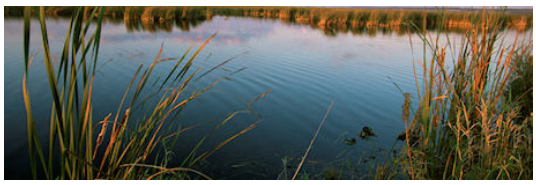
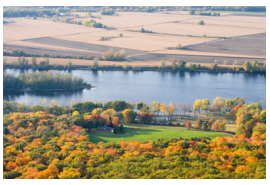
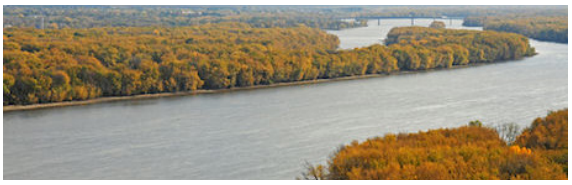
USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service

National Water Quality Initiative

Conservation Beyond Boundaries NWQI

Overview
Farmers and ranchers across the country are doing their part to improve water quality through the National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI), launched in 2012 by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in collaboration with the Environmental Protection Agency and state water quality agencies. Through NWQI, NRCS and its partners are accelerating conservation funding in the highest priority watersheds in each state, as selected by NRCS State Conservationists in consultation with state water quality agencies and NRCS State Technical Committees.

Priorities
Streams and lakes throughout the country are impaired because of excess nitrogen, phosphorus, pathogens and sediment from urban areas, industries, farms and ranches, and other contributors. NWQI provides a means to accelerate voluntary, private lands conservation investments to improve water quality with dedicated financial and technical assistance through NRCS' Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and to focus water quality monitoring and assessment funds where they are most needed. This strategic approach will leverage funds and provide streamlined assistance to help individual agricultural producers take actions to reduce the runoff of sediment, nutrients and pathogens into waterways where water quality is a critical concern. Ultimately, the goal of NWQI is to implement conservation practices in a concentrated area so that agriculture no longer contributes to the impairment of water bodies within these priority watersheds.

Funding Source
Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

Results
Since 2012, NRCS has obligated more than $88 million in funding for water quality–related conservation systems in high-priority watersheds throughout the country. NWQI goes above and beyond general NRCS program funding. In fiscal year 2014, NRCS has worked with more than 600 farmers and ranchers and planned or implemented conservation on more than 90,000 acres.

In fiscal years 2013 and 2014, NWQI provided the necessary funding to complete projects in eight high-priority watersheds. These watersheds, located in Maine, Tennessee, Nebraska, North Carolina and Oregon, have had a long-standing NRCS and partner commitment to address impairments from agricultural sources. While work in the watersheds will continue, the need for accelerated financial assistance has been met, and these funds will be moved to other areas that need it. In fiscal year 2013, EPA issued guidance to state water quality agencies requiring them to implement in-stream water quality monitoring in at least one NWQI watershed per state. NRCS state offices worked closely with these agencies to identify watersheds where monitoring is most needed. Long-term monitoring is an essential part of ensuring that NRCS, partners and producers are implementing conservation systems that will have the greatest impact on improving water quality.

Conservation practices on a Louisiana farm are trapping sediment, keeping it from entering waterways.

Feature Story

NRCS, Partners Unite to Improve Water Quality in Kansas' Big Creek

Near the town of Munjor, Kansas, farmers and conservation partners in the Big Creek watershed are working together to improve water quality. High levels of nutrients and sediment currently impair waters and degrade habitat in this area. NRCS is helping producers reduce nitrates and phosphorus in waterways by implementing conservation systems designed to avoid, control and trap nutrient and sediment runoff. Using the Kansas Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy (WRAPS), NRCS and local partners identified Big Creek as one of the watersheds in the state with the highest potential to improve water quality. NRCS and Kansas State Research and Extension worked together to show how farming and ranching operations were affecting the water quality of the watershed — and what they could do to improve it — eventually reaching 100 percent of the farming community.

Farmers use cover crops to hold soil in place when other crops are not being grown, an effort that helps keep water clean downstream.

To help farmers better understand how their operations connect to water quality, Kansas State conducted water sampling and explained the results during one-on-one conversations. The partners also organized driving tours of working farms in the watershed.

With more than $1.1 million in NWQI funding since 2012, NRCS has worked with 50 farmers and ranchers in the watershed to implement conservation systems that include cover crops, terraces, residue and tillage management and nutrient management plans. These conservation practices were tailored to the specific water quality concerns in the watershed by the Kansas WRAPS' nine-element watershed plan.

Farmers in the area already have a strong conservation ethic, and NWQI has been a catalyst for them to try new practices. Randy Huser, a producer in the area, took advantage of NRCS assistance to install a water and sediment control basin, designed to trap agricultural runoff and sediment along areas of concentrated flow.

"Soil was previously eroding from the field to the nearby stream, forming a gully along the path," Huser said. "Now, with the NRCS designed water and sediment control basin, we can see the soil held on the field."

Although work is not yet complete in the Munjor area, early indicators suggest that the voluntary conservation approach is working. According to water quality modeling by Kansas WRAPS, Big Creek is about 30 percent of the way toward its annual goals to reduce phosphorous and is making headway on its annual goals to reduce nitrogen.

Fiscal Year 2014 National Water Quality Initiative
NRCS Financial Assistance (FA) and Active and Completed Contracts

Region	Contracts	Acres	Obligations
Central	245	41,226	$7,859,312
Northeast	73	7,390	$3,098,119
Southeast	223	25,265	$8,030,161
West	88	24,141	$7,446,159
Totals	**629**	**98,022**	**$26,433,753**

Data source: NRCS Resource Economics, Analysis and Policy Division, January 2015.

For more information, visit: nrcs.usda.gov/initiatives

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