



Overview

To improve the health of the Mississippi River Basin, including water quality and wildlife habitat, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service is pleased to announce the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI). Through this new Initiative, NRCS and its partners will help producers in selected watersheds in the Mississippi River Basin voluntarily implement conservation practices and systems that avoid, control, and trap nutrient runoff; improve wildlife habitat; and maintain agricultural productivity.

The Initiative will build on the past efforts of producers, NRCS, partners, and other State and Federal agencies in the 12-State Initiative area to address nutrient loading in the Mississippi River Basin. Nutrient loading contributes to both local water quality problems and the hypoxic zone in the Gulf of Mexico. The 12 participating States are Arkansas, Kentucky, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee, and Wisconsin. MRBI will be implemented by NRCS through the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI), the Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP), Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG), and other programs.

Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative

NRCS will offer this Initiative in fiscal years (FYs) 2010 through 2013, dedicating at least \$80 million in financial assistance in each fiscal year. This is in addition to funding by other Federal agencies, States, and partners and the contributions of producers. The \$80 million will be in addition to regular NRCS program funding in the 12 Initiative States, and will be supported with needed technical assistance.

NRCS MRBI Funding (in millions of dollars)

	FY 10	FY 11	FY 12	FY 13
CCPI	\$50	\$50	\$50	\$50
WREP	\$25	\$25	\$25	\$25
CIG	\$5	\$5	\$5	\$5
Total	\$80	\$80	\$80	\$80

How Will MRBI Work?

Step One: Watershed Selection

NRCS, in consultation with State Technical Committees, selected forty-one (41) 8-digit hydrologic unit code (HUC) watersheds as focus areas for the MRBI. (8-digit HUC watersheds are 250,000 to 1,250,000 acres in size). When making these selections, States considered future growth opportunities and providing opportunities for maximum program participation. States utilized a consistent watershed evaluation process that included the following information:

- Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) data.
- Spatially Referenced Regression On Watershed (SPARROW) attributes. SPARROW is a statistically based U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) modeling approach that attempts to explain in-stream measures of water quality in relation to upstream sources.
- State-level nutrient reduction strategies and priorities.
- State-level water quality data.
- Monitoring and modeling of nitrogen and phosphorous management in the watershed.

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Step Two: Request for Proposals

NRCS will announce a Request for Proposals (RFP) for the MRBI. The request will seek proposals to utilize the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) and the Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP) as the foundation for MRBI to leverage investment from non-Federal sources and ensure coordination of NRCS efforts with other Federal, State, Tribal, and local efforts.

The RFP will allow eligible partners to submit proposals addressing the conservation objectives to be achieved in one or more 12-digit HUC subwatersheds within the designated 8-digit focus area or areas. All proposals will be submitted to the NRCS Chief and copied to the appropriate State Conservationist(s). For information on the RFP and a list of focus area watersheds, please go to www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/mrbi/mrbi.html.

Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative

CCPI offers a statutory (2008 Farm Bill) funding mechanism for targeting resources on a watershed basis across three programs: the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

Under MRBI-CCPI, NRCS enters into multi-year agreements with eligible partner organizations to use EQIP, WHIP, and/or CSP to address conservation priorities related to agriculture and nonindustrial private forest land. The MRBI-CCPI emphasizes a "systems approach" to address water quality resource concerns. A cornerstone of this approach is to use screening and ranking systems to focus program support on participants who will implement a system of practices, that is, multiple practices and management techniques that work together to

address the nitrogen and phosphorous generated from agricultural runoff. NRCS has approved a number of core and supporting conservation practices, which are recognized methods of avoiding, trapping and controlling pollutants. (See the list of core and supporting conservation practices at www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/mrbi/mrbi.html).

AVOIDING - Cover Crops



CONTROLLING - No-Till



TRAPPING - Wetlands



Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program

MRBI-WREP enables NRCS to enter into agreements with a State, non-governmental organization (NGO), or Tribe to carry out special projects that will advance the restoration, protection, or enhancement of wetlands on private and/or Tribal lands.

MRBI-WREP will offer opportunities for the restoration of wetland ecosystems. These wetlands can be used to filter surface waters near the watershed outlets, while providing additional resource benefits such as wildlife habitat.

Conservation Innovation Grants

Similar to the Chesapeake Bay component of CIG, a special CIG category will be designated for MRBI. CIG affords a competitive opportunity to match funds and collaborate with non-Federal agencies, NGOs, Tribes, and individuals on innovative projects (technologies and/or approaches) that will further the objectives of the Initiative. CIG grants will be made available to fund innovative projects related to nutrient management, drainage water management, bio-filters, market-based approaches to conservation on a watershed scale, and other high-priority interest areas where field trials and demonstrations are needed and/or scaling up of previous proven research to a farm or watershed scale is desired.

Other Programs

In addition to NRCS programs, many other Federal, State, and local programs could be focused on the designated watersheds. This could include the Farm Service Agency (FSA) Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) 319 Program.

Step Three: Implementation

For CCPI, WREP and CIG, implementation will extend beyond FY 2013, because funds are obligated through contracts and agreements for multiple years. The number of new watersheds added each year through FY 2013 under both CCPI and WREP will depend on how much of each year's new funding is needed to meet prior-year commitments in previously selected proposals.

Step Four: Outcome Measurement

The MRBI Initiative is adopting a three-tiered monitoring and evaluation approach designed to assess environmental outcomes at the field, 12-digit and 8-digit watershed scales. Higher priority will be given to projects that adopt this three-tiered approach where the partner can provide resources or services or conduct activities to monitor water quality and evaluate effects of conservation practices/systems and activities implemented through the project on a field or edge-of-field scale as well as at selected downstream monitoring points. A framework for watershed and edge-of-field monitoring can be found at: www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/mrbi/mrbi.html.

The Role of Partners

In addition to providing input for watershed selection criteria and the processes used to implement MRBI, partners will have a crucial role in encouraging and supporting producer participation. Partners' involvement will be key in a variety of ways, including:

- Providing information and conducting education and outreach activities.
- Forming agreements to provide staffing for technical assistance and education activities.
- Joining the State Technical Committee to provide input for future focus area and watershed selection.
- Submitting proposals for CCPI, CIG, and WREP or partnering with a group submitting a proposal.
- Targeting their agency's or organization's programs toward the Initiative's watersheds.
- Assisting with monitoring, evaluation, and assessment.

Specifically, interested partners at the national level are asked to:

- Designate a point of contact for collaboration with NRCS.
- Provide NRCS a description of how they would like to collaborate (funding, technical assistance, outreach, etc.) with MRBI.

Contact Information

Partner responses should be emailed to Thomas Christensen, Central Regional Conservationist, at thomas.christensen@wdc.usda.gov. For additional information please go to www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/mrbi/mrbi.html.