



Natural Resources Conservation Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



Digging into Nebraska NRCS

April 24, 2025 | Rob Lawson, State Conservationist & Conor Ward, ASTC-Partnerships

FARM PRODUCTION AND CONSERVATION
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Old as, well, dirt.

A black and white photograph of a small, single-story house in a desolate, dusty landscape. A massive, dark, and turbulent cloud of dust fills the sky, partially obscuring the house. The ground is covered in a layer of dust and debris.

The Soil Conservation Act was passed April 27, 1935 amid the Dust Bowl, leading to the creation of the Soil Conservation Service, now NRCS.

NRCS – Helping People Help the Land

- The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is USDA's primary private lands conservation agency.
- Help people make investments in operations to keep working lands working.
- Assist with making decisions using objective, reliable science to improve air, water, soil, plants, and habitat.

NRCS Assistance

- The Natural Resources Conservation Service offers financial and technical assistance.
- All assistance provided is free of charge and participation in NRCS programs is voluntary.
- Non-regulatory agency.

NRCS Assistance

Technical Assistance

- **Resource assessments.**
- **Practice design.**
- **Resource monitoring.**
- **Follow-up of conservation practice installation.**
- **May serve as springboard for participation in financial assistance.**

NRCS Assistance

Financial Assistance

- **Funding primarily made available through the Farm Bill.**
- **Conservation programs available include:**
 - Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
 - Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)
 - Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)
 - Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)



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Environmental Quality Incentives Program



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Environmental Quality Incentives Program - EQIP



Provides financial and technical assistance to address natural resource concerns and delivers environmental benefits such as improved water and air quality, conserved ground and surface water, reduced soil erosion and sedimentation, and improved or created wildlife habitat.

Common EQIP Practices – Cropland

- **No-till**
- **Cover crops**
- **Windbreaks**
- **Grassed waterway**
- **Buffer strips**
- **Pest Management**
- **Nutrient Management**
- **Irrigation Water Management**
- **Irrigation Sprinkler**
- **Subsurface Drip Irrigation**



Common EQIP Practices – Range/Pasture

- **Prescribed burns**
- **Brush management**
- **Rotational Grazing**
- **Cross Fencing**
- **Well/Tank System**





Environmental Quality Incentives Program – Nebraska

Farm Bill 2018 – Top 25 Practices by Obligation

Conservation Practice	Obligation
Cover Crop	\$ 26,986,449.56
Brush Management	\$ 15,073,345.80
Sprinkler System	\$ 14,286,684.49
Prescribed Grazing	\$ 12,728,927.33
Pumping Plant	\$ 12,124,330.59
Irrigation System, Microirrigation	\$ 9,945,308.79
Nutrient Management	\$ 9,713,235.31
Fence	\$ 8,611,275.67
Conservation Crop Rotation	\$ 8,440,221.01
Irrigation Water Management	\$ 7,972,116.75
Livestock Pipeline	\$ 7,823,247.41
Watering Facility	\$ 7,813,729.13
Terrace	\$ 6,622,845.76
Water Well	\$ 4,837,591.32
Pest Management Conservation System	\$ 4,318,792.96
Underground Outlet	\$ 4,062,476.37
Pasture and Hay Planting	\$ 4,028,189.63
Irrigation Pipeline	\$ 3,746,488.77
Waste Storage Facility	\$ 2,293,758.61
Forest Stand Improvement	\$ 1,988,929.09
Prescribed Burning	\$ 1,935,932.83
High Tunnel System	\$ 1,643,756.16
Conservation Cover	\$ 1,297,034.61
Residue and Tillage Management, No Till	\$ 1,296,839.61
Grassed Waterway	\$ 1,180,542.76

Other EQIP practices

Organic

- Transition to Organic
- Applicable Common Practices

Small Scale and Urban

- High and Low Tunnels
- Micro-Irrigation Systems
- Applicable common practices on a smaller economy of scale (sqft vs. acre)



Historically Underserved

- **NEW and Beginning Farmer and Ranchers**
- **Socially Disadvantaged Producers**
- **Limited Resource Producers**

Opportunities

- **Options for Advanced Payments**
- **Eligible for Higher Payment Rates**
- **Compete in their own Ranking Pools**





State Wildfire Initiative

This is a special initiative to provide funding in areas affected by wildfires.

This typically would include funding for:

340 Cover Crop

528 Prescribed Grazing – Livestock Deferment on Grazing Lands

484 Mulching



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Conservation Stewardship Program



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Conservation Stewardship Program - CSP



Helps agricultural producers maintain and improve their existing conservation systems and adopt additional conservation activities to address priority natural resource concerns. Participants earn CSP payments for conservation performance—the higher the performance, the higher the payment.

Conservation Stewardship Program

- **Payment for building on existing conservation efforts while strengthening operation.**
- **5-year contract length.**
- **Opportunity to renew.**



Popular CSP activities

- **Prescribed Grazing**
- **Cover Crops**
- **Pest Management**
- **Nutrient Management**
- **Tree/Shrub Establishment**
- **Herbaceous Weed Treatment**
- **Pollinator seedings**



CSP payment rates

- **Existing Activity Payment**
- **Plus Enhancement Payments for installing new practices**
- **\$4,000 minimum contract payment per year**



CSP by the numbers

- **Nationally >80 million acres enrolled since 2010**
- **Nebraska**
 - **Over 14 million acres enrolled**
 - **Over 1,000 active contracts**





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Regional Conservation Partnership Program



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Regional Conservation Partnership Program -



Promotes coordination between NRCS and its partners to deliver conservation assistance to producers and landowners. Under partnership agreements, NRCS and its partners leverage and target their respective resources to deliver conservation assistance to producers and landowners to address priority natural resource concerns.

How does RCPP Work?

- **What** - RCPP helps producers protect working agricultural lands to ensure resilience by increasing the sustainable use of soil, water, wildlife, and related natural resources.
- **How** - NRCS and partners co-invest in conservation activities to address resource concerns at a regional scale.
- **Where** – Private or Tribal agricultural land, nonindustrial private forest land, or associated land on which an eligible activity would benefit agricultural land.
- **Length** – RCPP Projects are typically five-year agreements.



Who Can Apply for RCPP?

■ From 7 CFR 1464.5 (b)

1. An agricultural or silvicultural producer association or other group of producers;
2. A State or unit of local government, including a conservation district;
3. An Indian Tribe;
4. A farmer cooperative;
5. An institution of higher education;
6. A water district, irrigation district, acequia, rural water district or association, or other organization with specific water delivery authority to producers on agricultural land;
7. A municipal water or wastewater treatment entity;
8. An organization or entity with an established history of working cooperatively with producers on agricultural land, as determined by the Secretary, to address -
 - i. Local conservation priorities related to agricultural production, wildlife habitat development, and NIPF management; or
 - ii. Critical watershed-scale soil erosion, water quality, sediment reduction, or other natural resource concerns; or
9. A conservation district
10. An eligible entity as identified by NRCS pursuant to [7 CFR part 1468](#).
(eligible to hold an easement)



Why Apply for RCPP Funding?

- **Target NRCS funding** and expertise on specific resource concerns within a specific geographic area.
- **Help producers and landowners** receive assistance to address critical resource concerns on private agricultural and forest lands, including lands held by Native American governments and entities.
- **Amplify the impact of NRCS funding** with partner contributions.



How can RCPP funding be used?

- **Financial Assistance (FA)**

- These funds are used to implement eligible activities on eligible land.
- Typically, this is 75% of an RCPP Project.

- **Technical Assistance (TA)**

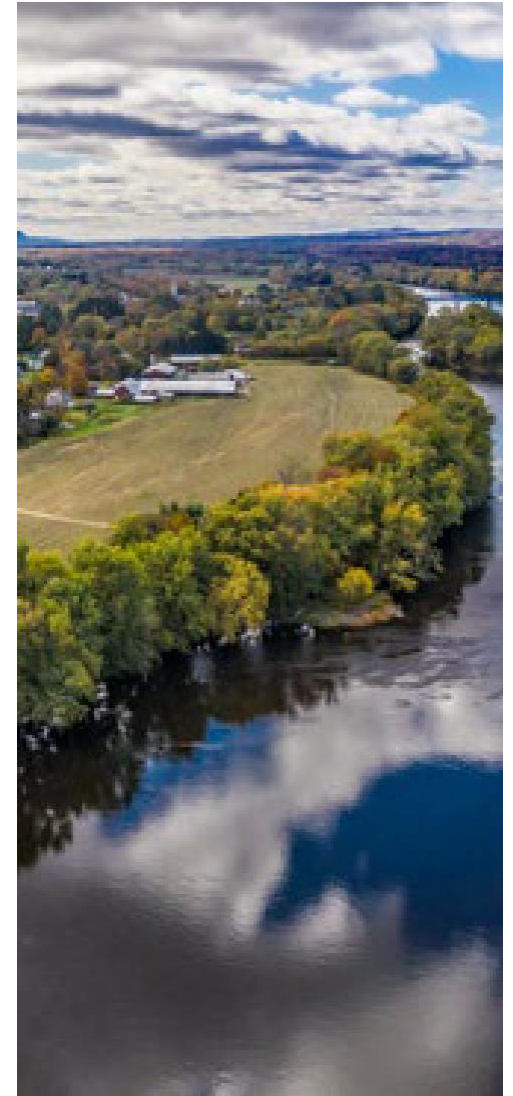
- To support the implementation of conservation activities such as planning, design, installation, and checkout.
- To support the RCPP project by conducting outreach, evaluating and reporting on outcomes, and project management.

Remember: RCPP funds pay for eligible activities, not people.



Covered Programs

RCPP Activity Type	Covered Program Authorities	Purpose/Notes
Land Management	EQIP & CSP Enhancements ACEP-ALE/WRE – restoration PL-566 – land treatment	Treatments to restore or improve the land
Rental	CRP	Temporary & based on foregone income
US-Held Easement	ACEP-ALE/WRE & HFRP – easement acquisition	Permanent protection of the land
Entity-Held Easement	ACEP-ALE/WRE & HFRP – easement acquisition	Permanent protection of the land
Watershed Project	PL-566	Infrastructure project requiring an approved watershed <u>plan & design</u>



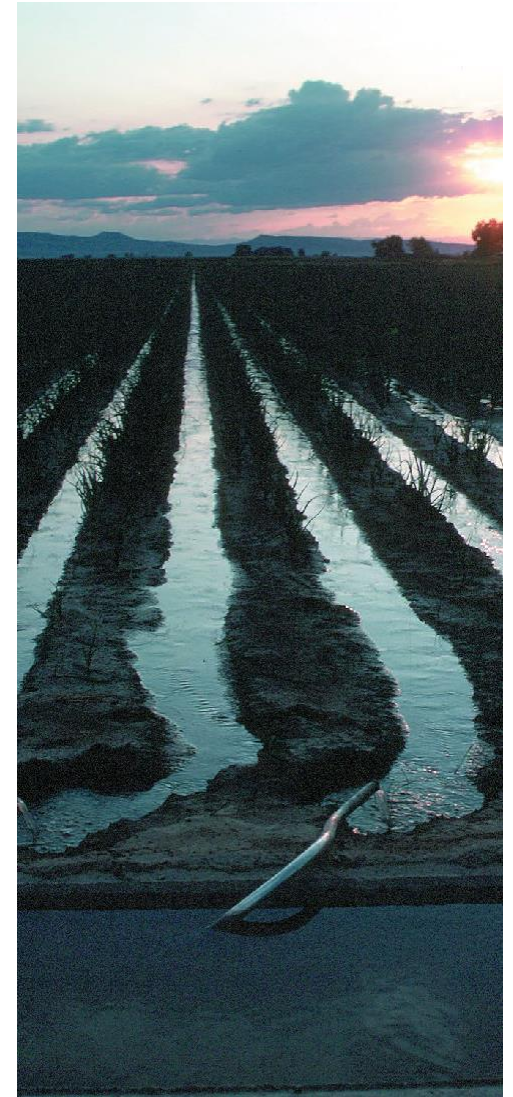
Project Types

Classic

- NRCS reimburses producers directly for FA activities.
- NRCS often delivers a majority of TA in support of producer contracts and easements.
- Partner's primary role is to provide outreach, measure impact, and deliver partner contributions to amplify NRCS funding.
- Funding *obligated* by end of 5 years

AFAs

- Partner installs practices for producers or reimburses producers for FA activities.
- Partner delivers all project TA in support of producer contracts and easements.
- NRCS support limited to non-delegable tasks such as confirming the eligibility of producers and land, AGI verification, and compliance with NEPA/HEL/WC.
- Funding *spent* by end of 5 years

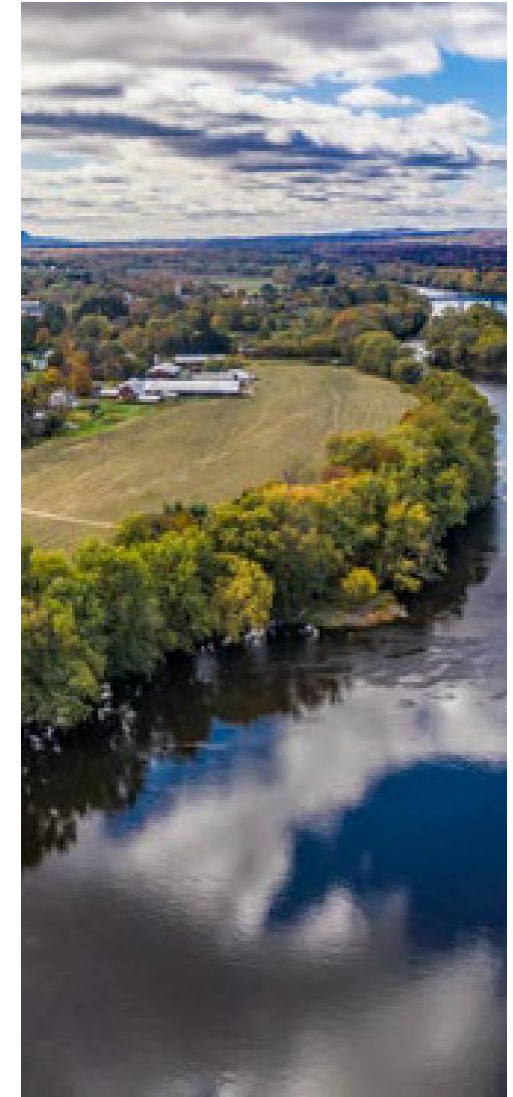


Regional Conservation Partners Projects (RCPP)

- NRCS has been working with Natural Resources Districts (NRDs) through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).
- There are 16 NRDs that are lead and/or participating partners in 9 RCPP projects in Nebraska.
- Nearly \$30 million in Federal funds were committed to these projects with matching contributions from the partners.
- As a result, over \$24 million was committed to help Nebraska agriculture producers apply priority conservation practices in these 16 NRDs.

FY24 Awarded Proposals

Title	Lead Partner	Project Type	Funding Source	Funding Amount (FA)	Status
Growing and Expanding Nebraska's Grassland Cores	Nebraska Community Foundation	AFA	IRA	\$18,750,000	Obligated
Pasture Progress: Advancing Regenerative Beef in Nebraska	Prime Pursuits	AFA	IRA	\$15,750,000	In Negotiation
Irrigation and Nutrient Management in lower Loup River Basin	Lower Loup Natural Resources District	Classic	FB18	\$15,000,000	Obligated
Protecting Nebraska's Groundwater and Grasslands	Nebraska Community Foundation	Classic	IRA	\$15,600,000	In Negotiation
Tribal Buffalo Restoration in the Southeast Region (OK, FL, KS, NE)	InterTribal Buffalo Council	AFA	IRA	\$16,000,000	In Negotiation



Nebraska RCPP Projects Roster

CLASSIC	Alternative Funding Arrangement
Resilient Futures for Nebraska Soils (2021)	NE Forest Restoration Program (2022)
Cropland Cover for Soil Health and Wildlife (2021)	Kansas Nebraska Wetland Initiative (2025)
Ogallala Aquifer & Platte River Recovery (2022)	Expanding Soil Health through Carbon Markets (2025)
Platte & Playa Wetland Protection (2022)	Growing and Expanding Nebraska's Grassland Cores (2025)
Improving Grassland Health and Connecting Resilient Lands (2024)	Pasture Progress: Advancing Regenerative Beef in NE (selected proposal)
Irrigation and Nutrient Management in LL River Basin (2025)	Tribal Buffalo Restoration in the Southeast Region (selected proposal)
Protecting Nebraska’s Groundwater and Grasslands (selected proposal)	

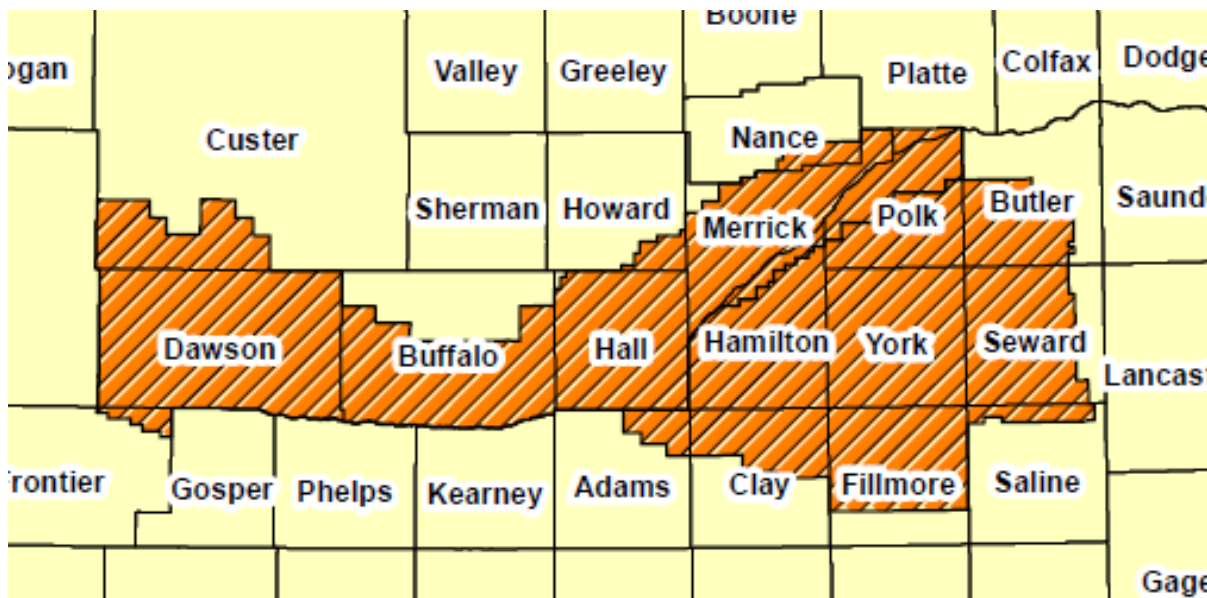
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Irrigation and Nutrient Management in LL River Basin (selected proposal)	Tribal Buffalo Restoration in the Southeast Region (selected proposal)
Protecting Nebraska's Groundwater and Grasslands (selected proposal)	

Resilient Futures for Nebraska Soils - TNC

Location – Central Platte NRD and Upper Big Blue NRD watershed

Financial Assistance – \$ 3.6M – Administered by NRCS



Obligations:

FY21: \$521,094.00	20 Contracts
FY22: \$534,135.00	23 Contracts
FY23: \$833,943.00	22 Contracts
FY24: \$1,271,509.00	30 Contracts

Cost Overrun: \$14,000.00

FY25 Preapprovals:

\$448,388.00 **6 Applications**

Project Details

Goals:

- Enroll 100,000 acres in LM Producer Contracts
- Store Carbon
- Prevent Soil Erosion
- Link Producers to Carbon Markets

Eligible Practices:

- 328 - Crop Rotation
- 340 - Cover Crop
- 329 - NoTill

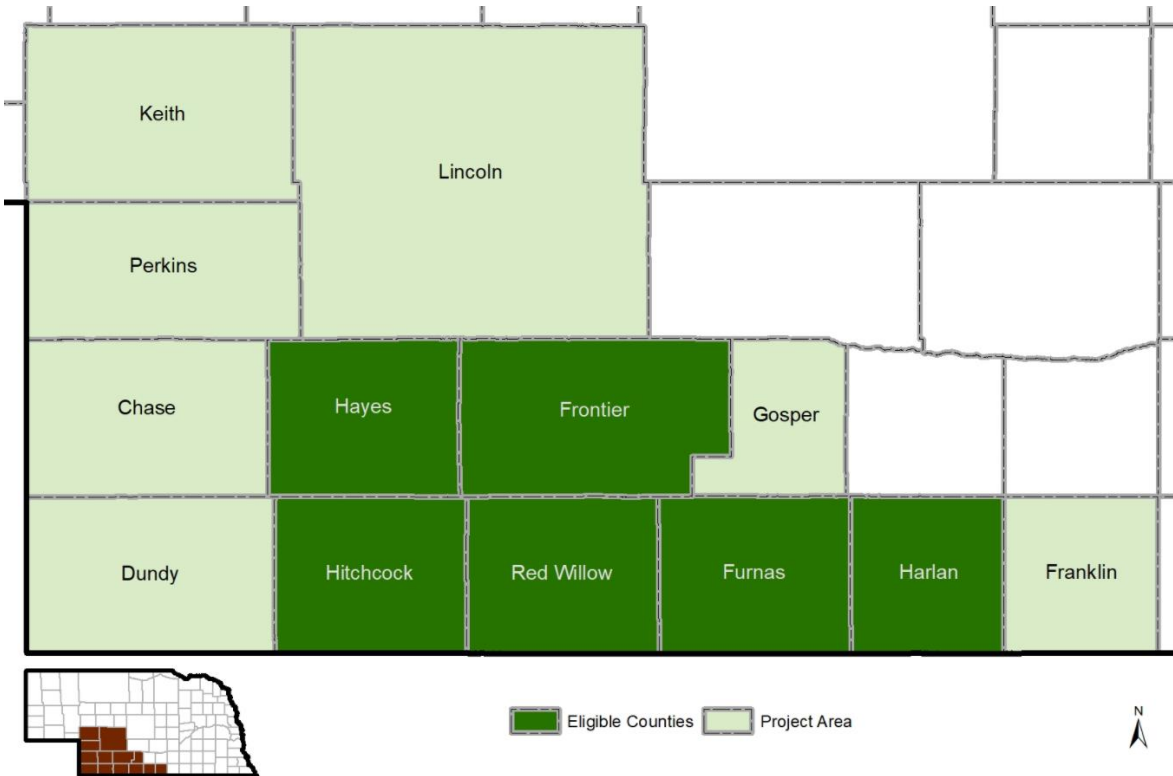
Agreement

Start – FY21

End - FY25

Cropland Cover for Soil Health and Wildlife - NGPC

Financial Assistance \$ 490K – Administered by NRCS –



Obligations:

FY22: \$111,070.00 13 Contracts
FY23: \$86,776.00 6 Contracts
FY24: \$55,274.00 6 Contracts

FY25 Preapprovals:

\$304,366.00 12 applications

Cost Overrun: \$2,000.00

Project Details

Goals:

Enroll 7,000 acres in
LM Producer
Contracts
Allow Grazing (75%)
Wildlife Habitat (25%)

Eligible Practices:

340 - Cover Crop
472 - Access Control

Agreement

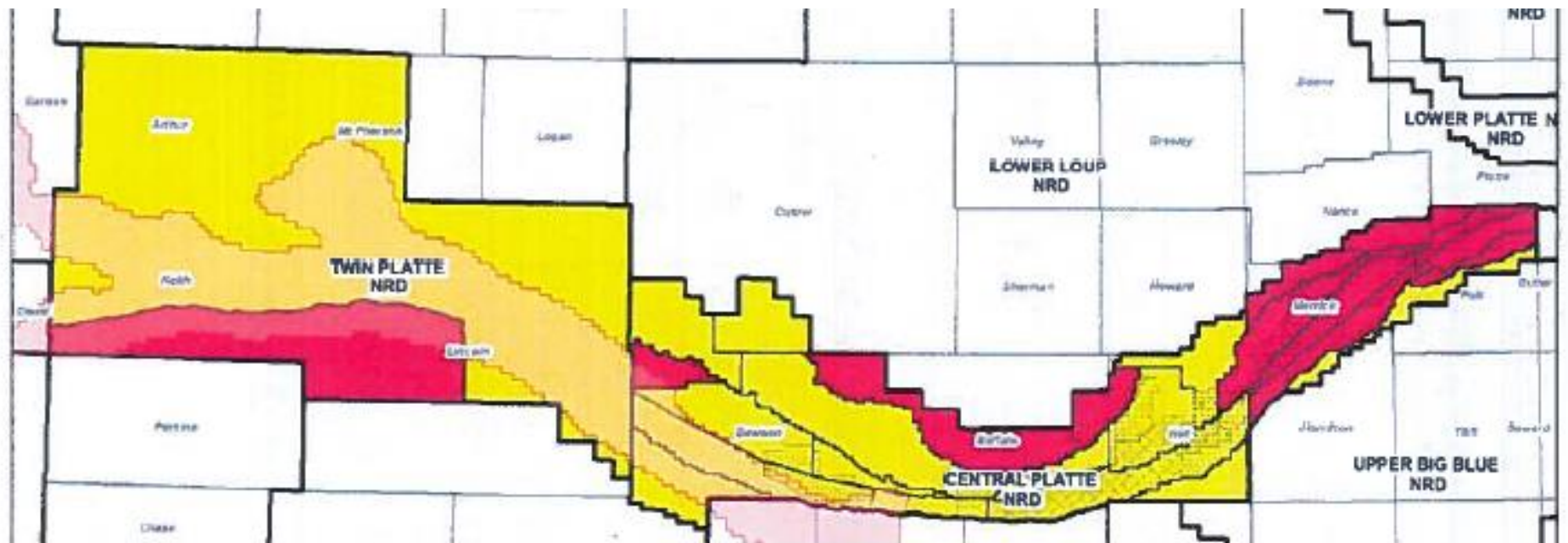
Start – FY21

End - FY25

Ogallala Aquifer & Platte River Recovery - CPNRD

Location –Central Platte NRD and Twin Platte NRD Watershed

Financial Assistance \$ 2M – Administered by NRCS – FB 18 Funded



Obligations:

FY23: \$529,058.00 11 Contracts

FY24: \$459,747.00 11 Contracts

FY25 Preapprovals:

\$572,730.00

12 Applications

FA Remainder for FY26: \$517,463.00

Project Details

Goals:

Reduce Water
Consumption and
Depletions

Eligible Practices:

328 – Irr to Dry
442 – Sprinkler
430 – Pipeline
533 – Pumping Plant
587 – Structure for Water
441 – Drip Systems
449 – IWM
590 – Nutrient Mgt
329 – Residue Mgt
340 – Cover Crop

Agreement

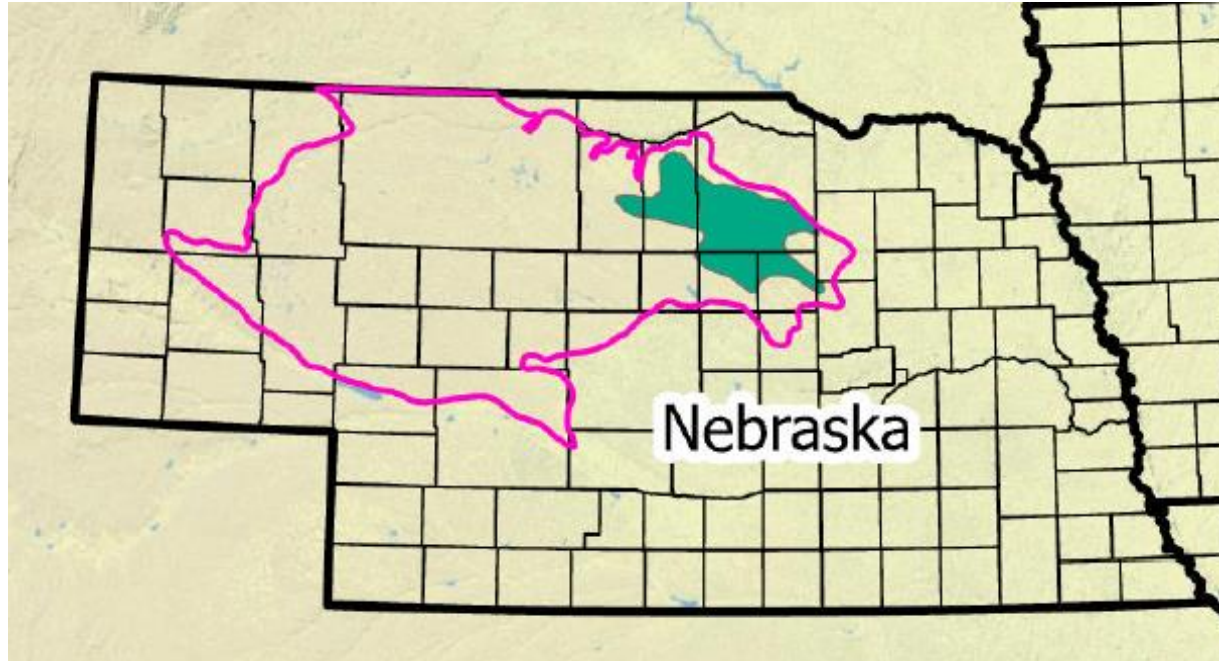
Start – FY22

End - FY26



Improving Grassland Health and Connecting Resilient Lands - TNC

Financial Assistance - \$1.8M Administered by NRCS



Core Practices:

314 Brush Management

338 Prescribed burning

528 Prescribed Grazing

550 Range Planting

595 Pest Management

Goals:

Enroll 250,000 acres of priority grasslands in LM producer contracts.

Improve grassland health

Improve habitat for prairie chickens and sharp-tailed grouse

Agreement

Start – FY25

End – FY29

FY25 Preapprovals:

\$211,800.00

6 applications

FA Remaining: \$1,600,000.00



Improving Grassland Health and Connecting Resilient Lands - TNC

Financial Assistance - \$1.8M Administered by NRCS



Core Practices:

314 Brush Management

338 Prescribed burning

528 Prescribed Grazing

550 Range Planting

595 Pest Management

Goals:

Enroll 250,000 acres of priority grasslands in LM producer contracts.

Improve grassland health

Improve habitat for prairie chickens and sharp-tailed grouse

Agreement

Start – FY25

End – FY29

FY25 Preapprovals:

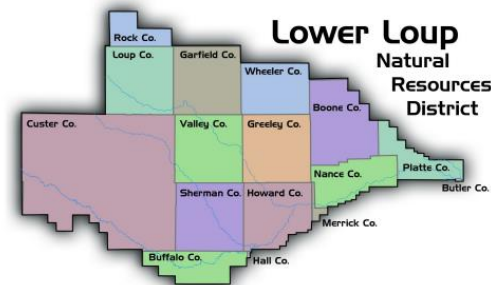
\$211,800.00

6 applications

FA Remaining: \$1,600,000.00

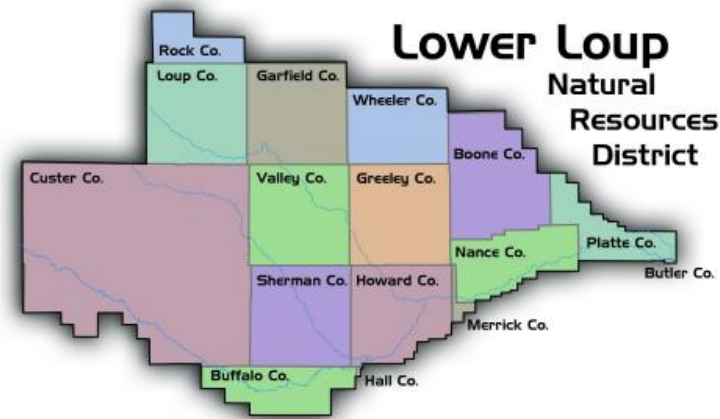
Irrigation and Nutrient Management in Lower Loup River Basin

- Promote **water quality and quantity conservation** in the Lower Loup Natural Resources District (LLNRD). Water quantity will be conserved through improved irrigation scheduling, application, and soil moisture monitoring. Improvements to water quality and soil health will be achieved through implementing nutrient management, cover crops, crop rotation, tillage practices, and improved fertilizer application.



RCPP 3673 Quick Facts

-Irrigation and Nutrient Management in Lower Loup River Basin



Classic RCPP project – Farm Bill 2018

Sign-up deadline will follow EQIP deadlines –
Current FY25 signup deadline is May 30, 2025

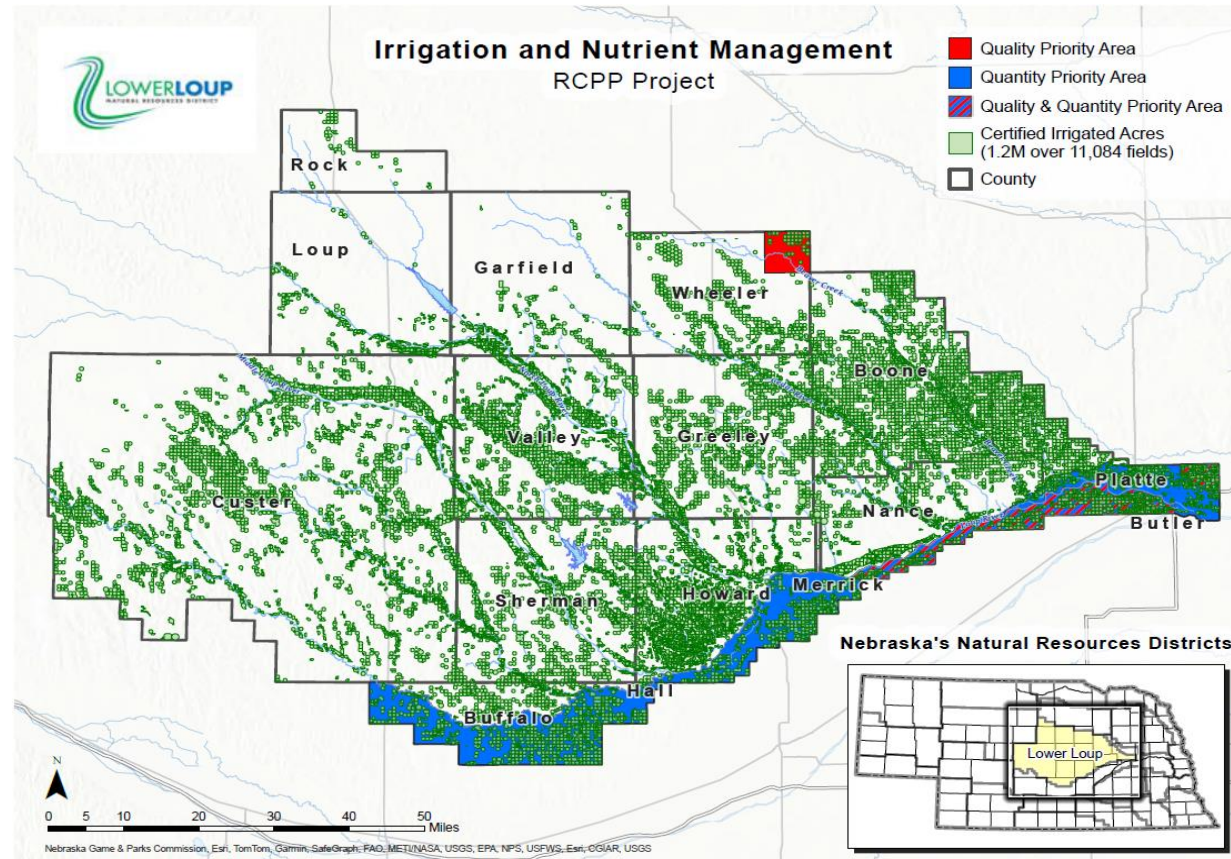
Project Area- Lower Loup NRD Boundary

Partners – Lower Loup NRD; UN Extension

Total Project Funding: \$18,292,683.00

Project Timeline – FY2025-FY2029 (5 yr agreement)

Irrigation and Nutrient Management in Lower Loup River Basin





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Agricultural Conservation Easement Program



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Agricultural Conservation Easement Program - ACEP

A photograph of a rural landscape. In the foreground, there is a wetland area with tall, green grasses and some water. In the middle ground, there is a large, flat green field. In the background, a long, low structure, likely a center pivot irrigation system, stretches across the horizon under a cloudy sky. A small white box with a black border is overlaid on the wetland area, containing text.

Helps landowners, land trusts, and other entities protect, restore, and enhance wetlands, grasslands, and working farms and ranches through conservation easements.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

ACEP has 2 components:

- **Agricultural Land Easement Component (ALE)**
- **Wetland Reserve Easement Component (WRE)**



Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

Agricultural Land Easement Component (ALE)

- NRCS provides financial assistance to eligible partners for purchasing Agricultural Land Easements that protect the agricultural use and conservation values of eligible land.
- Helps farmers and ranchers keep their land in agriculture.



Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

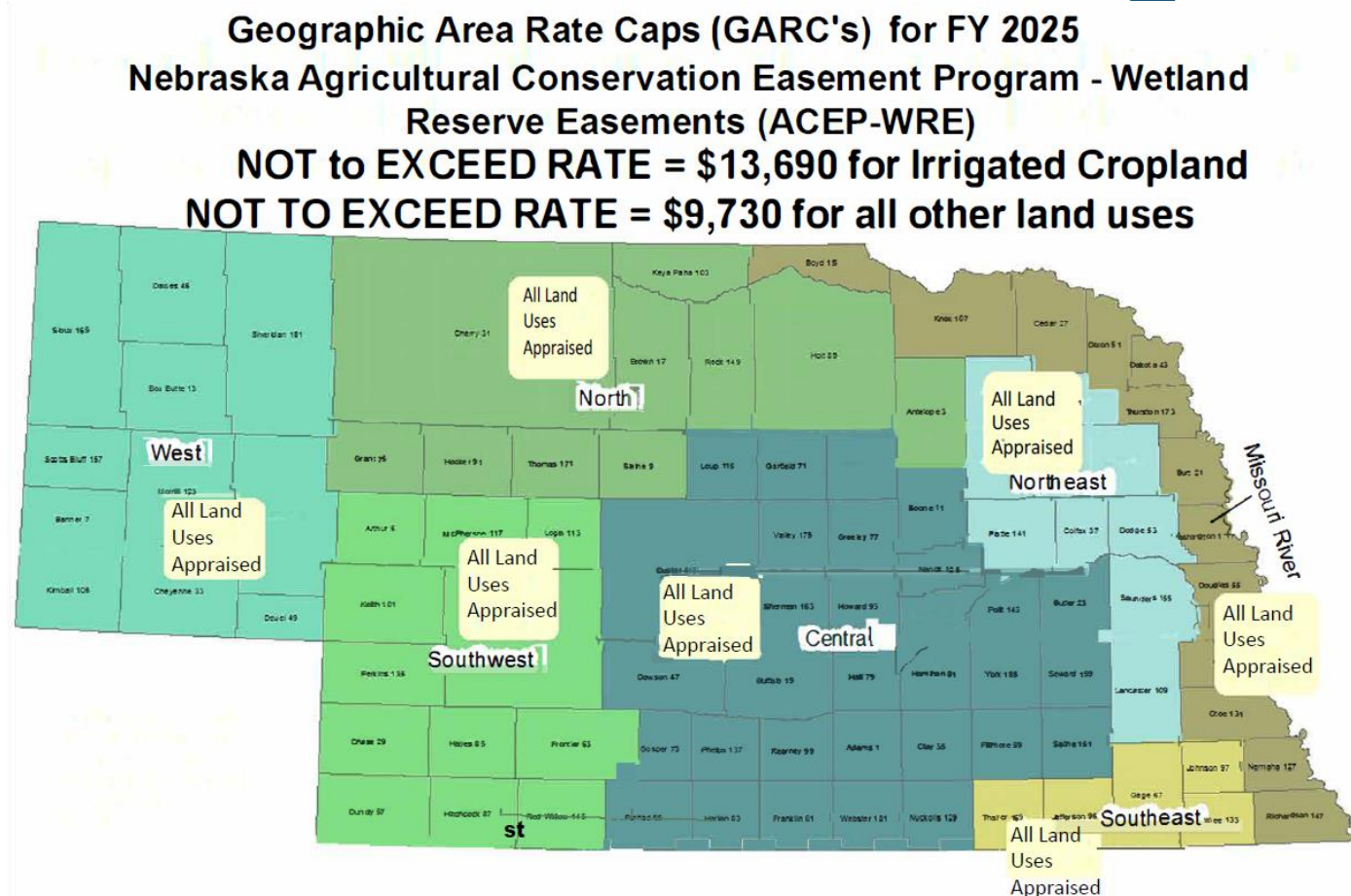
Wetland Reserve Easement Component (WRE)

- NRCS provides technical and financial assistance directly to private landowners and Indian tribes to restore, protect, and enhance wetlands through the purchase of a wetland reserve easement.



Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

**ACEP payment
rate: 95% of the
appraised value
across the state**



Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Wetland Reserve Enhancement Partnership (WREP)

This voluntary program, authorized in the 2018 Farm Bill, provides funding for the purchase of conservation easements to help with restoration of critical wetlands and surrounding upland buffers.

Applications can be submitted at any time, but to be considered for this fiscal year 2025 funding opportunities, applications in Nebraska must be received by May 30, 2025.

Prioritizing the four playa wetland complexes located in Nebraska known for their importance for millions of waterfowl during spring migration.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Wetland Reserve Enhancement Partnership (WREP)

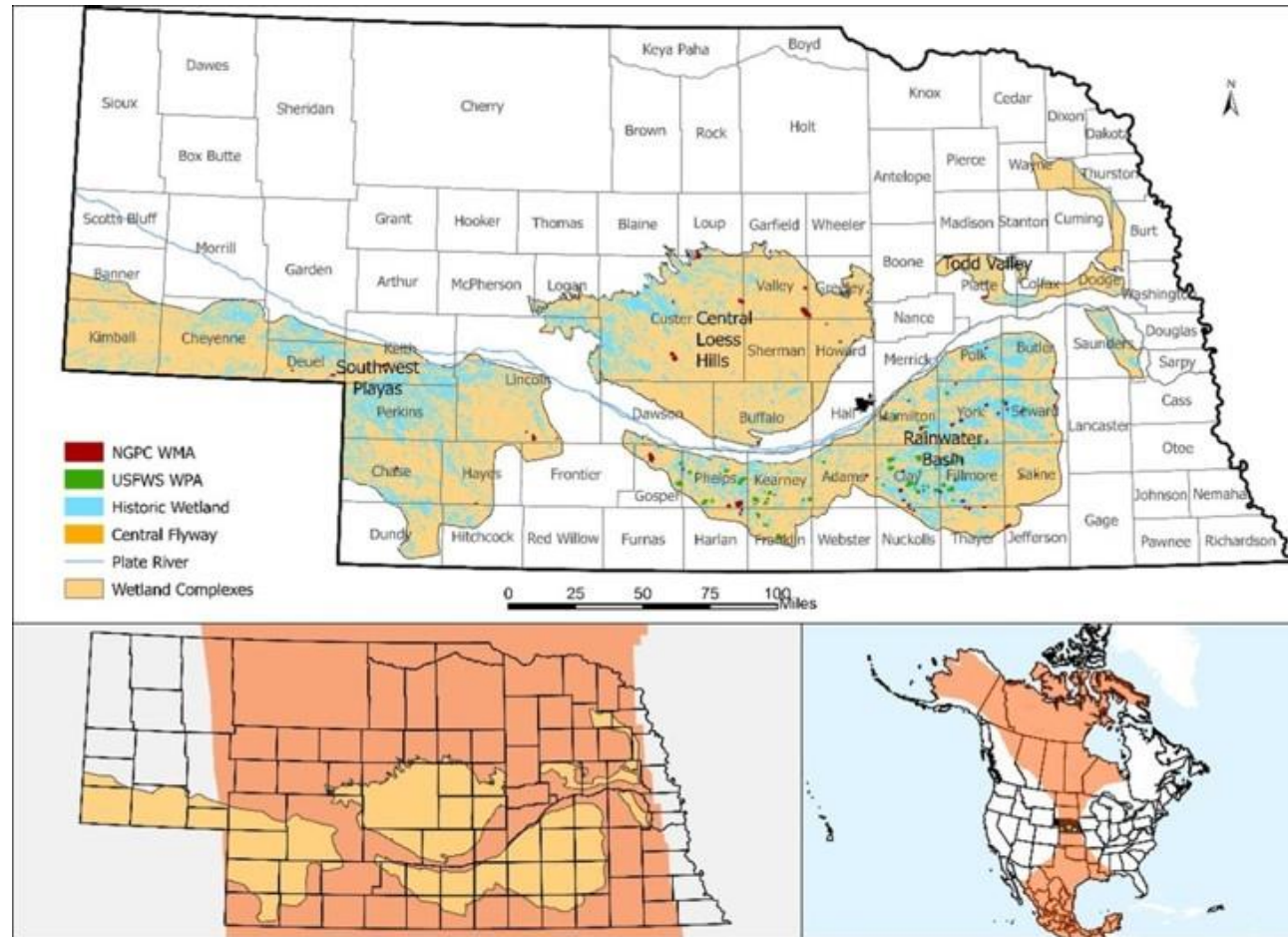


Figure 1. Map of eligible regions: Wetland Playa Complexes



The Farm Bill is an important tool. But it doesn't work without the dedication of the folks in the field, most importantly, the farmers and ranchers that use it to make the best decisions for their land and operations.

Locally driven process

- **Local Work Group Meetings – Typically in Jan./Feb.**
 - Visit www.ne.nrcs.usda.gov for local meeting dates, locations, and agendas
 - Based on NRD boundaries
 - Open to all partners and the public
 - Local decisions for priority resource concerns and practices
- **State Technical Committee Meetings - Quarterly**
 - Makes final recommendations to the State Conservationist on all NRCS programs for the following fiscal year.



Questions?

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