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Regional Conservation Partnership Program: A Tool for Natural Resources Management Across Watersheds

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Abstract

This article introduces the Regional Conservation Partnership Program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service. The program encourages partnerships among Extension professionals, conservation agency representatives, and farmers that focus on addressing natural resources concerns through the development and implementation of regional watershed plans. These plans assist farmers in practicing sustainable crop and animal production methods. Extension professionals will find the program useful as a tool for building collaborations at watershed and regional scales to promote agricultural production practices that enhance natural resources conservation.

Keywords: [conservation](#), [natural resources](#), [sustainability](#), [management practices](#)

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Introduction

To ensure the implementation of management actions appropriate for tackling natural resources concerns on working lands in the United States, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) was introduced in the 2014 Farm Bill (Agricultural Act, 2014). This initiative implemented through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) encourages individuals at land-grant universities and conservation agencies to partner with landowners to implement voluntary conservation practices. The partnering groups work together, providing financial and technical assistance and outreach addressing natural resources issues of heightened concern within a watershed or region. The activities allow farmers to implement innovative conservation practices, thereby broadening conservation effectiveness (Natural Resources Conservation Service [NRCS], 2015).

Despite such potential to get involved in watershed-based projects, Extension professionals have used the program only minimally in broadening Extension's objectives. As agricultural systems become more complex,

the goals of agricultural Extension will be advanced through strategic incorporation of ideas into education and outreach (Doudna, O'Neal, Tyndall, & Helmers, 2015; Lubell, Niles, & Hoffman 2014). Extension professionals can use RCPP projects as opportunities to bring together those with local expertise in agricultural systems and conservation programs to provide knowledge transfer to various types of stakeholders. Such collaboration proves useful when financial resources for outreach programs are declining by providing opportunities to serve more clients with fewer resources.

As Smart et al. (2015) suggested, measurable conservation gains can happen only when conservation practices are implemented in critical areas and are coupled with careful long-term messaging and planning by Extension professionals. Extension professionals, through RCPP projects, can collaborate with partner agencies to contribute services such as planning, monitoring, and technical assistance. RCPP projects, which often span years, can be used for identifying a cohort of farmers to serve as early adopters of innovative conservation practices. In addition, long-term on-farm data available from the projects can inform development of educational material for outreach, and farmer experiences may prove valuable for influencing conversations among agricultural producers within a region regarding a management practice or suite of practices.

Program Priority Areas

Through the RCPP, the NRCS provides financial assistance for projects that address natural resources concerns such as water quality degradation, soil health degradation, and inefficient irrigation water use, among others. Projects can occur at national, multistate, and state levels as well as within critical conservation areas (CCAs). CCAs are eight areas in the United States chosen by the Secretary of Agriculture that center on priority regional and local natural resources concerns (NRCS, n.d.).

The RCPP is implemented through NRCS's existing programs. The practices selected for RCPP projects are qualified under NRCS's Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, and Healthy Forests Reserve Program. For the purpose of achieving greater participation from landowners and, thereby, greater conservation gains, some of the requirements of these existing programs are relaxed, on a case-by-case basis. To maximize conservation impact, landowners select conservation practices based on priorities for mitigating natural resources issues associated with their particular production enterprises. A main difference between accessing NRCS funds in the traditional manner and doing so via the RCPP is that the RCPP requires participants to leverage resources, either cash or in-kind, from partners and fosters interaction between landowners and partners that facilitates achieving conservation gains at a watershed scale.

For Extension professionals, the RCPP is a vehicle for developing partnerships and engaging landowners in watershed-wide projects addressing natural resources concerns that otherwise would not be implemented due to limited funds within a county or parish. For example, in Louisiana alone, from 2015 to 2017, through a total of 10 projects that included national, state-level, and CCA projects, \$27 million was used for implementing practices to promote natural resources management (NRCS, 2015). Extension agents were critical in contributing to the success of these projects by interacting with agricultural landowners at the local level, gathering perspectives, initiating conversations regarding conservation, and organizing messaging sessions, such as field days for demonstrating expected project outcomes. Specifically, for the Red Bayou project, a watershed-based project for improving water quality and soil health in the Red River Basin of

Louisiana, priority concerns were identified through a watershed tour followed by farmer meetings held by Extension faculty and conservation agency staff. These events highlighted the need for better resource management, improved efficiency in nutrient and irrigation use, and profitable production methods. Such efforts demonstrate that through the RCPP, Extension professionals have an excellent opportunity to bring partners together to allocate resources, both financial and technical, within watershed boundaries. As most practices implemented under RCPP projects are managed and maintained similarly to those in any NRCS program, the practices fit with little or no change into landowners' existing practices.

Conclusion

The RCPP provides a mutually beneficial means by which agricultural landowners can participate in a concentrated resource management effort to facilitate sustainable use of natural resources. Extension professionals can play a vital role in identifying and building partnerships and marketing the value of these watershed-wide projects. In addition, RCPP projects can provide an avenue for data collection with respect to real-time management practices and provide more data-driven solutions that can be shared with other stakeholders within a region.

Overall, the RCPP constitutes a useful tool. Extension professionals can use the program to foster public participation in natural resources conservation and management. The RCPP can serve as a program that enhances landowners' abilities to address natural resources concerns on their farms, issues often not adequately addressed due to limited financial and technical assistance, while not compromising on profitability. Extension professionals can use the program for developing education, outreach, and conservation initiatives focused on the benefits of long-term conservation on working lands.

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