

Source Water Protection Funding & the 2018 Farm Bill: An Arkansas 2020 Update

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The 2018 Farm Bill required that 10 percent of funds (~\$4 billion) authorized for conservation programs be used to protect sources of drinking water, increased incentives for agricultural producers to implement practices that benefit source water protection, and authorized USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)—through their respective State Technical Committees—to work with state source water protection programs and community water systems to identify state/local source water protection priorities.

The Arkansas NRCS source water protection working group consists of members from water utilities, conservation districts, state and federal agencies (Arkansas Department of Health, Division of Agriculture, US EPA, USGS) as well as the State Technical Committee. ADH has collaborated with NRCS providing GIS analysis to delineate the priority areas both for groundwater and for surface water protection statewide.

The NRCS, with US EPA input, has identified the following as risk factors in setting statewide priorities:

- Excess nutrients, pathogens, and/or pesticides in source water at watershed scale,
- Reported likelihood of Harmful Algal Blooms (CyanoHABs),
- Community public water system health-based (MCL) violations,
- Size of population served by water utility,
- Designated groundwater depletion or sole source aquifer areas,
- Other risks such as karst, highly erodible soils, wildfire risk.
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Best management/implementation practices for each of these risks were identified, all with the potential to either improve or maintain water quality for both groundwater and surface water sources. NRCS offers a variety of funding sources for implementation activities in the priority areas.

EQIP, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, is the traditional financial or technical assistance to agricultural producers to improve water quality, increase soil health, and conserve ground and surface water.

RCPP, Regional Conservation Partnership Program, one example is the West Fork of the White River Watershed Project. The \$375,000 funded in 2017 consists of a watershed plan and stabilization of three miles of stream bank in the West Fork/White River. This is a joint project of Watershed Conservation Resource Center, Beaver Water District, beaver Watershed Alliance, Walton Family foundation, and NRCS. Several water utilities are exploring opportunities for source water quality improvements under the 2020 grant cycle.

CIG, Conservation Innovation Grants, feature collaboration between NRCS and partners to implement on-the-ground conservation activities and then evaluate their impact. Arkansas Forestry division The Arkansas Agriculture Division of Forestry received a grant from the NRCS to prioritize forested watersheds with respect to drinking water utilities and increase technical assistance to landowners in those watersheds.

You can find more information about these programs in future newsletters as we examine the details of the different funding programs mentioned, by visiting the AR NRCS website at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/ar/home/>, and by contacting Darcia Routh at 501-661-2623 or darcia.routh@arkansas.gov.