

Regional Water Enhancement Program

The Administration's farm bill proposal creates a new \$1.75 billion ten-year cooperative conservation program, called the Regional Water Enhancement Program (RWEP), and aimed at improving water quality and water conservation on working agricultural lands on a regional scale. This program is included in the redesigned Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

The RWEP would address an important missing component in the Federal government's conservation assistance—watershed-based, coordinated water quality and water conservation projects.

Key elements of the new program include:

- A focus on one or two key water quantity/quality objectives per project area.
- Use of multiple conservation tools (including farmland management practices, easement purchases, and ecosystem restoration assistance) to enable partners and landowners the flexibility to achieve improved water quantity/quality goals.
- Performance incentives to encourage high producer participation rates in project areas and achieve cooperative conservation outcomes.
- Targeted funding to farmers and ranchers for work on agricultural landscapes, including crop, pasture, grazing, and orchard lands, and non-industrial private forestlands.
- Interim performance targets that must be achieved to ensure timely results and be eligible to renew funding.

Additional program details:

Watershed and irrigation basin conservation delivery

- The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) would deliver RWEP on a larger-scale basis (covering an entire watershed or irrigation basin) basis.
- The program would target concerted cooperative efforts on working agricultural landscapes and other high priority areas identified by the partnership.

- Partners who could enter into a contribution agreement with USDA on a project basis could include state governments, federally-recognized Indian Tribes, non-governmental organizations, local units of governments, and water districts.
- Recipients, including local community groups, water districts, non-profits, or farming groups, would administer funds to achieve clear water quality and conservation goals.

Key environmental priorities

- Landowners and partners in watersheds and irrigation districts, working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and its advisory State Technical Committees, would identify one to two water quality or water conservation priorities for a project area. All RWEP assistance in the project area would be targeted at addressing these priorities.
- Emphasis would be placed on identifying priorities where conservation results would be both measurable and achievable.
- The NRCS State Conservationist, with advice from the State Technical Committee and in collaboration with the project partners, would also establish conservation outcomes for the water quality priorities. NRCS would later assess a project's progress towards meeting these targets for program oversight, as a basis for project renewal, and for the purposes of Conservation Enhanced Payments proposed in the Administration's 2007 farm bill commodity title.

Competitive grants

- The large majority of program funding would be for competitive grants, with the remainder for funding for local coordination.
- NRCS would issue competitive grants to project areas. On an annual basis, NRCS would conduct a nationwide competition to issue RWEP grants to project areas. As part of their grant, project applicants would have to define the project area, identify the key priorities and performance targets, and detail how the requisite assistance is provided to participants.

Flexible conservation tools

- The program would enroll participants into three to five-year contracts. The multi-year contracts would be renewable based upon the project area's performance at meeting its targets.
- The RWEP would incorporate multiple conservation tools to provide flexibility to participants to meet the water quality or conservation objectives. These tools would include assessing area and resource conditions, facilitating and developing effective conservation plans, cost-sharing restoration, and monitoring environmental results.

Performance Incentives

- Expired contracts would be renewable based on meeting water quality or conservation improvement results.
- To encourage project sponsors and the farm community to broaden the scope of a water quality or conservation project, the federal cost-share rate could increase depending on the proportion of producers in a project area (i.e., higher proportions of farmers participating in a proposal would boost rankings).