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## USDA urges environmental farm measures

With funding from the Agricultural Act of 2014 starting to make its way into the hands of regional and county agencies, local United States Department of Agriculture offices are urging qualified partners to consider joining a good-for-the-environment program.

There are plenty offered under the umbrella of the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. They include the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, Habitat Incentive Program, Wetlands Reserve Easement Program, and Conservation Reserve Program.

Many focus on the ecological wellbeing of the St. Joseph River Watershed, which covers 4,685 square miles and includes eight counties in Michigan and seven others in Indiana.

It is the third largest watershed that drains into Lake Michigan, which includes watersheds in Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin. About 70 percent of the land in the watershed is in agriculture production.

The state has an allocation of \$3.2 million available as a cost-share incentive to farmers who would be compensated for subscribing to practices ranging from buffer strips and not planting crops over a number of years, to allowing portions of their land to revert to its natural state in hopes of enhancing wildlife.



The Farm Bill of 2014 includes millions of dollars earmarked for preservation and prairie restoration. Funds from the bill, passed last year, are finally making their way to local agencies. Courtesy photo

### Best farming practices

Marcie Colclough, senior planner with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, said the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, like many others, is geared toward better and more efficient farming practices.

Potential issues such as erosion, water quality and even irrigation-management practices are just a few of the matters covered through the RCPP.

“By doing some of these practices, it might save you money, and things like cover crops and no-till could actually improve your soil’s health,” she said. “At the same time, those practices will reduce erosion and runoff of chemicals like nitrogen and phosphorous.”

The deadline for participation in the 2016 RCPP program is March 15.

### Targeting risk areas

Jack Knorek is the regional coordinator with the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. He said funds are assigned based in large part on what he called “relative risk.”

“We’re able to target these funds to areas that have a higher risk to the resources within the watershed – primarily surface water, ground water and wildlife habitat,” he said.

Knorek cited as an example a process that incorporates buffer strips. He said buffer strips are areas of a field adjacent to surface water. The farmer, he said, agrees to give up that part of the field to raising crops and leave it in a state of permanent vegetative cover.

Knorek explained that vegetation acts as a filter, and holds nutrients and sediments on the field rather than being lost to surface water.

“So the farmer is given a certain amount of money as compensation to not farm that area of the field,” Knorek said.

A strong secondary benefit to such a practice also abets wildlife habitat, especially ground-nesting birds.

Knorek said funding for prospective participants is available through September 2019 or when the allocation is exhausted.

“The goal of the program is to outline the economic benefits for the various practices so that when the cost-sharing ends, the practices still continue,” he said. “The ecological benefits don’t mean much if they go away when the program ends ... when the cost-sharing portion ends.”

Tyler Tankersley is a Farm Bill biologist based in Coldwater. His area of expertise centers on conservation efforts in the eight-county watershed region.

He said communication and education are the best ways to entice farmers into joining a conservation program.

“One of the things that really sells the program is that right now our soil rental rates are on the increase ...once they see that rate is a little higher than what they might get paid to farm unproductive ground, then that really gets the wheels turning,” he said. “For each of the different programs, farmers are paid annually based on their predominant soil types and I think the average rate right now here in Branch County is about \$120 per acre. You’re getting an annual payment based on how many acres you put into one of these programs each year for the duration of the contract.”

On average, the contracts are about 10 years in length.

## Embracing the effort

Tankersley said the Agricultural Act of 2014 — more commonly known as the Farm Bill — placed a seemingly great amount of emphasis on conservation. He is glad to see the effort being embraced.

“A lot of the people we work with are doing it because they want a more-pollinated habitat, or they want to improve their hunting opportunities or their wildlife viewing opportunities,” he said. “Sometimes, though, they’re just not getting what they want out of the ground agriculturally, so why not put it into a program that’s going to benefit them as well as the habitat and the environment?”

Brett Johnson, president of the St. Joseph County chapter of Pheasants Forever, said he and fellow Pheasants Forever members applaud the efforts being made to promote sound ecological practices.

He said the group is supporting the Habitat Incentive Program and Conservation Reserve Program sign-up by providing additional cash incentives to farmers to establish the practices, providing that they purchase grass seed, which runs about \$60 an acre, from our organization. This is a native grass seed that yields some of the best cover to foster habitat for ground-nesting fowl. Anyone interested should contact a Pheasants Forever Board Member.

“HIP is relatively new to our area and we are jumping on that, but the CRP has been a strongly supported program and it, in fact, is in an enrollment period through Feb. 26,” Johnson said. “Modern farming practices have changed the habitat for ground-nesting birds and they can’t live on bare dirt, they need that fence row or that thicket of brush.”

Johnson said the conservation-minded efforts of Pheasants Forever goes beyond a focus on pheasants and is for the good of all wildlife.

More information about ongoing conservation programs offered through the Farm Bill of 2014 can be obtained from local conservation districts, farm service agencies, natural resource conservation services or Farm Bill biologists.

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