to identify environmental, economic, and social outcomes that flow from: inputs (funding, technical and customer service skills); activities (conservation, planning, outreach), and outputs (contracts, conservation practices)
- The applicant needs to have a clear vision of their project, and can work with NRCS early on to develop their project vision. Previous RCPP recipients can mentor applicants too
- NRCS can help with the eAuthorization process when submitting an application online
- What is the difference between Classic Funding Arrangement vs. Alternative Funding Arrangement? For Classic Funding Arrangement (which is this year’s RFP in July), NRCS helps with implementing the project. For the Alternative Funding Arrangement, the lead partner must administer the whole project yourself, work with producers, getting funds out to contractors. They have not had one yet in Arkansas, but they have had 15 throughout the US. It takes more effort and accountability.
- For Outcomes, what is used to measure environmental and social benefits? A [WEPP Model](#) can be used. The Arkansas NRCS economist can help applicants identify outcomes. One social outcome that is important is to try to reach historically underserved participants. There are also examples on the NRCS RCPP website on the “Outcomes” page
- It can be difficult to get landowners on board to participate in NRCS funding programs because of tax implications and general fear of working with the federal government. What is the best way to get landowners on board and cooperative before the project is submitted? It’s a good idea to work with NRCS and Conservation Districts because they have a lot of information about landowners in the area. NRCS funding isn’t considered “free money” - NRCS has to follow tax law and issue a 1099 (added income form) to landowners for the value of the assistance they receive for conservation practices. Some practices are costly so the 1099 tax form will be a higher value. The 1099 income isn’t a barrier to working with landowners if they understand ahead of time what’s going to happen. It’s best to tell landowners to consult their accountant early on to prepare for the tax implications. Landowners and funding recipients should keep accurate receipts and invoices
- Tools and Resources Portal (includes RCPP Partner Proposal Guide, Proposal Template, Sample Letter of Commitment, etc)  
<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/financial/rcpp/?cid=nrscseprd1477816>
- Contacts for questions – Diane Schlenker, [Dianne.Schlenker@ar.usda.gov](mailto:Dianne.Schlenker@ar.usda.gov) and (501) 412-9852; or Amanda Mathis, [Amanda.Mathis@ar.usda.gov](mailto:Amanda.Mathis@ar.usda.gov) and (501) 301-3162

### ***Priority Source Watersheds Selected for NRCS Focus***

*Chandler Barton, Arkansas Forestry Division; and Darcia Routh, Arkansas Department of Health Source Water Protection Program)*

- Many priority watershed analyses have been done in Arkansas over time by various agencies for different purposes including Nonpoint Source Pollution, Source Water Protection, and others
- These different watershed analyses and the following maps were used to help develop priority source water protection area maps for NRCS funding programs (to help NRCS implement the Farm Bill source water protection requirements)
- Arkansas Dept. of Health has a voluntary Source Water Protection Program for utilities to participate, and does a state Source Water Assessment to determine priority areas for source water protection
- First map is Nonpoint Source Pollution Priority Watersheds – based on streams being listed for impairment by the Clean Water Act. There are some drinking water intakes in Beaver River Watershed and Illinois River Partnership that drive how important these watersheds are
- Second map is Priority Source Water Protection Areas – includes EPA Safe Drinking Water Act Source Water Protection priority areas; gold color is ground-water supply (quantity), purple color (quality)
- Third map is Forests to Faucets, which is another analysis that provides information on forests that contribute to drinking water. Arkansas Forestry Division used this information and refined it further to get into the detail of where drinking water intakes are connected to critical forests.
- The resulting priority watershed map for NRCS use is very good because it brings together a lot of analyses and data for Arkansas, and is based on HUC10/HUC12 data – very proud of this map
- About 20 percent of the state is considered high priority for source water protection; the NRCS priority source water protection maps will be fine-tuned over time
- Arkansas Forestry Division is using this priority watersheds map to focus their provision of technical assistance and education workshops
- Priority watersheds data from EPA and others was also used by The Nature Conservancy to create another map for inclusion in the Arkansas Forests Action Plan to guide how forests are managed and stewarded over time
- Darcia will send Kitty link to show which data and priorities were used in creating priority map.

***West Fork White River Watershed Initiative RCPP Grant Project Overview & Update*** *(James McCarty, Beaver Water District; Sandi Formica, Watershed Conservation Resource Center; and Becky Roark, Beaver Watershed Alliance)*

- West Fork White River is a major tributary to Beaver Lake, which is a major drinking water source and major economic engine for Northwest Arkansas
- West Fork is on Clean Water Act 303d impaired water bodies list for Arkansas

- Lake impounded by US Army Corps of Engineers since 1966
- Provides water supply for one in six Arkansas residents
- Beaver Lake is a 24,000 acres reservoir and Beaver Watershed is an 800,000 acre watershed that is 60 percent forested
- Beaver Water District Source Water Protection Program is trying to control sediments/turbidity and nutrients, both of which come from destabilized streambanks and legacy phosphorous. There has been quite a bit of conversion from forests to agricultural lands, as well as extreme weather events that have resulted in release of sediments and nutrients. Poultry production is also a source of nutrients
- Why the West Fork White River for RCPP project? Issues included watershed scale erosion, water quality, riparian areas, aquatic habitat. Wanted to use restorative solutions like implementing BMPs on agricultural land and addressing streambank erosion
- Outcomes: Several miles of river and riparian restoration, 75% decrease in sediment, total phosphorous, and total nitrogen loads
- [Beaver Water District](#) is the sponsor partner for this RCPP project. About 90 percent of the work is being done by The [Watershed Conservation Resource Center](#) (which is the lead partner for the project), along with [Beaver Watershed Alliance](#) and other partners
- The [West Fork-White River Water Initiative](#) applied for RCPP funding in July 2015 and was one of 84 projects selected nationally. Project started in late 2016.
- Sandi recommends starting one year in advance of applying in order to establish partners, project details, and application resources
- This project includes 14 partners, and have to have one sponsor that can help levy taxes for the project. Partners provide funding, technical assistance, landowner outreach, etc.
- Key reasons their project was selected: the Initiative had 20 years (1998-2004) of assessment data to help with the RCPP proposal which helped with defining outcomes, and also already had successful projects established (a track record) which was a big selling point for their proposal; also had data showing streambank erosion is 66 percent of the sediment loading in West Fork White River – very compelling for NRCS
- RCPP requires letters of commitment for all cash and in-kind partner contributions, and some of these may take a year to establish – need to get this nailed down early in the process
- This project included PL-566 Watershed Program, to restore reaches of river including channel, riparian, and wetlands (requires environmental assessment), and EQIP Program (for implementing conservation practice BMP's)
- The project was a total of \$8.8 million; \$4.3 million was RCPP (federal); \$4.5 million was match or partner contributions (cash and in-kind)
- EQIP and Conservation Planning work included: conduct outreach, develop conservation-based plans, eligible landowners complete EQIP applications for recommended BMPs, signed contracts and implement BMPs
- An example of one of their EQIP projects is a streambank and shoreline protection and grade control structure. Practices included building a toe-wood bench, soil lifts, along with other streambank restoration. This project took about a year, December 2018-October 2019

- Beaver Watershed Alliance focused on enhancing connections with landowners throughout the watershed through site visits, technical assistance, and newsletters
- Outreach to landowners was done by mailed newsletters, targeted mailers, digital newsletters to emailing lists, and site visits. Identify target audience for successful outreach
- Success Story: Held BMP workshops for landowners to learn about land practices, showcased installed BMP's at one landowner's place and invited other landowners to hear their testimonial and serve them dinner
- Outcomes and Outputs: 203 landowner contacts in project area, 426 decision makers and watershed residents, 68 workshops, presentations, and local events, 10 newsletters; 100 completed conservation-based plans (including 46 site assessment plans, 29 nutrient management plans, 11 forest management plans, 4 wildlife management plans, 10 comprehensive conservation plans)
- Other Results: reduction of erosion, reduction of land conversion, reduction of sediment loads to the river and watershed, and improving aquatic, riparian, and wetland habitats
- Lessons Learned: Listen to the NRCS! Ask for assistance throughout the entire process, have a good understanding of NRCS programs (EQIP, Conservation Planning, etc.); understand watershed landowners and what practices are being used or could be used; learn what is important to landowners; it's better to know in your application what practices you want to use up front; projects should be challenging, but over-committing can be stressful – more does not mean better. Sandi says they should have worked more with the NRCS up front to get reasonable numbers for funding, BMPs to be implemented, and number of conservation-based plans
- If you do help create land management plans before asking for funding, can you get reimbursed for those plans? Yes, but it is separate funding.
- Arkansas has an amazing NRCS staff that offers great assistance, so reach out!
- Plan ahead on how to encourage landowner participation to achieve your desired project results
- RCPP is not a grant, it is a program and it is important to work with the NRCS along the way.
- The match is important and so are partnerships, it makes your project more competitive. No one can do it alone.

### **Next Steps**

- Sign up for our Arkansas emailing list by emailing Kitty Weisman, [kitty.weisman@icloud.com](mailto:kitty.weisman@icloud.com)
- We will send out the meeting notes, PDFs of presentations, and zoom recording links.
- Darcia Routh has some resource links she will send
- RCPP RFP comes out at end of July and will be sent in a mailing to the Arkansas Forests and Drinking Water Collaborative members.

**Zoom Recording of this meeting (Part 1):** <https://youtu.be/Kv9nj8F99-M>

**Zoom Recording of this meeting (Part 2):** <https://youtu.be/Evyx-paNOcQ>