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The Lake Champlain Regional Conservation Partnership Program:

Accelerated Implementation of Agricultural & Forestry
Conservation Practices in the Lake Champlain
Watershed of Vermont and New York



Semi-Annual Report for the USDA NRCS
Reporting Timeframe: April 30th 2015 – September 30th 2015

30 November 2015
Report Prepared by:
Allison N. Compagna
RCPP Project Coordinator



Background

In October of 2014 the State of Vermont submitted a grant proposal for the *Accelerated Implementation of Agricultural & Forestry Conservation Practices in the Lake Champlain Watershed of Vermont and New York* through the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service's **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)**.

In April of 2015 the State of Vermont, in partnership with 25 organizations, agencies, businesses and non-profits was awarded the second largest grant in the country, totaling \$16 million. In addition, over 25 different partners are contributing more than \$16 million of match to this effort! The *Accelerated Implementation of Agricultural & Forestry Conservation Practices in the Lake Champlain Watershed of Vermont and New York* (Lake Champlain RCPP) will help landowners in the Lake Champlain Basin of Vermont and New York invest in conservation practices to improve water quality.

The Lake Champlain RCPP provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural and forest landowners over the next five years, to help with the development and implementation of site-specific farm and forest projects that will directly improve water quality in streams and rivers within the Lake Champlain Basin. This RCPP project affords funding to conserve important and environmentally critical agricultural lands, and to restore and protect wetlands that are crucial to absorbing runoff and slowing floodwaters.

The Lake Champlain RCPP provides the opportunity for expanding the many strong partnerships that already exist in the Lake Champlain Basin. This project brings together traditional partners such as state agencies, federal agencies and non-profits, while adding new partners such as dairy cooperatives and lenders. Partners will support education and assistance to landowners, increasing participation and water quality improvement project installation.

The Lake Champlain RCPP brings new initiatives to the conservation field; the *Environmental Stewardship Program* provides incentives to go above and beyond regulatory requirements with valuable conservation practices such as manure injection, skidder bridges and easements, and the *Wetlands Calculator*, provides an incentive payment to increase participation in high priority wetland and floodplain restoration projects.

\$9.98 million is allocated to Vermont and \$1.0 million to New York for conservation practices through the **NRCS Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)**. Funding is available for agricultural and forestry water quality improvements. All *agricultural funding* is for the development and implementation of conservation plans and improvements on *conserved* farms.

\$4 million is allocated in Vermont to the **Agricultural Conservation Enhancement Program (ACEP) Agricultural Land Easements (ALE)**. Farms participating agree to conserve land in perpetuity, and as of the 2014 Farm Bill, are required to have and implement a conservation plan that addresses natural resource concerns on the farm. Farms that are being conserved through the Lake Champlain RCPP as well as prior conserved farms will be prioritized for the EQIP funds above.

\$1.02 million is allocated in Vermont to **Wetlands Reserve Easements (WRE)**. Through this program, landowners are compensated for retiring land from agriculture in perpetuity, and restoring wetland functions and values.

As match to this grant, the State of Vermont is developing a *Wetlands Payment Calculator* that will determine an incentive payment to accelerate landowner participation in high priority wetland, riparian and floodplain restoration projects. The State of Vermont is also providing cash payments to pilot test this innovative approach.

In addition to the \$12.8 million of direct payments to farmers for the programs listed above, the Lake Champlain RCPP will provide over \$3 million in technical assistance to help landowners develop and implement these valuable conservation practices. Two FTEs have been hired to conduct conservation planning and practice implementation for agricultural producers, as well as one forester FTE.

April 30, 2015 – September 30, 2015 Report

Program Establishment

On April 30th, a press release event was held for the signing of the *Accelerated Implementation of Agricultural & Forestry Conservation Practices in the Lake Champlain Watershed of Vermont and New York Regional Conservation Partnership Program* (the Lake Champlain RCPP) grant agreement between the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service. Those in attendance included Vermont Governor Peter Shumlin, the Secretaries of the Agency of Agriculture and the Agency of Natural Resources, many partners and farmers.

In June of 2015, the Vermont DEC hired Allison Compagna as full-time staff for coordination of the RCPP grant, funded through match from DEC and the VT Agency of Agriculture (VAAFAM).

In June, DEC advertised a Request for Proposals (RFP) for a contracted conservation planning work. DEC was seeking proposals demonstrating the ability to provide conservation and nutrient management planning assistance to farms that have or are in the process of committing to land conservation easements on their farms, conduct resource inventories on farms using NRCS tools and evaluation materials and work as a case manager with producers. The strong VACD proposal resulted in their selection for two years of conservation planning work with the potential for ongoing efforts. DEC drafted a contract and is in the process of finalizing with VACD.

DEC drafted MOUs for each of the partners committing match to the Lake Champlain RCPP and has been working with partners to finalize these agreements. To capture the great accomplishments occurring through the Lake Champlain RCPP, DEC is asking partners to provide quarterly financial and narrative match reports. DEC developed financial and narrative reporting guidelines and is working towards automated reporting processes. DEC worked with the Vermont NRCS business office to provide updated financial budgets and federal financial reports.

The RCPP Project Coordinator attended a program development workshop for the new Vermont DEC Eco AmeriCorps Program. This planning workshop included value stream mapping and efficiency tools that she then used to host a Lake Champlain RCPP planning event. Areas of opportunity for efficiency were identified and a yearly flow chart was developed showcasing timelines and deliverables.

DEC established the Lake Champlain RCPP Advisory Board. The board consists of members from partner organizations including NRCS, VAAFM, VACD, Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB) and Vermont Land Trust (VLT). DEC hosted the first meeting that included a presentation about the Lake Champlain RCPP, partner program discussions, Lake Champlain RCPP EQIP Ranking Criteria, the RCPP Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) process and goals of the Lake Champlain RCPP. In addition, a subgroup is meeting monthly to ensure smooth implementation of the ALE program, and the related technical assistance efforts.

DEC has been working closely with VAAFM to assist in development of the Vermont Environmental Stewardship Program (VESP). VESP will provide incentives for farmers who are already doing great work to protect natural resources but want to go above and beyond.

The Vermont DEC Clean Water Initiative Program (CWIP) staff have been working with NRCS regarding wetland restoration projects in critical source areas and the development of the Wetland Easement Calculator. DEC staff are about to release an RFP for a contractor who will provide outreach, test the incentive payment calculator and facilitate landowner payment. DEC CWIP staff have been in discussion with two landowners about the potential for WRE projects. NRCS/USFWS (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service) staff have also been working to disseminate information regarding RCPP to landowners in the Lake Champlain Basin.

The RCPP coordinator attended an APEX training held by NRCS to gain knowledge about how the APEX tool could be utilized by the contracted conservation planners working on Lake Champlain RCPP project development.

Outreach

DEC worked with NRCS to develop a Lake Champlain RCPP flier that addresses all programs available under the grant (see attached). This flier is being shared with all NRCS field offices, the DEC office and is on the NRCS RCPP website (<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/vt/programs/farbill/rcpp/>).

The Vermont Department of Forest, Parks and Recreation (FPR) worked with NRCS to develop a RCPP Forestry Flier (see attached). The forestry flier is available at NRCS field offices, at DEC and FPR offices as well as on the FPR website (<http://fpr.vermont.gov/>).

FPR developed a PowerPoint presentation highlighting RCPP forestry practices that was provided at the 2015 annual consulting foresters meeting.

FPR provided an overview to Southern Vermont NRCS staff regarding the forestry practices available under the Lake Champlain RCPP.

Partners, VHCB & VLT, have been working to spread the word about the Lake Champlain RCPP opportunity with producers who are interested in agricultural land easements.

DEC is currently developing the Lake Champlain RCPP Outreach Plan, available December 2015. This plan will include how all RCPP partners will be involved, including watershed groups, farmer groups and co-ops.

Technical Assistance

FPR foresters working with NRCS have provided technical assistance to seven forest landowners, assisting with project development and landowner signup.

VAAFMs have provided on-farm direct communication with farmers in the Lake Champlain Basin about their farm management, resource concerns and the potential for water quality improvements. These communications include how to get access to technical assistance through the Lake Champlain RCPP and traditional NRCS EQIP.

VHCB & VLT have provided extensive technical assistance while working with the landowners of eight potential ACEP-ALE projects for the Lake Champlain RCPP.

People Reached

Outreach and technical assistance efforts has reached agricultural and forest landowners in the Lake Champlain Basin as well as partners and the public. More detailed quantification of numbers is being developed.

Of the two forestry contracts for the Lake Champlain RCPP thus far, one was with a first time participant.

Success Stories

The RCPP Project Coordinator is an Eco AmeriCorps mentor to a member who is serving in a Vermont NRCS office. The mentor role was developed to provide support and assist with professional development. A second Eco-AmeriCorps member is working with DEC CWIP, and is helping with communication of all programs, including RCPP.

The FPR foresters working with forest landowners provided excellent technical assistance, project planning and assisted with helping the landowners sign up for EQIP Contracts.

Ongoing conversations regarding the ACEP-ALE process have been taking place with DEC, NRCS, AAFM, VACD, VHCB and VLT. DEC has been working with these partners to develop visual tools mapping out the processes for agricultural land easements.

Relationship Building with Partners

Currently eight of the Lake Champlain RCPP partner organizations are actively working on RCPP efforts. Those eight include AAFM, FPR, VHCB, VLT, VACD, DEC, NY Washington and Essex NRCD. Other partner efforts are under development.

The Lake Champlain RCPP provides opportunities for building relationships between partners including the RCPP Advisory Board, subcommittees on ACEP-ALE and WRE projects and the development of the VESP. At these meetings partners are actively describing priorities and goals and working with each other to identify and overcome challenges to improve water quality and protect and restore natural resources. The success of that relationship building can be seen as partners work together to make the Lake Champlain RCPP a cohesive and effective program while gaining a better understanding of how each other's programs work.

Some of the partnerships within RCPP are traditional while others are new. New partners include the New York Essex and Washington Soil and Water Conservation Districts.

Implementation

Two contracts were in ProTracts for FY2015. The practices contracted were for Forest Trails & Landings. These contracts included 3,602 linear feet of forest trails and landings restoration work. One of the contracts was with a first time producer. Projects were not completed prior to the end of the federal fiscal year.

Six ACEP-ALE easement projects were entered into the database (VHCB/VLT had two alternate projects available in the que in addition). NRCS deferred these projects to 2016.

Adjustment of Terms

Adjustment of Terms available for the Lake Champlain RCPP was the ability to having a rolling signup with no batching. This will be a positive outcome as landowners can immediately begin the screening and planning process after signup.

Use of Funds

Successful in expenditure included \$8,916 EQIP FA funds obligated to (2) contracts for Forest Trails and Landings practices. One contract consisted of \$5,801 obligated to a forest trails and landing restoration project of 2,637 feet. The other contract consisted of \$3,110 obligated to a forest trails and landing restoration project of 965 feet.

Measurement of Results

A water quality monitoring plan will be available January 1, 2016.

Ranking & Targeting

EQIP dollars for agricultural practices are available to conserved farms in the three target watersheds of Missisquoi Bay, St. Albans Bay and South Lake. Wetland and Forestry EQIP dollars available to any landowners in the Lake Champlain Basin. The RCPP Advisory Board, with input from local district working group questions, held discussion regarding RCPP EQIP ranking questions.

Training

FPR hosted a field training with DEC staff to showcase potential forestry water quality improvement projects for the Lake Champlain RCPP. Training in resource concern identification and beneficial vegetative plant species identification was included.

A Lake Champlain Webinar and partner training is upcoming in FY2016.

Project ID 449 – Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation

Reporting Item	Responsible Entity	
1. The number and types of eligible partners, landowners, and producers participating in the partnership agreements selected.	NRCS 1 Eligible Partner (DEC), 2 landowners with EQIP Contracts, 6 landowners with proposed ALE easements that were unable to be obligated in 2015 and were deferred to 2016	Partner *
2. The number of producers and landowners receiving assistance.	2 landowners with EQIP Contracts	*
3. The number of new producers and landowners reached (i.e., those who have not previously participated in NRCS programs) and if any beginning farmers or ranchers, limited resource farmers or ranchers, socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers, eligible veteran farmers or ranchers, or Indian Tribes received assistance.	1 first time participants, 1 beginning farmers	X
4. Total funding committed to projects, including from Federal and non-Federal resources.	\$8,916– 2 EQIP Contracts	X
5. A description of how the funds are being administered under an alternative funding arrangement.	There is no alternative funding arrangement.	X
6. Means for tracking adherence to any applicable provisions for payment eligibility.	X	*
7. Any oversight mechanisms implemented.	X	*
8. The process through which program appeals by program participants are resolved.	X	

RCPP: Coming Together for Conservation

The RCPP Program

The State of Vermont, in partnership with 25 organizations, agencies, businesses and non-profits, has received funding from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service through the new **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)**. The \$16 million grant was the second largest in the country and will help landowners in the Lake Champlain Basin of Vermont and New York invest in the best conservation practices to help improve water quality.

The project will provide financial and technical assistance to agricultural and forest landowners over the next five years, to help with development and implementation of site-specific farm and forest projects that will directly improve water quality in streams and rivers that flow towards Lake Champlain. RCPP funds will also help conserve important and environmentally critical agricultural lands, and restore and protect wetlands that are crucial to absorbing runoff and slowing floodwaters.



RCPP Partnerships

RCPP provides the opportunity for expanding the many strong partnerships that already exist in the Lake Champlain Basin. RCPP brings together traditional partners such as state and federal agencies and non-profits, and adds new partners, such as dairy cooperatives and lenders, who will enable this education and assistance to more landowners, increasing participation and on-the ground projects. **Over 25 different partners are contributing more than \$20 million dollars of match to this effort!**

RCPP Innovations

RCPP brings new initiatives to the conservation field, with the *Environmental Stewardship Program* which provides incentives to go beyond regulatory requirements with valuable conservation practices like manure injection, skidder bridges and easement, and the *Wetlands Calculator*, which provides an incentive payment to increase participation in high priority wetland and floodplain restoration projects.

RCPP Facts and Figures

Funding: 80% (\$12.8m) directly to farm and forest landowners.
 \$3.2m in technical assistance to help landowners.
 10% of the funds are targeted to the South lake watershed in New York.

Priorities: Funding for agricultural practices will be targeted to conserved farms in the Lake Champlain Basin. Wetland and forestry funds will be open to all landowners. Priority practices will be determined by on-site evaluations.

For additional information, please contact:

Marli Rupe, Agricultural Water Quality Specialist
 VT Department of Environmental Conservation
 Marli.rupe@state.vt.us; 802-490-6171

EQIP—Conservation Practices

\$9.98 million is allocated to Vermont and \$1.0 million to New York for conservation practices through the **NRCS Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)**. Funding is available for agricultural and forestry water quality improvements. All agricultural funding is for development and implementation of conservation plans and improvements on *conserved* farms.

EQIP practices include:

- *Field improvements such as cover crops, gully stabilization and reduced tillage.*
- *Production area improvements such as live-stock exclusion, stream crossings and small waste management practices.*
- *Forestry practices such as skidder bridges*

ACEP-ALE Easements

\$4 million is allocated in Vermont to **Agricultural Conservation Enhancement Program (ACEP) Ag Land Easements (ALE)**. Farms which participate agree to conserve land in perpetuity, and as of 2014, are required to have and implement a conservation plan that addresses natural resource concerns on the farm. Farms that are being conserved through RCPP as well as prior conserved farms will be prioritized for EQIP funds above.



ACEP—WRE

\$1.02 million is allocated in Vermont to **Wetlands Reserve Easements (WRE)**. Through this program, landowners are compensated for retiring land from agriculture in perpetuity, and restoring wetland functions and values.

As match to this grant, the State is developing a *Wetlands Payment Calculator* that will determine an incentive payment to accelerate landowner participation in high priority wetland, riparian and floodplain restoration projects. The State is also providing cash payments to pilot test this innovative approach.



Technical Assistance

In addition to the \$12.8 million of direct payments to farmers for the programs listed above, RCPP also provides over \$3 million in technical assistance to help landowners develop and implement these valuable conservation practices. Two conservation planners will be hired by partners to work directly with landowners, as well as one forester. In addition, funds are available to support partners who have strong relationships with local landowners, helping to accelerate the quantity and success of water quality improvements throughout the Lake Champlain basin.

The State of Vermont RCPP program is also committed to closely coordinating with the successful RCPP projects being developed by others.

- *The Vermont Association of Conservation Districts is working with small farmers to develop the nutrient management plans that will help position farmers to do additional conservation practices.*
- *The Long Island Sound RCPP project is supporting financial and technical assistance to farmers in the Connecticut River Basin of Vermont.*

A key priority of the State's RCPP is to coordinate efforts to ensure maximum implementation and efficiency on the highest priority projects.

IMPROVING FOREST WATER QUALITY IN THE LAKE CHAMPLAIN BASIN

State of Vermont Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

Availability of Financial Assistance

The State of Vermont received funding from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) through the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program.

The \$16 million grant will help agricultural producers and private forest landowners in the Lake Champlain Basin invest in conservation practices to protect and improve water quality.

FORESTRY CONSERVATION PRACTICES

Forest conservation practices for forest landowners funded through RCPP include—

- ◆ Controlling soil erosion on logging trails
- ◆ Improving stream crossings
- ◆ Restoring forest riparian buffers along streams
- ◆ Stabilizing erosion-prone soils.



Applications are accepted at any time.

Contact your local NRCS Field Office for more information.

Submitting an application will provide you with assistance and information, but there is no commitment for practice installation until a contract is signed.

Contact the USDA Service Center nearest you. Contact information can be found at:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/vt/contact/local/>

IMPROVING FOREST WATER QUALITY IN THE LAKE CHAMPLAIN BASIN

Getting Assistance for the RCPP Application Process

The Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation has two foresters available to assist landowners with the application process and evaluating conservation practice opportunities.



For land located in the northern portion of the Lake Champlain Basin contact:

- ◆ **Rick Dyer**, (802) 505-5530, Rick.dyer@state.vt.us

For land located in the southern portion of the Lake Champlain Basin contact:

- ◆ **Allen (A.J.) Follensbee**, (802) 786-3857, Allen.follensbee@state.vt.us



For More Information on RCPP Forestry Conservation Practices

- ◆ **Gary Sabourin** – Watershed Forester, (802) 272-4145, gary.sabourin@vermont.gov or visit <http://fpr.vermont.gov/>



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