

Prioritizing public-private partnerships to advance conservation

Background

The Midwest Row Crop Collaborative (MRCC) convenes leading companies and nonprofits that span the full food and agriculture value chain to catalyze systems change. MRCC members test innovative approaches to address key systemic barriers, distribute risk, and learn from the process to inform and accelerate the design of future supply chain programs.

MRCC supports on-the-ground collaborative projects that drive impact and support shared-learning across the value chain. These projects inform policy priorities that enable the systemic change needed to strengthen the resilience of our food and agricultural systems.

Public-private partnership programs

Public-private partnerships, when properly calibrated, meet shared goals and deploy innovative, scalable conservation projects on the landscape and should be prioritized in the 2023 Farm Bill. These partnership programs leverage taxpayer dollars and corporate, NGO, and Tribal match funds to implement climate-smart and regenerative practices on farms and ranches.

Public-private partnership programs are vital to successful conservation efforts because they:

- Bring in new farmers who wouldn't otherwise seek USDA resources.
- Encourage collaborative innovation on locally specific projects to test new ideas quickly.
- Spur innovation (i.e., ecosystem markets) by supporting upfront implementation costs.
- Stretch the reach of government funding.

Existing USDA partnership programs include:

- **NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Classic:** Producers, landowners, and communities collaborate with project partners using NRCS contracts and easements.
- **NRCS RCPP Grants:** Partners work directly with producers to support the development of new conservation approaches not available under RCPP Classic.
- **NRCS Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG):** Public-private grantees test innovative conservation strategies and market-based solutions to resource challenges. Grantees must match funds at least one to one.
- **Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities (PCSC):** Public-private partnerships pilot test projects focused on production and marketing of climate-smart commodities. Currently funds both large producers/operations and small/underserved producers.

What is working?

Public-private partnerships may have lower barriers to entry than traditional conservation programs and afford producers and implementers the agility necessary for innovation. Longer term pilot programs (3-5 years) allow for learning and evaluation, certainty and confidence for participating producers, and investment in human capital to innovate new NRCS practices. Private dollars used for popular soil health practices such as cover crops leverage complementary public funding for less common soil health practices that may require a front-loaded investment. The set aside for underserved farmers in PCSC is a good model that meets the needs of large and small producers.



What can be improved?

Equity

Burdensome RCPP implementation requirements and restrictions on indirect costs limit producer eligibility for the programs and create program participation and management barriers.

Scaling and systems

Stronger measurement, reporting, and verification of climate impacts on RCPP and CIG projects must be prioritized to scale-up successful outcomes. Robust project-level data enables private partners to align their Scope 3 and water goals and reporting. Complementary infrastructure and rural economic investments are needed to support system-wide climate-smart agriculture.



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Recommendations

Funding

- Using PCSC as a model, establish two funding pools for both RCPP and CIG grants—one for underserved and socially disadvantaged producers and one for all other producers.
- Increase funding for USDA NRCS digital infrastructure to streamline and enhance data collection, management, and analysis of climate and biodiversity outcomes from public-private partnership programs. A simplified reporting database increases usability and decreases burdensome farm-level data reporting requirements.

Program eligibility and development

- Expand project eligibility to include rural infrastructure and economic development investments.
- Establish a dedicated program to support the systematic transfer and adoption of climate-smart innovations into mainstream programming. The program should prioritize technology transfer from public-private partnership programs, Agricultural Research Service, universities, traditional ecological knowledge experts, and others, into programs, technical assistance, educational approaches, technical standards, and conservation planning. The technology transfer team should convene an expert advisory group and deliver regular progress reports on NRCS and FSA programming and standards.

Technical assistance and capacity building

- Increase technical assistance for producers and private partners to support evaluation and reporting requirements, including increased funding for NRCS county and state staff and prioritization of hiring for unfilled NRCS staff positions that directly support producers at the local level.
- Establish a USDA workstream that supports increased private sector collaboration within the Secretary of Agriculture's office or the Office of the Undersecretary of Farm Production and Conservation. This workstream should gather private sector, NGO, and farmer input on best practices for climate-smart agriculture, identify insights from program evaluation data, advise the Secretary on scaling climate-smart agriculture projects, and expand the reach of existing programs.