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News Release

Release No.: 000014.14

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USDA, PARTNERS IN GEORGIA USHER IN A NEW ERA IN CONSERVATION

New conservation initiative goes beyond traditional government efforts

ATHENS, GA, June 2, 2014 – Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced last week the launch of what he calls “a new era in American conservation efforts” with an historic focus on public-private partnership.

“This is an entirely new approach to conservation,” Vilsack said. “We’re giving private companies, local communities and other non-government partners a way to invest in what are essentially clean water start-up operations.”

The new conservation program, called the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), was authorized in the 2014 Farm Bill and will benefit areas all across the nation. RCPP streamlines conservation efforts by combining four programs (the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program, Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative, the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative, and the Great Lakes Basin Program for Soil Erosion) into one that Georgia’s conservation partners will have an even more significant role in.

The RCPP will competitively award funds to conservation projects designed by local partners specifically for their region. Eligible partners include private companies, universities, non-profit organizations, local and tribal governments and others joining with agricultural and conservation organizations and producers to invest money, manpower and materials to their proposed initiatives.

“Local decision making is empowered through this program– bringing together conservation groups, cities and townships, sportsmen groups, universities, agricultural associations and others – to design conservation projects that are tailored to our needs here in Georgia,” said Greg Kist, NRCS acting state conservationist in Georgia.

With participating partners investing along with the Department, USDA’s \$1.2 billion in funding over the life of the five-year program will leverage \$2.4 billion for conservation. Through RCPP, partners propose conservation projects to improve soil health, water quality and water use efficiency, wildlife habitat, and other related natural resources on private lands.

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“This is an example of government at its best — streamlining multiple programs into one more effective effort, providing flexible tools, and connecting local citizens and organizations with resources that best address their priorities, protect and improve their quality of life, and propel economic growth,” Vilsack said.

The RCPP has three funding pools:

- 35 percent of total program funding directed to critical conservation areas, chosen by the agriculture secretary;
- 40 percent directed to regional or multi-state projects through a national competitive process;
- 25 percent directed to state-level projects through a competitive process established by NRCS state leaders.

Vilsack named eight critical conservation areas, which received 35 percent of the program’s overall funding. Parts of Georgia are included in the National critical conservation areas of the Longleaf Pine Range.

Longleaf pine forests once encompassed more than 90 million acres of the North American landscape and represented some of the world’s most unique biologically diverse ecosystems. In 2010, about 3 percent, or 3.4 million acres, of longleaf pine forest remained. With this critical conservation area designation, USDA can build on existing strong partnerships in the area to improve the profitability and sustainability of longleaf pine forest ecosystems. Conservation efforts will address invasive species, habitat degradation and water quality with a goal of increasing longleaf pine acreage from 3.4 to 8 million acres by 2025.

For proposals in Georgia, priorities include: excess/insufficient water, inadequate habitat for fish and wildlife, inefficient energy use, livestock production limitation and water quality degradation. For more state-specific information on RCPP or other conservation programs visit the Georgia web page at <http://www.ga.nrcs.usda.gov> or your or [local USDA service center](#).

“This program is a prime example of how government can serve as a catalyst for private investment in rural America,” Kist said.

The announcement of program funding can be found at <http://www.grants.gov/web/grants/view-opportunity.html?oppId=256049>. Pre-proposals are due July 14, and full proposals are due Sept. 26.

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