



**Natural Resources
Conservation Service**

Room 3416 Federal Building
700 West Capitol Ave.
Little Rock, AR 72201
Web: <http://www.ar.nrcs.usda.gov>

News Release

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Contact: Reginald Jackson, State Public Affairs Specialist
(501) 301-3133(w) 501-352-7761(c)
reginald.jackson@ar.usda.gov

USDA Invests \$33 Million to Improve Water Quality in High-Priority Watersheds

LITTLE ROCK, AR, Dec. 15, 2016 – Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced an investment of more than \$33 million in 197 high-priority watersheds across the country to help landowners improve water quality through the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s (NRCS) National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI).

In Arkansas, three watersheds are included in the NWQI for FY17 financial assistance. The three watersheds are Cousart Bayou-Little Cypress Bayou, Upper Deep Bayou and Lower Deep Bayou in portions of Jefferson and Lincoln counties.

Producers in these watersheds have until Jan. 30, 2017, to apply for funding consideration at their local NRCS office. More than \$1.4 million is available in Arkansas.

The NWQI helps farmers and ranchers implement voluntary conservation practices, such as irrigation water management, irrigation pipeline, land leveling, cover crop, field border, residue management and conservation crop rotation are the more commonly used practices in the contracts, which protect and improve water quality where it is needed most. Conservation practices enhance agricultural productivity and profitability while also improving water quality by enhancing soil health and optimizing the use of agricultural inputs.

“USDA is committed to working hand-in-hand with farmers, ranchers, and landowners to address water quality issues and provide the tools necessary to ensure clean, safe water for communities and wildlife,” said Mike Sullivan, NRCS state conservationist in Arkansas. “This latest investment is yet another example of how voluntary, incentive-based conservation programs are benefitting both producers and our natural resources.”

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The goal of the NWQI is to implement conservation practices within a local area to protect water bodies within priority watersheds. NRCS works closely with conservation partners and State water quality agencies to select watersheds where on-farm conservation can deliver the greatest benefits for clean water. State water quality agencies also work to align U.S. Environmental Protection Agency funding with these priority watersheds.

New Assessment Project

Buffalo Slough-Cache River, in portions of Greene and Lawrence counties, was also selected as one of 21 assessment projects. These assessment watershed projects span 17 states and include a variety of land uses and water quality issues. NRCS will provide resources for these assessment projects to leverage existing plans, data, and information, and fill gaps needed to complete watershed assessments and develop outreach plans. Experience and data gained from several studies, including the Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP), have shown that improvements in water quality are more likely to be detected when conservation systems are placed in the most vulnerable areas of a watershed.

In 2017, NRCS will be working with partners (state agencies, conservation districts and universities) to conduct a watershed scale resource assessment to look at the current conditions and what and specifically where is the best place to put conservation on the ground. In 2018, funds will be available for farmers to implement the practices.

Since 2012, conservation systems have been placed on almost 600,000 acres in priority watersheds through NWQI, supported by approximately \$125 million in USDA investments. Now in its sixth 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.

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