

## Regional Conservation Partnership Program Improvement Act

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program Improvement Act, introduced by Sen. Debbie Stabenow and Sen. Joni Ernst makes changes to expand, strengthen, and improve the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), an innovative approach to conservation first authorized in the 2014 Farm Bill. These new improvements will provide more resources for partners and producers to expand the reach and effectiveness of conservation projects, while cutting red-tape and increasing flexibility to attract new partners and encourage innovation in addressing natural resource concerns.

The legislation makes the following changes to RCPP:

- **Eliminates the burdensome requirement** that projects must operate through existing USDA conservation programs and abide by their corresponding rules and regulations, which often do not provide enough flexibility to accommodate the unique needs and focus of RCPP projects. Instead, the bill requires USDA to operate RCPP as its own program with project partners defining the combination of conservation activities that will be most effective in addressing local natural resource concerns, which will increase flexibility and ease of administration.
- **Makes the program work better for producers** by allowing them to access financial assistance through a new, streamlined contract that is tailored specifically to the conservation activities targeted by the project. It also requires USDA to set specific timelines for approving contracts and awarding funding to producers so that they will have certainty in how and when financial assistance will be made available to implement conservation activities on their operations to meet the project objectives.
- **Increases resources to expand the reach of conservation activities** so that more producers can participate. Recognizing that partnerships through RCPP can more than double the federal investment in conservation activities, the bill raises the percentage of funding contributed from USDA conservation programs from 7% to 20%, allows funding transferred to RCPP to remain available for use in the program, and better targets funding to critical conservation areas and state initiatives.
- **Encourages more diverse partnerships** by simplifying the project application process, providing additional flexibility in partner matching contributions, and allocating funding to partners for project outreach and development activities.
- **Fosters new and innovative approaches to conservation** by authorizing a pilot grant program that allows partners to directly operate conservation projects. For example, conservation activities involving multiple producers at a watershed scale or projects that utilize innovative financing methods like pay-for-performance, may be eligible for funding under the grant pilot.
- **Increases focus on conservation outcomes** - such as improved water quality, drought resilience, and wildlife habitat - by requiring partners to report on progress made by projects in addressing the natural resource concerns and related outcomes.