

LAKE CHAMPLAIN REGIONAL CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS AND/OR QUESTIONS FROM THE WEBINAR EVENT

What is the Lake Champlain Regional Conservation Partnership 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.

This 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 into the Lake Champlain watershed. 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.

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

Program Questions

Easements

Will ALE Plans include assessment of woodlots and sugar bushes as well as the agricultural land use?

The ALE assessment will cover all the natural resources on the conserved parcel. If the conserved parcel contains any woodlots and sugar bushes those areas will be assessed for any water quality improvement opportunities and forestry technical assistance providers will be available to help. If a landowner is interested in further opportunities for conservation, we will provide technical assistance in evaluating other areas outside the conserved parcel for water quality improvement opportunities.

Can a conservation easement contain all forest land?

Through the USDA NRCS EQIP ACEP-ALE program, a conservation easement can have up to 2/3 forested cover included in the easement.

Wetlands

Will RCPP fund WRE or WREP/WRP projects?

RCPP funds for wetlands are only available through the Wetlands Reserve Easement (WRE) component of the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP).

Forestry

Forestry funding is available through the RCPP. How is this different from the regular NRCS forestry funding pool?

Forestry applicants in the Lake Champlain Basin seeking financial and/or technical assistance for practices outlined in the “Improving Forest Water Quality in the Lake Champlain Basin” handout should be signed up (if they are eligible) under the VT DEC RCPP funding pool because funding and technical assistance is immediately available.

Do landowners need to have a Forest Management Plan (FMP) to implement RCPP funded forestry practices?

Yes, landowners must have a valid and current Forest Management Plan (signed by a County Forester) that meets UVA (Use Value Appraisal, or “current use”) standards. Forest land in the UVA program is administered by VT FPR through the County Foresters. Consulting Foresters typically write FMPs and the County Foresters review and sign them (making them current for ten years). CAP funds for forest management plans are available through traditional NRCS EQIP only. The local County Forester or NRCS field office should be contacted with further questions.

Agricultural

Agricultural funding is available through the RCPP EQIP. How is this different from the regular NRCS agricultural funding pool?

Funding for agricultural practices under the RCPP EQIP is for the development and implementation of conservation plans and improvements on farms with **conserved lands**. Benefits of the RCPP funding pool are less competition and opportunity for higher cost-share of up to 90% (with a combination of USDA NRCS and VAAFMM funds). Farms are also able to receive funding sooner, since there will be a rolling enrollment and allocation of funds. Farms will receive “case manager” type technical assistance from RCPP planners who will continue with the farmer throughout the process.

Does the up to 90% cost share cover the practices of cover-crop, no-till, etc.?

Agricultural structural practices that improve water quality are eligible for up to 90% cost-share. Agronomic practices are not eligible.

General Programmatic

What kind of timeline can be expected for the development of a plan that is needed to install a practice (for example, CNMP, FMP, etc.) before funding is available for a practice?

As with normal NRCS practices, if someone is implementing a practice or practices that involve nutrient or manure management, a **CNMP is required to be in place** before any practices can be implemented. The screening criteria is written to address this. One of the advantages of RCPP is that we have extra conservation planners available to provide technical assistance to help facilitate getting these plans developed as quickly as possible. We cannot provide a specific time of how long that process will take; however, the development of these plans will be prioritized to move landowners forward through the process. The development of plans other than CNMPs, will depend on the requirements of those specific plans. For example, ALE plans must be developed and completed prior to the signing of the land conservation easement.

What are the ranking, signup, contract deadlines?

That information is available through the normal NRCS channels. The next application signup deadline is February 19, 2016 with tentative ranking and obligation deadlines of April 16, 2016 and June 17, 2016, respectively.

Does RCPP use the same conservation practice list as that used for regular EQIP?

Yes, for the agricultural practices. All agricultural practices are eligible for RCPP funding.

Only forestry practices that improve water quality are available for RCPP forestry funding. These are:

- ❖ Forest Trails & Landings (655)
- ❖ Stream Crossings (578)
- ❖ Riparian Forest Buffer (391)
- ❖ Mulching (484)

General forestry practices such as timber stand improvement are not available for RCPP funding. CAP funding for Forest Management Plans is not included in RCPP forestry funding.

Eligibility Questions

Who is eligible for services under the RCPP?

Funding is available for agricultural practices and technical assistance on farms with conserved lands in the Lake Champlain Basin with higher ranking for those falling in the three target watersheds of St. Albans Bay, Missisquoi Bay, and South Lake (A & B).

Wetland and forestry funds are available to all landowners in the Lake Champlain Basin.

Does the whole farm have to be conserved to be eligible for RCPP?

No, only a parcel of land needs to be conserved for the whole farm to be eligible for RCPP funds.

At what stage of the easement process are the farmers eligible?

Landowners must be eligible with NRCS prior the VHCB/VLT signing of the cooperative agreement with NRCS for the RCPP/ALE money to be available.

Once a parcel to be conserved has been approved by NRCS and is included in the signing of a cooperative agreement between NRCS & VHCB, they will be eligible to sign up for agricultural practices under the RCPP.

There is an ACEP-ALE flowchart available, please contact allison.compagna@vermont.gov.

Can a farmer apply for practices on both the conserved or non-conserved parcels if only a portion of that land is conserved?

Yes, if a landowner has a portion of the land conserved, the entire farm is eligible for RCPP. For example, if a farmer wants to install livestock exclusion throughout the property, both on the conserved & non-conserved parcel, they are eligible to do that.

Do farmers have to apply for practices on both the conserved and non-conserved parcels?

No, if a farmer has a conserved piece of property but there's not a resource concern on that tract of land, and there are resource concerns on other tracts of land (that are not conserved), the farmer can apply for funding to address the issues on the non-conserved parcel. They do not have to apply for practices on both the conserved and non-conserved parcels to be eligible. The parcel where the practice is being implemented does not need to be connected to the conserved parcel, or even in the same town, just under the same ownership.

Watersheds

What are the RCPP Target Watersheds?

Through the RCPP there are targeted watersheds, and projects that fall within these watersheds will receive high ranking points. The watersheds are St. Albans Bay, Missisquoi Bay and South Lake (A&B).

Does this include the Rock River Watershed?

Yes, the Rock River falls in the Lake Champlain Basin. It is not an RCPP target watershed but it is one of the four sub-watersheds for NRCS's targeted funding this year. Any producer in the Rock River watershed should speak directly with a conservation planner in the St. Albans NRCS office to determine which pool is the best option for him or her.

Are there plans to correct blue line stream data, information that is crucial to this effort that may not be correct in terms of ground-truth location?

There are no plans in the RCPP grant program to correct that data but certainly as planners are on the ground and see these concerns, they're going to be brought to the appropriate people who can move that process forward. We're aware that there are some challenges there and one of the advantages to having more boots on the ground is that we'll find more of those errors that we can hopefully correct.

Technical Assistance Questions

How is the point of contact for the farmer determined?

If the farmer is already working with someone and would prefer to continue to, such as UVM Extension or conservation district staff member, they can do that. If they are not already working with someone, the three conservation planners (Justin Michaud, David Arnold & Annalise Carington) who are working on the RCPP grant through VACD will be the point of contact for the farmer to assist them through the various programs and help to facilitate the coordination with the NRCS folks.

How will you evaluate high erosion risk? Are you aware that some K values may change for some soils over the coming few years?

Yes we are aware of that and evaluation of the high erosion risk will be done using current NRCS methods. In the future if calculation methods are updated, RCPP will continue to use the same process as NRCS.

Financial Assistance Questions

How does the up to 90% cost-share work?

NRCS provides reimbursement for practices based on standard payment rates already set for each practice. As match to RCPP, VAAFMM can supplement those payments to provide cost share up to 90%. VAAFMM provides payment based on the actual cost of the project installation, this means the total of all invoices (so keep your receipts!).

For example, a project costs \$425 and NRCS's payment rate was \$276.25. That would mean that the NRCS payment rate covered 65% of the actual cost for the project installation. VAAFMM would then provide an additional 25% (\$106.25) of the total cost to increase the cost-share rate to 90%.

Total cost of the project - \$425

NRCS portion - \$276.25 (65%)

VAAFMM portion - \$106.25 (25%)

Total payment provided to the farmer of \$382.50 at 90% cost-share.

One caveat, based on Vermont statute and VAAFMM rules, is that VAAFMM can provide up to 90% cost-share but cannot exceed 35% of the total project cost.

For example, a project costs \$425 but the NRCS payment rate was \$191.25. That would mean that the NRCS payment rate covered 45% of the actual cost for the project installation. VAAFMM would then provide an additional 35% (\$148.75) of the total cost to increase the cost-share rate to 80%.

Total cost of the project - \$425

NRCS portion - \$191.25 (45%)

VAAFMM portion - \$148.75 (35%)

Total payment provided to the farmer of \$340 at 80% cost-share.

Will "foregone income" be counted towards the 90% cost-share?

No, foregone income cannot be counted in the cost of a project for the purposes of reimbursement from the AAFMM BMP funds.

Is RCPP money limited by the \$450,000 spending cap under the 2014 Farm Bill if used in combination with EQIP?

Yes, landowners who receive funding under RCPP are still limited under that same cap per statute. Non-RCPP funds and RCPP funds are counted together towards that cap.

Partner Questions

Are watershed groups involved in this effort?

Many of them are; for example, Friends of Northern Lake Champlain is a partner not only in assistance but in match support. The Farmers Watershed Alliance and Champlain Valley Farmers Coalition did not provide match but will be partners in sharing information with fellow landowners. RCPP is a dynamic program, and while we had match commitment to put in the application to receive the grant reward, we are still receiving opportunities for match and for other ways partners can be involved in the program. We are always open to those who want to participate and any ideas partners may want to share with us.

Can you describe some of the proposed partner match activities?

There is a lot of exciting match activities going on from our partners and one of the exciting parts of RCPP is the diversity of match. Many of the partners we have already done a lot of coordination with, such as VHCB which is providing funding and assistance in partnership with NRCS and VLT for agricultural land conservation. UVM Extension is not funded partner but provides substantial technical assistance and is assisting with outreach, as are several other partners.

There are also quite a few non-traditional partners that many of us have not worked with in the past. The dairy cooperatives and farm lenders are partners in this program and their role will be to help get information out to landowners when they're doing visits. One of the things we wanted to do through this program was to increase the amount of knowledge of the people who are working with farmers on a regular basis. As we all know there are a lot of people that stop by farms (the dairy inspectors, the dairy cooperatives and the lenders), and the goal is to get as much information out there through various people and opportunities. Our goal is to share not just the RCPP program but any other resources that are available for addressing water quality concerns. We have a huge task ahead of us in dealing with the water quality issues identified in the Lake Champlain TMDL and it needs to be an all-in, "all hands on deck" effort to get water quality improvement practices on the ground.

The dairy cooperatives and the lenders, for example, have agreed to have their staff participate in some intensive training so they will be able to recognize water quality concerns and practice opportunities when they are on the farms. In addition these folks will have many of the outreach materials available to hand out available to provide to the landowner.

Organizational Questions

How will NRCS staff easily be able to tell if a customer is signed up for VT DEC RCPP or traditional NRCS funds?

All staff and partners working with customers who are seeking financial and/or technical assistance through the RCPP will need to ensure the customer completes the RCPP Applicant & Information Release Form. This form will be kept with the customer's NRCS files and will communicate that the customer is seeking financial and/or technical assistance under the Lake Champlain RCPP versus other funding pools.

When should the RCPP Applicant & Information Release Form be completed?

State of Vermont foresters and hired VACD conservation planners will have customers complete the release form and submit it to the NRCS if the customer has not yet contacted NRCS.

NRCS staff assisting customers who come into the office pursuing RCPP funded practices and/or technical assistance, who have not yet worked with other RCPP technical assistance staff, should have the customer complete the applicant release form.

A copy should be filed at the NRCS field office the customer will be working with and an electronic copy should be sent to Alli Compagna, VT DEC, allison.compagna@vermont.gov.

If there are applications put in the RCPP DEC EQIP and EQIP simultaneously, will there be any chance for duplication of efforts?

No, there are several places where checks and balances exist, with the primary one being the NRCS office where they are very vigilant about keeping track of applications. The advantage to applying for EQIP in both categories would be in case one of the funding pools were to run out. Although the RCPP grant at \$16,000,000 seems like a lot of money, when broken down over five years, two states, four programs and multiple practices, it will run out quickly. We want to make sure that if a landowner does apply and is interested in doing a practice within a year that if there is funding available in some other pot, they are able to access it.

What program forms are specific to NRCS and what forms are specific to RCPP?

There is a CPA 1200 and Applicant & Information Release Form that are specific to the Lake Champlain RCPP and these documents can be found on the zip file. Alternatively from what was stated in the webinar, there is not an RCPP specific CPA 52 form. The CPA 52 is the national or state form used throughout all EQIP programs. For further questions, contact Bob Sylvester of NRCS.

What is the NRCS flowchart?

As we stepped into the process of starting this program it became very clear that there were a lot of questions about who would be responsible for the multiple aspects of the conservation planning process from the producer walking in the door, if not before, straight through to the actual documentation, implementation and completion of the project. A group of NRCS and DEC folks worked together to ensure that we looked through every single aspect of going through that planning process. DEC developed a flowchart and we think that all partners involved will find it very helpful as it clearly shows which partner is responsible for each aspect of the program process.

Resources Available

What materials are available for landowners and agricultural producers interested in the RCPP?

Currently the “RCPP: Coming Together for Conservation” and “Improving Forest Water Quality in the Lake Champlain Basin” handouts are available for public distribution. Additionally, there are several NRCS materials available: an ACEP-ALE Fact Sheet, EQIP Fact Sheet, Cultural Resource Review Fact Sheet and What is a CNMP fact sheet.

Programs other than the Lake Champlain RCPP

Is the VACD RCPP NMP training program only for small farms or is any farm eligible?

The NMP training program is through the Vermont Association of Conservation Districts (VACD) RCPP and is focused on small livestock operations; however, the program is not limited based on animal numbers. The program uses NRCS NMP funding levels based on acres treated. An informational handout is available in the zip file.

Is the CREP program available for producers to be covered under the RCPP?

No, CREP is a different program and is not available through this RCPP. RCPP covers EQIP, ACEP-ALE and ACEP-WRE. If you're working with a farm that is eligible for the CREP program, there is nothing to prevent them for signing up for CREP in addition to RCPP. It would involve a separate application process and project selection process. One of the goals of this program is that we have a planner connected with landowners so that they have one individual to help them through the various programs they are interested in. These planners are going to be aware of the CREP program, among others, and are going to point out opportunities for implementing water quality improvement opportunities such as the CREP program and will help landowners in connecting with those resources.

For additional information, please contact:

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