

The Farm Bill and Source Water Protection: One Year Later



Mehan

G. Tracy Mehan III, Adam Carpenter, and Nancy Sullivan

Congress passed the new farm bill just over one year ago. It was a noteworthy event for source water protection, utilities, and their partners in agriculture in that, for the first time, the farm bill formally recognized the protection of sources of potable water under the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA), not just impaired waters, as under the Clean Water Act (CWA). Funding from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) is now available to help agricultural producers protect source waters.

The new law also commits substantial resources to this new imperative of source water protection, with 10% of all dollars in the law's conservation title (except the Conservation Reserve Program) being allocated for this purpose. This amounts to around US\$4 billion over 10 years.

NRCS—both its headquarters and its state offices led by state conservationists—has moved with alacrity to identify critical source areas consulting with the US Environmental Protection Agency staff, state agencies, and where mobilized, AWWA volunteers. This important first step will determine where millions of USDA dollars will be deployed in the service of source water protection as conceived by AWWA's G-300 standard.

Over the past year, AWWA's Government Affairs Office and Section Services have been working with AWWA Sections to mobilize our membership to engage NRCS state conservationists in a robust partnership to fund beneficial practices on agricultural lands, livestock operations, and private forested areas that benefit downstream drinking water utilities.

Educating NRCS staff on what source water protection is and how it differs from ambient water quality goals under the CWA is one of the more crucial first steps for AWWA volunteers. NRCS personnel have long worked on CWA issues, and SDWA issues are breaking new ground in most places. In some states, volunteer engagement has led their state conservationists to add source water subcommittees to their standing technical or advisory committees. By our count, at least 14 AWWA Sections are actively engaged with NRCS state conservationists and their technical committees. Among these are Missouri, which has worked closely with its state conservationist and the state technical committee on prioritizing source water protection areas, and Texas, which has hosted a webinar for utilities and other

groups. At least another six states have had some contact with their state conservationists.

Besides regular interaction with NRCS to guide the use of conservation dollars for source water protection, there are specific programs available to accomplish this crucial goal. The National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) is one such program, which has successfully targeted funds toward specific water quality concerns in smaller watersheds (or critical sub-watersheds within larger ones). It uses the largest conservation program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, and brings additional funds and focus to address these concerns. Last year NWQI added source water protection areas to the program. Those who are interested and have some data (watershed assessment, source water protection plan, etc.) should reach out to their state conservationist, who can in turn file an application. Although the total program funding is much less than the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP; approximately \$10 million per year goes to the NWQI, around \$300 million to the RCPP) and each individual project is much smaller, NWQI does not require any specific match.

RCPP is to address natural resource challenges at a large scale. It brings partners together (with each partner contributing what it can) to jointly address concerns with NRCS, which looks favorably on projects that match the NRCS contribution with local contributions. RCPP is built with considerable flexibilities and can pull conservation practices and knowledge from across the program. Individual projects can receive up to \$10 million in NRCS funding. Most of the NRCS funding must go to the producers implementing the conservation practices, although some can go to partners that are providing technical assistance. Many successful partnerships have taken place in recent years, including those in northwest Arkansas and in the Cedar Rapids area of Iowa.

You can find your NRCS state conservationist's contact information by searching "NRCS State Conservationists" in any search engine and going to the "USDA Office Locator." ♦

G. Tracy Mehan III (tmehan@awwa.org) is the executive director of government affairs, **Adam Carpenter** is the manager for energy and environmental policy, and **Nancy Sullivan** is the manager of Section services for AWWA.

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