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## The Agricultural Act of 2014: Regional Partnership Programs, The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

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### *What is the RCPP?*

The RCPP helps producers and landowners install and maintain conservation activities on the regional or watershed scale through the coordination of partnership agreements, funding opportunities and easement programs. The program is administered through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and targets projects that increase the restoration and sustainable use of soil, water, wildlife and other related natural resources (USDA NRCS 2014).

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program is new for 2014 and is created by consolidating the functions of the Agriculture Water Enhancement Program, Chesapeake Bay Watershed Program, Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative, and Great Lakes Basin Program (USDA ERS 2014). Total annual funding for RCPP is set at \$100 million Total annual funding for RCPP is set at \$100 million plus an additional “7-percent of the funding or acres for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, and Healthy Forests Reserve Program will be directed through RCPP” (USDA ERS 2014).

RCPP serves to integrate regional and watershed level management of natural resources and conservation activities and to facilitate cooperation between state or local government, producer associations, and producers (CBO 2014). Projects that the program focuses on include water quality and quantity, soil erosion, wildlife habitat, drought mitigation, flood control, and other regional priorities (USDA OBPA 2014). The Farm Bill designates the minimum proportion of projects selected from a competitive process that is national (40%) and state-level (25%). It also specifies that that at least 35% of projects must come from “critical conservation” areas, defined as projects that “include multiple States with significant agricultural production, are covered by an existing agreement, would benefit from water quality and quantity improvement, and contain producers that need particular assistance” (USDA OBPA 2014).

### *How do I enroll?*

The RCPP is open to both partners and individual participants. Eligible producers or owners of agricultural or non-industrial private forest land may apply for assistance as an individual if they are located in an area

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Extension programs are available to all without discrimination.

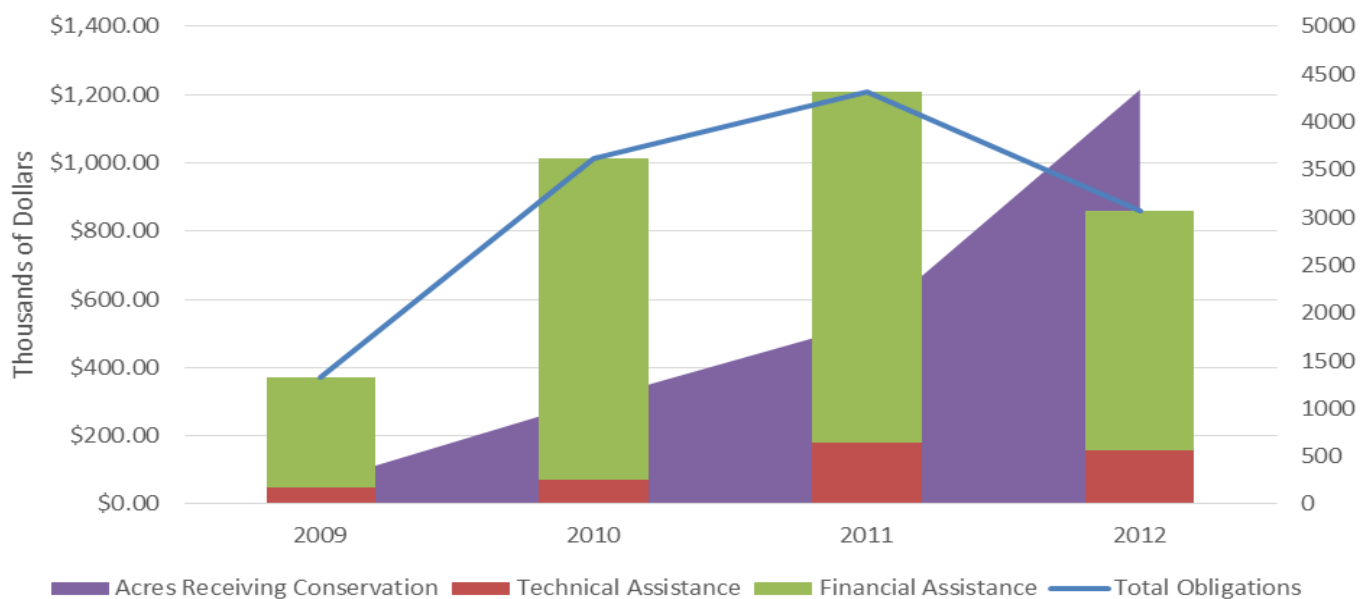
designated as a critical conservation area by the Secretary of Agriculture or if they are located in a partner area. Individuals may join partnership agreements, which may be for a period of up to five years, by entering into conservation program contracts or easement agreements.

Partners conduct outreach to eligible landowners and producers, educating them on projects and assisting them in the application process. Additionally partners help coordinate RCPP activities. They are responsible for covering part of project costs and assessing the projects affects. Applications for partnership agreements must include the activities to be implemented, the geographical scope of the project, including the potential agricultural or non-industrial private forest operations affected, and all planning, outreach, implementation and assessment to be conducted. Examples of eligible partners include agricultural or silvicultural producer associations, farmer cooperatives or other groups of producers, state or local governments, American Indian tribes, municipal water treatment entities, water and irrigation districts, conservation-driven nongovernmental organizations and institutions of higher education (USDA NRCS 2014).

Partnership applications to the program can be made when program funding is announced. Projects are selected according to requirements laid out in the announcement. Applications may be made directly at local USDA Service Centers in selected project areas and critical conservation areas. Applications can also be submitted by partners in a selected project area at the producer’s request.

*The RCPP in Colorado:*

The Agricultural Water Enhancement Program is the only predecessor to the RCPP for which data is readily available. Since 2009 the ACEP has seen steady increases in total acres receiving conservation. Total financial obligations of the program had increased each year from 2009 through 2011 before falling slightly in 2012. Nevertheless, the obligations of the program grew 232% over that four year period. Over that time period technical assistance for planning and expertise remained relatively constant as proportion of total obligations; growing slightly from 13% to 18%. Obligations for financial assistance to program participants grew from \$320,100 to \$702,600.



**Figure 1:** Historical Obligations of ACEP in Colorado, 2009-2012

**Source:** Natural Resources Conservation Service, 2013.

*Summary of changes to RCPP:*

<b>Prior Law/Policy</b>	<b>Enacted 2014 Farm Bill (P.L. 113-79)</b>
No directly comparable provision. Includes elements of the establishment and purposes section of the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program, the Chesapeake Bay Watershed program, the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative and the Great Lakes basin program for soil erosion and sediment control.	Establishes the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). Combines the purposes of AWEP, the Chesapeake Bay Watershed program, CCPI, and the Great Lakes basin program to further conservation, restoration, and sustainability on a regional or watershed scale, and encourage partners to cooperate with producers in meeting or avoiding regulatory requirements and implementing projects.
No directly comparable provision. Includes elements of previously mentioned programs.	Defines covered programs as ACEP, EQIP, CSP & HFRP. Eligible activities include those that address water quality and quantity concerns, drought mitigation, flood prevention, water retention, habitat conservation, erosion, forest restoration, air quality improvement, and others determined by USDA. Defines eligible land as cropland, grassland, rangeland, pastureland, nonindustrial private forest land; Eligible partners include state or local governments, Indian tribes, farmer cooperatives, institutes of higher education, municipal water or waste treatment entity, and other nongovernmental entity or organizations with a history of working with producers on conservation projects.
No directly comparable provision. Includes elements of previously mentioned programs, primarily AWEP and CCPI.	Authorizes competitive partnership agreements for a period not to exceed five years with a possible one-year extension. Describes the duties of partners as defining the scope of projects, conducting outreach, acting on behalf of producers to apply for assistance, leveraging financial and technical assistance, conducting assessments, and reporting results. Provides application process, content, criteria, and priority.
No directly comparable provision. Includes elements of previously mentioned programs, primarily AWEP and CCPI.	Directs USDA to enter into contracts to provide technical and financial assistance to producers participating in projects with eligible partners, or producers within a project area or critical conservation area not working through an eligible partner. Program rules, requirements, and payments are to be consistent with the covered programs (ACEP, EQIP, & CSP). Provides the Secretary the authority to adjust the rules of a covered program, including operational guidance and requirements in order to simplify the application and evaluation process. Prohibits the adjustment of statutory requirements for a covered program, including appeals, payment limits, conservation compliance, and prior irrigation history.
No directly comparable provision. Authorizes mandatory AWEP funds of \$73 million in FY2009 and FY2010, \$74 million in FY2011, and \$60 million each fiscal year thereafter. Sec. 1240Q(h) authorizes Chesapeake Bay Watershed program funds of \$23 million in FY2009, \$43 million in FY2010, \$72 million in FY2011, & \$50 million in FY2012. Sec. 1243(i) authorizes CCPI to use 6% of covered program for a state (90%) and national (10%) competition. Sec. 1240P(d) authorizes appropriations of \$5 million annually for the Great Lakes basin program.	Authorizes \$100 million annually for FY2014-FY2018 to remain available until expended. Annually reserves 7% of covered program funds until April 1st, after which time uncommitted funds are returned to the covered program.
No comparable provision.	Requires USDA to make information on selected projects publically available. Requires a report to Congress on December 31, 2014 (and every 2 years thereafter) on the status of projects funded.

No comparable provision.	Requires USDA to use 35% of the funds and acres available for RCPP for partnership agreements within no more than six critical conservation areas that expire after 5 years, subject to redesignation. Areas are selected based on: multi-state areas with significant agricultural production; existing agreement or plan in place; water quality concerns; water quantity concerns; vital habitat for migrating wildlife; or subject to regulatory requirements.
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**Figure 1:** Summary of Changes to RCPP  
**Source:** Congressional Research Service, 2014

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