



**Natural Resources
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News Release

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USDA seeks applications for \$25 million in Conservation Innovation Grants

Funding is available in six focus areas, including data analytics tools and precision conservation

BANGOR, Maine (Nov. 8, 2016) -- Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack recently announced that USDA is seeking new proposals for cutting-edge projects that will provide new conservation opportunities through its competitive Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) program. Through USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the department will invest up to \$25 million for projects that spark the development and adoption of innovative conservation technologies and approaches in areas like conservation finance, data analytics, and precision conservation to benefit producers on private agricultural and forest lands.

"Conservation Innovation Grants have played a critical role in developing and implementing creative new methods to conserve the nation's private agricultural lands and strengthening rural communities," said Vilsack.

He said the announcement "builds on our support of technologies and approaches that help producers increase resiliency to extreme weather such as drought and floods."

CIG is authorized and funded under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and fosters innovative conservation projects that accelerate the transfer and adoption of promising technologies that benefit natural resources, agricultural production and forest management. The 2017 focus areas for project proposals include the following:

- Innovative approaches that benefit historically underserved and veteran farmers and ranchers, beginning farmers and ranchers and those with limited resources;
- Natural resources data analytics tools—such as software and mobile apps—that increase producer knowledge of conservation benefits and alternatives;

- Precision conservation tools that uncover opportunities for better input management (for example, nutrient management addressing source, timing, rate and placement), or address in-field vulnerabilities;
- Conservation finance approaches that demonstrate the potential for new investment strategies to accelerate and expand private lands conservation;
- Demonstration, evaluation and quantification of the effects of water management and soil health practices to minimize off-site impacts of natural resource challenges, such as excess sediment and nutrient runoff;
- Pay-for-success models that stimulate conservation adoption and achievement of measurable outcomes.

Potential applicants should review the announcement for program funding that is available on <http://www.grants.gov/>. **Proposals are due by Jan. 9, 2017, and final CIG funding is subject to fiscal year 2017 funding actions.** American Indian tribes, state and local units of government, non-governmental organizations and individuals are eligible to submit proposals.

More information on the CIG program, including a link to application materials and submission procedures, can be found on the NRCS CIG website.

Innovative CIG projects in the conservation finance arena are testing new approaches, leveraging environmental markets and improving the ability to measure the impact of conservation actions on the landscape. For example, The Climate Trust has launched a Working Lands Carbon Fund to serve as a revolving source of financing for conservation projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and sequester carbon on working lands. CIG projects have also helped address water management needs, such as the SmartIrrigation Cotton App which helps schedule irrigation on operations in Georgia and northern Florida. More than one hundred and forty users, including agricultural producers and county agents, now use the app.

Since 2009, USDA has invested nearly \$173 million to fund nearly 414 national CIG projects. USDA is continuing its commitment to increasing assistance to historically underserved and military veteran farmers and ranchers and the organizations that include and support them, with up to \$2 million of this year's funding has been set aside for projects that target these stakeholders.

CIG is part of the more than \$29 billion USDA has invested since 2009 to help producers make conservation improvements, working with as many as 500,000 farmers, ranchers and landowners to protect more than 400 million acres nationwide, boosting soil and air quality, cleaning and conserving water and enhancing wildlife habitat.

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