



Agricultural Collaboration Toolkit



Collaboration Toolkit:

Protecting Drinking Water Sources Through Agricultural Conservation Practices

Are you interested in getting more agricultural conservation practices on the ground to help protect sources of drinking water? If you're working at the state level, a natural ally is the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS, U.S. Department of Agriculture) State Conservationist's or District Conservationist's office. Another key set of allies is conservation districts – important partners at the local level, who also have helpful contacts at the state level.

This toolkit, developed as a result of extensive collaboration between members of the Source Water Collaborative, the NRCS, and the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), offers a step-by-step approach. The resources inside are useful for anyone working in source water protection: from those who already know their NRCS State Conservationist or District Conservationist or NACD Executive Director/Board Member or Conservation District Manager, but may be looking for new ideas, to those aiming to build a successful relationship. Each insightful tip is based on advice we received from NRCS and NACD, and from state and regional source water coordinators who recently fostered effective partnerships.

Note that many successful projects rely on participation from local conservation districts and the office of the NRCS State Conservationist. Both can bring key partners, especially producers and private landowners, to the table for project planning or implementation. And both often have access to technical and financial resources, as well as credibility with local and state leaders. Where you start can depend on your own network of connections or on a personal introduction you are able to get through one of your contacts. Either path of this toolkit can help you access a useful network of state and local participants. Depending on current priorities, you may find that some are more receptive to further discussions about source water protection needs, and will contribute to the success of your source water protection project.

Click an option to be taken to the page

Local Level

How To Work With Conservation Districts

State Level

**How To Work With
NRCS State Conservationists**

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"Multiple rows of trees and shrubs, as well as a native grass strip, combine in a riparian buffer to protect Bear Creek in Story County, Iowa. The buffer is a nationally designated demonstration area for riparian buffers." Iowa

Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS

How to Work with Conservation Districts

Get Started

STEP
1

Understand How Conservation Districts Can Help Protect and Improve Sources of Drinking Water

STEP
2

Get Started

STEP
3

Take Action

STEP
4

Funding Resources

STEP
5

Partners



Understand How Conservation Districts Can Help Protect And Improve Sources Of Drinking Water

What Are Conservation Districts?

Conservation districts have a presence in 3000 counties across the nation and in US territories, and have links to community leaders and landowners in urban suburban, and rural areas. Conservation districts provide technical assistance, outreach, education, and links to resources for private landowners to plan and implement conservation practices to protect soil and water quality. Districts encourage active, voluntary participation from landowners to support the success of conservation work on private land.

Conservation districts are well-connected at the state and local level, particularly with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service and are effective partners in drinking water protection in many communities. If you want to partner with a conservation district, a good first step is to understand how your district is organized and who to contact. Since they are established under state laws, conservation districts vary in what they are called and how they are funded. This Toolkit can help explain their basic structure, and help you find your state or local contact. It also provides ideas on how to communicate your shared interests and goals.

The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) is a valued [Source Water Collaborative member](#) committed to source water protection.

Conservation Districts Partners:

- Local entities set up by state statute, often corresponding with counties
- Recognized local leader in nonpoint source water quality and quantity, soil health, and watershed planning on agricultural, forested, and urban lands
- Provides technical assistance and education and is a trusted resource for farmers, private landowners, and local governments on soil and water conservation projects
- Participates in USDA/NRCS State Technical Committee and leads Local Working Groups to assist in identifying state and local priorities for NRCS funding and technical assistance
- Integral part of the Conservation Partnership implementing the Farm Bill

Common Ground Key Opportunities to Work Together

- Participate in NRCS State Technical Committee and Local Working Groups to help prioritize source water protection concerns and opportunities
- Ensure that watershed plans developed under the EPA 319 Nonpoint Source Protection Program and other programs include healthy watersheds and groundwater as well as impaired waters
- Participate in or initiate state, regional, and local source water collaboratives (examples: <https://sourcewatercollaborative.org/how-to-collaborate-toolkit/map/>) and the environment

Find My State Or Local Conservation District Contact

This toolkit will walk you through an array of information to help you connect with conservation districts. [Click here](#) to see an overview of how conservation districts are named and organized in each state.

Already know where you want to start? [Click here](#) for a quick finder for your state or local level conservation districts contacts.



Get Started

The general term “conservation districts” is used throughout this toolkit, but it’s important to know many states use different terminology. (A handy link below will help you find the correct name in your state.) Conservation district boundaries also vary by state: they could be along county lines or geography (e.g. mountain range, body of water, watersheds).

As you consider reaching out to conservation district staff in your area, take a moment to review these key resources to help orient you to their structure, programs and priorities so you’re better informed before your first interaction.

What You Need To Know To Get Started

- Find the specific terminology for your state/area [here](#).
- Visit local conservation district websites to get a sense of their current activities. [Click here](#) to find specific conservation district websites.
- Look for the conservation district’s annual workplan or report on their website to understand their priorities and programs and find opportunities to connect.
- Identify a specific geographic area or project to propose for collaboration, where systems of conservation practices could help protect and improve drinking water sources. If available, use the conservation district’s annual workplan or report to help you identify an area to propose to conservation district staff. Know that they may be most interested in projects that help farmers with the bottom line of their operations, so consider discussing with the conservation district how to best make this connection.
 - **TIP:** Your state Nonpoint Source (NPS) Coordinator (who works in the state 319 Clean Water Act program) may already be working with the conservation district or other local partners on specific watershed projects. To contact them about existing relationships, [click here](#) to find your coordinator, as well as links to all the state NPS management program websites.
 - **TIP:** Project ideas for local districts could come from a district employee, the local Conservation District Board, USDA agency, local watershed planning group, county commissioners/council, or others. To gain broad support, it is helpful if the project idea is within the scope of the conservation district’s annual workplan or report.
 - **TIP:** Keep in mind that the Natural Resources Conservation Service has employees in nearly every county. [Click here](#) to find your local USDA Service Center.

The two-page infographic (on the following pages) highlights what source water programs and conservation districts can bring to a collaborative effort to protect sources of drinking water. Print these two pages for a meeting handout.

COLLABORATION CAN PROTECT SOURCES OF DRINKING WATER

TOGETHER WE CAN

- Align our work for multiple benefits in agricultural, forested, and urban areas, focusing on soil health, watershed management, and open space preservation that protects water quality and quantity of underground and surface drinking water sources, and the overall health of communities
- Work together with partners to leverage and share resources, tools, and funding to achieve and demonstrate results in priority areas
- Provide education, outreach, and technical assistance on voluntary (non-regulatory) programs for private landowners/operators and local governments

SOURCE WATER PARTNER*

- Shares data and information on delineated source water protection areas, priority contaminants, sources of contamination, and water quality monitoring results
- Helps leverage potential funding sources
- Assists with implementation and helps target USDA initiatives (e.g., identifying priority areas and potential benefits of conservation practices to drinking water sources)
- May assist in conducting outreach to private landowners and operators
- State, Regional, and Local Source Water Contacts:
 - » State Source Water Coordinator: <https://www.asdwa.org/sourcewatercontacts/>
 - » Regional Source Water Coordinators, US Environmental Protection Agency: <https://www.epa.gov/sourcewaterprotection/source-water-contacts-epas-regional-offices>
 - » State, regional, and local Source Water Collaboratives: <https://sourcewatercollaborative.org/how-to-collaborate-toolkit/map>

CONSERVATION DISTRICT PARTNER

- Local entities set up by state statute, often corresponding with counties
- Recognized local leader in nonpoint source water quality and quantity, soil health, and watershed planning on agricultural, forested, and urban lands
- Provides technical assistance and education and is a trusted resource for farmers, private landowners, and local governments on soil and water conservation projects
- Participates in USDA/NRCS State Technical Committee and leads Local Working Groups to assist in identifying state and local priorities for NRCS funding and technical assistance
- Integral part of the Conservation Partnership implementing the Farm Bill
 - » State Association of Conservation Districts: contact the Executive Director or President <https://www.nacdnet.org/general-resources/conservation-district-directory/>
 - » State Conservation Agency: find staff contact <https://www.nascanet.org/find-your-state-rep/>
 - » State Office of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service: contact the Assistant State Conservationist for Programs <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/contact/states/>



MOVING AHEAD TOGETHER

- Participate in NRCS State Technical Committee and Local Working Groups to help prioritize source water protection concerns and opportunities
- Ensure that watershed plans developed under the EPA 319 Nonpoint Source Protection Program and other programs include healthy watersheds and groundwater as well as impaired waters
- Participate in or initiate state, regional, and local source water collaboratives (examples: <https://sourcewatercollaborative.org/how-to-collaborate-toolkit/map/>)

***Note:** Many groups are invested in protecting the public's sources of drinking water. Depending on your area, Source Water Partners might include water utilities, local watershed groups, technical assistance providers, non-governmental organizations, or local governments, e.g. planning commissions.

The Source Water Collaborative, twenty-nine national entities representing federal, state, and local partners, works together to protect drinking water sources for generations to come.

The 2018 Farm Bill emphasizes protection of drinking water sources: The conference report reserves 10 percent of covered conservation funding for the protection of sources of drinking water, allows community water systems to work with State Technical Committees to identify local priority areas for source water protection, and allows additional incentives for practices that protect source water. (House-Senate Conference Report)

Opportunities:

- Participate in State Technical Committee identification of priority source water watersheds;
- Identify partners and help develop applications for key programs (National Water Quality Initiative, Regional Conservation Partnership Program, Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, easement, and other conservation programs);
- Provide outreach to engage landowners in priority areas.

Conservation Districts play an important role in providing technical assistance, identifying funding, and bringing partners to source water protection projects:

Rhode Island: The Northern Rhode Island Conservation District partnered with the Providence Water Supply Board and the state of Rhode Island on a source water protection project to protect Providence Water Supply Board's Scituate Reservoir, funded by a \$3.9 million US Forest Service Forest Legacy program grant. The project established conservation easements on 716 acres on 14 key properties in the Scituate Watershed. The Scituate Reservoir Watershed spans five towns in western Rhode Island and is arguably the most important forested area in the State; providing drinking water for 60 percent of the State's population (962,570 residents) and is the location for 61 percent of commercial timber harvests in the last 10 years. The Northern Rhode Island Conservation District played an essential role in outreach to landowners.

Supporting parties: Providence Water Supply Board; Rhode Island Woodland Partnership; The Nature Conservancy; Rhode Island Audubon Society; Scituate Conservation Commission; Scituate Land Trust; Rhode Island Land Trust Council; RI Dept. of Administration, Division of Planning; and North West Rhode Island Supporters of Open Space.

https://www.nacdnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/SR_Fall19.pdf

Iowa: Plymouth County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) partnered with the City of Remsen, Iowa to reduce nitrate in municipal drinking water wells. The Plymouth County SWCD played a key role in the development of the source water protection plan, and made the local community contacts that initiated the planning process. The District provided substantial technical support in the plan's development, including identifying and providing a GIS map of critical lands near the public wells, making initial contact with landowners, contacting the local Pheasants Forever president and chapter members, providing cost estimates of a native grass seeding plan for the critical lands, enrolling eligible Conservation Reserve Program acreage, and providing information on proper maintenance of the lands.

Supporting parties: Remsen Utilities Board; Local landowners; Plymouth County Sanitation; Plymouth Soil & Water Conservation District; USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service; Plymouth County Pheasants Forever with Youth Council; Iowa Department of Natural Resources; Iowa Department of Agriculture & Land Stewardship; Division of Soil Conservation; Watershed Improvement Review Board; Sioux Rivers Resource Conservation & Development, Iowa Department of Natural Resources Drinking Water State Revolving Fund.

https://sourcewatercollaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/RemsenIowa_FINAL.pdf

Pennsylvania: Schuylkill River, drinking water source for nearly 2 million people

Agriculture: Berks County Conservation District led a workgroup that completed farm improvement projects such as streambank fencing, riparian buffer plantings, animal crossings, and worked with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) on the selection of projects for Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funding. They implemented a "whole farm" approach, addressing all of the major pollution problems at each site.

Acid Mine Drainage: The Schuylkill County Conservation District and the Schuylkill Headwaters Association led an effort resulting in significant progress in remediating or eliminating abandoned mine drainage, restoring floodplains, and educating and involving the public in the effort to improve the quality of the river as a resource.

Stormwater: The workgroup partners with municipalities, government agencies, water suppliers, other watershed organizations and schools to implement best management practices. Montgomery County Conservation District helped install a large rain garden to process stormwater from a parking lot and athletic fields at a local high school.

For more information on the Schuylkill Action Network: www.schuylkillwaters.org



"Grass filter strip planted along a stream on a farm in Carroll County, Iowa, helps keep sediment and farm chemicals out of the stream and out of Lake Panorama farther downstream." Iowa

Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS



Take Action

Based on feedback from the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) and source water professionals who have built successful relationships with conservation district staff, here are suggested actions, approaches, resources, and tips to help you collaborate. Protecting drinking water sources provides a rallying point for identifying a mutually beneficial set of actions.

These projects work best if they are engaged at multiple levels. For example, when a water system and a local conservation district work together, you can also leverage expertise, opportunities and resources if state and federal counterparts are also on the same page.

In My Efforts To Protect Sources Of Drinking Water, I Am Seeking Opportunities To Work With Conservation Districts At The:

State Level

Local Level

Working With Conservation Districts At The State Level

If you are interested in reaching out, here are two suggestions you can consider to get started. Both offer opportunities to gain useful information and contacts.

- ✓ **Schedule a Meeting** View the NACD website to find which specific state contact NACD has recommended you contact. [Click on this link](#) and select your state to find the recommended state contacts and view a map to find local conservation district contacts and some websites with annual work plans or reports. Since titles and positions vary by state, the recommended contact could be the Executive Director/President of the State Association of Conservation Districts, NACD Board Member, or Director of the conservation agency* responsible for conservation districts. The conservation agency might be the Department of Environmental Quality, State Department of Natural Resources, or the State Department of Agriculture.
- ✓ **Ask your USDA NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Programs for an invitation** to attend a State Technical Committee Meeting* (sometimes referred to as a State Tech Meeting or “STAC”). These meetings are open to the public and some of your state’s NRCS District Conservationists might attend. State Technical Committees provide advice and recommendations to the NRCS State Conservationists and guidance to Local Working Groups. The NRCS State Conservationist acts as the Committee Chair and ensures equal representation of interests among committee members during meetings. This meeting is a great place to make a variety of connections with agriculture leaders in one place, to become familiar with their priorities and concerns, and to understand how the Committee develops recommendations for funding decisions made by the NRCS State Conservationist. Find the contact information for your NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Programs [here](#).

Resources To Prepare:

For State-Level Conservation District Meeting:

- Check in with [your state Nonpoint Source \(NPS\) program](#) to identify the potential for coordinated work in priority watersheds and recommended conservation district contacts. The State NPS Management Program Plan identifies priorities. State NPS programs (supported by section 319 of the Clean Water Act), provide funds and set criteria for projects in priority watersheds to address impaired and threatened waters and link to source water protection, where appropriate. About half the funding goes toward watershed restoration and protection projects, generally in the form of subgrants from the state water quality agency to local partners. [Click here](#) to find your state NPS program coordinator.
- USDA NRCS State Conservationists often have agreements with conservation districts for specific projects. State Conservationists have decision making authority and flexibility to offer technical and financial assistance to private landowners and operators. Ask your [Associate State Conservationist for Programs](#) to share the state’s priority source water areas and other opportunities to promote conservation practices such as the [National Water Quality Initiative](#). You can also ask if the state’s 3-5 year plan (available to partners) includes water quality language in the priority resource concerns. This might be helpful in making your case for source water protection projects.

For State Technical Committee Meeting:

- Each State Technical Committee meeting has a different dynamic. Some can be very formal so it is best to respect the process and observe more in the beginning, to develop your understanding. There may be a chance during a “round robin” part of the agenda to briefly describe your role in drinking water protection. If you have limited time, introduce priority geographic areas for protecting drinking water sources, and express your interest in working with conservation districts.
- If you have more time to share information at the meeting, it may help to mention the Source Water Collaborative and NRCS’s and NACD’s membership. Be sure to express your interest in meeting with conservation districts, and suggest a follow-up meeting with those interested.
- If the next State Technical Committee meeting will not be held for a while, you may want to reach out first to schedule a meeting with the State Executive Director, or other recommended state contact listed on the NACD website.

Suggested Meeting Approach:

- **Be flexible in your approach:** Depending on your timing, the scope of your project(s) or goals, dates of specific scheduled meetings, and availability of key contacts, there may be a number of different opportunities in your state. Suggested actions would vary by state (and according to current opportunities – e.g., if the next State Technical Committee meeting isn't soon, schedule a meeting with the Conservation District Manager or State Executive Director before the next meeting.). Having trouble scheduling a meeting? Ask if you can “piggyback” on another meeting such as the [Local Working Group](#) meeting or a county level ag meeting to get acquainted.
- **Agenda/Talking Points:** A main goal of this initial meeting may be to consult with conservation leaders on tips for who to work with at the district level and discuss district priorities and upcoming opportunities.
- **What to Bring:** Bring concrete information about what source water protection has to offer:
 - GIS maps, e.g. maps of high priority areas for source water protection
 - Source water assessment data
 - Source water protection plans, particularly in priority watersheds [identified in the State NPS Management Program plan](#). Work in these watersheds is based on plans developed for the project area by the state's NPS coordinator. Watersheds are also identified through national initiatives. Here are two examples:

[Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative](#)

[Great Lakes Restoration Initiative](#)
- **Participate in tours, field trips & conferences organized by conservation districts:** If you have trouble scheduling a meeting, meet them where they are. These present great opportunities to meet key leaders and understand their priorities and issues. Developing these kinds of informal working relationships is a key element of success. Those with long-term relationships say the power of time spent in the field with the district and their clientele cannot be understated.

Tips:

- Many state associations of conservation districts organize annual meetings at the state level, where they provide an overview of the past year's activities and training for their main attendees – conservation districts staff and Board Members. Conservation partners from USDA-NRCS and other state agencies also are participants. Many of the states have the information on their state association websites. There may be an opportunity to provide training on protecting sources of drinking water, including priority areas and important conservation practices.
- You can also connect with conservation district colleagues by participating in their regional meetings. Check NACD's online [event calendar](#) for meetings in your region.
- Many state associations of conservation districts are engaged in project implementation with the state nonpoint source/Clean Water Act Section 319 coordinator, and are familiar with watershed protection and restoration projects. Demonstrating source water concerns that align with the state's nonpoint source priorities and priority areas can provide an additional opportunity to involve the conservation districts.
- State departments of agriculture can play a key role with conservation districts, and may have access to state funding sources. [See state contacts here.](#)
- State source water protection staff may have partners such as non-profit organizations who can assist conservation districts with completing funding applications. [See state contacts here.](#)
- Be persistent. It is important to “keep showing up” at agriculture meetings in your state. If conservation district staff and NRCS staff see you showing up regularly at their meetings, it will demonstrate that you are genuinely interested in working with them. You will start to receive other invitations and be afforded more opportunities to participate.

Working With Conservation Districts At The Local Level

The size of the staff varies by district. Some conservation districts have no staff – in that case, the conservation district Board Member would be the main contact.

Contact your local District Manager/Administrator or Board Member* to schedule a “get acquainted” meeting. Request a meeting at their office, since travel might be difficult, or have an introductory conversation by phone.

Resources to Prepare:

- To find the district contact in your area, [click here](#) for the interactive link to the State Directory and all districts via NACD.
- Each conservation district has an annual workplan or report, which can be a helpful resource to help you identify their priority issues and areas. Check the conservation district’s website to see if the annual plan is available. If it’s not on the web, you can [contact their state office to request a copy](#).
- The conservation district may be assisting landowners in developing conservation plans with practices that can help protect drinking water sources. Sharing your source water data and maps can help inform this planning process.
- To get background on existing or planned watershed projects that may relate to source water protection interests, contact your state [Nonpoint Source \(NPS\) Coordinator](#), who may already be working with the conservation district or other local partners. State NPS programs are typically located within the state’s water quality agency. If possible, plan to bring an ally (for example from NRCS or state agriculture department) with a connection to the conservation district with you to the meeting, or ask them to make a call on your behalf before the meeting.

Suggested Meeting Approach:

- **Be flexible in your approach:** Depending on your timing, the scope of your project(s) or goals, dates of specific scheduled meetings, and availability of key contacts, there may be a number of different opportunities. If you are unable to schedule a meeting at their office, invite the Conservation District Manager/Administrator to your next project meeting.
- **Agenda/Talking Points:** Your main goals for this initial meeting may be to:
 - Identify their priority areas and discuss specific geographic areas where you would like to make improvements in source water quality.
 - Identify the key drinking water pollutants and sources in the district.
 - Identify opportunities to include key partners such as drinking water supply manager, conservation district partners, members of state, watershed, or local collaboratives in the area, or members of the national Source Water Collaborative.
- **What to Bring:** Focus on what you can do for them. Bring concrete information about what source water protection has to offer:
 - GIS maps, including maps of high priority areas for source water protection
 - Source water assessment data
 - Source water protection plans (particularly in priority 319 watersheds)
 - Proposed projects
 - Ideas for matching funds
 - Help with identifying potential partners

Tips:

- District Managers/Administrators are the key local contacts for conservation districts, and are potential participants in local source water protection teams.
- District Conservationists are USDA/NRCS employees, and may be co-located in the same conservation district office.
- Get to know the office administrator – as other staff may be very busy.

- Remember that conservation district staff may require funding for work beyond an initial meeting on a project. Be aware that your request could significantly impact their staff's workload. In some states, the NRCS liaison helps to do an assessment of new workload to decide if they need to bring in additional assistance and how to fund additional technical help. Big projects may need a project coordinator who might be a new hire or a contractor to perform the task.
- The NRCS Local Working Group meeting is a good way to meet local landowners and operators (farmers, ranchers) and district staff, and to hear their perspective on local issues "on the ground." Local working groups are convened and chaired by the local conservation district and are composed of governmental and local stakeholders. The purpose of the local working group is to facilitate locally led conservation and to provide advice to NRCS concerning the implementation of conservation programs. Recommendations for decisions about USDA-NRCS local funding distribution are made at these meetings. Depending on the state, the conservation district's Board Member may chair the meeting.
- Your State Source Water Coordinator may have data and connections with other potential partners such as non-profit organizations who can assist with completing funding applications. [Find your state contact here.](#)
- Be persistent. It is important to "keep showing up" at agriculture meetings in your state or at the county level if you're interested in a specific geographic area. If conservation district staff and NRCS staff see you showing up regularly at their meetings, it will demonstrate that you are genuinely interested in working with them. You will start to receive other invitations and be afforded opportunities to participate more.

Success Stories

- [Remsen, Iowa](#)
- [Portland Water District \(Maine\)](#)
- [Schuylkill Action Network \(PA\)](#)
- [New Spiro Lake, Oklahoma](#)

[Contact us](#) to share your successful partnership with a conservation district.



"A farmer discuss his conservation plan with his NRCS and local Soil and Water Conservation District representatives (Urbanna, Va.)."

Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS

STEP 4

Funding Resources

Your project planning can be better informed if you're aware of the key funding sources conservation districts use to manage and protect land and water resources. Keep in mind that because conservation districts are established under state laws, their funding sources vary by state. In some states, conservation districts are organized as special purpose taxing districts, eligible for loans and grants, and considered a municipal entity.

- **The Nonpoint Source/319 Program** is often a funding source for watershed protection and restoration activities implemented through conservation districts. Most state NPS programs issue RFPs to solicit proposals from local projects.
 - Larger drinking water systems may have funds (or in-kind services) to provide a non-federal match for a nonpoint source/319 funded project
 - When the project is at the local level and the conservation district or watershed group is writing a 319 grant proposal, source water partners can offer to provide letters of support and/or provide guidance on how the proposal could be structured to address drinking water concerns.
- **The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)** often provides direct funding to conservation districts. For this reason, it is important to "pitch" your project ideas to NRCS staff so they can target their funds in priority watersheds.
 - NRCS can provide funding for voluntary implementation of conservation practices and for voluntary development and implementation of forest management plans. For more information on USDA conservation programs see the, "How To Work With NRCS State Conservationists" section of this toolkit.
- **State Departments of Agriculture, Departments of Environmental Quality, and Departments of Natural Resources** can be sources of funding for state/local projects
- For information on a wide array of funding resources, see EPA's Catalogs of Funding Resources:
 - FITS: Funding Integration Tool for Source Water
 - [Catalog of Federal Funding Sources for Watershed Protection](#)



Partners

Many conservation districts often collaborate with these partners:

- **USDA offices:**
 - [Natural Resources Conservation Service \(NRCS\)](#)
 - [Farm Service Agency \(FSA\)](#)
 - [Forest Service](#)
- **State Nonpoint Source Programs:**
 - All state NPS management program websites are available by clicking on the online state map [here](#).
 - [Click here](#) to find state programs.
- **Tribal Conservation Districts:** Contact the Indian Nations Conservation Alliance for information about the 27 Tribal Conservation Districts in seven states throughout [Indian Country](#)
- **National Association of Resource Conservation & Development:** Local Resource Conservation and Development Districts may be partners with local conservation districts. [Click here](#) to find local RC&Ds
- **[Soil & Water Conservation Society \(SWCS\)](#):** SWCS serves as an advocate for conservation professionals and for science-based conservation practices, programs, and policy. SWCS members include researchers, administrators, planners, policymakers, technical advisors, teachers, students, farmers, and ranchers. Their work targets conservation of soil, water, and related natural resources on working land. Their mission is to discover, develop, implement, and constantly improve ways to use land that sustains its productive capacity and enhances the environment at the same time.
 - Attend a meeting: Conservation districts and USDA-NRCS staff are often members
- **[National Estuary programs](#)** work with a wide variety of state and local partners. Click on the link to find your local estuary program to enhance your project support network.
- **Watershed Groups:** Conservation districts are often involved with local watershed groups. Their meetings may provide a valuable opportunity to develop a collaborative approach for water quality projects and build a relationship with your conservation district. [Click here](#) to identify watershed groups and data in your area.
- **Envirothon:** Many districts involve youth in natural resources concerns through this event. [Click here](#) to see participating states.



"Multiple rows of trees and shrubs, as well as a native grass strip, combine in a riparian buffer to protect Bear Creek in Story County, Iowa. The buffer is a nationally designated demonstration area for riparian buffers." Iowa

Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS

How to Work with USDA NRCS State Conservationists

Get Started

- STEP 1** Understand How Key USDA Conservation Programs Can Help Protect and Improve Sources of Drinking Water
- STEP 2** Define What Your Source Water Program Can Offer
- STEP 3** Take Action
- STEP 4** Find Resources
- STEP 5** Coordinate with Other Partners
- STEP 6** Communicate Your Success

Easy-to-Follow Steps

The toolkit includes simple steps for identifying common ground, opportunities, and key contacts and ideas for working with USDA at the state level.

- Check out the Current Opportunities in the box to your right to put the toolkit to use in your state.
- **Step 1** gives a quick overview of key USDA conservation programs that help protect and improve sources of drinking water. Learn the vocabulary NRCS staff use so you're sure to speak their language.
- **Step 2** gives tips to help you define what your source water program can offer and includes an infographic that explains the State Conservationist's role and what can be accomplished through collaboration.
- **Step 3** links to talking points, draft agenda for first meeting, and key USDA documents to help you take the first steps to action.
- **Step 4** lists useful conservation and source water protection resources.
- **Step 5** links to key partners who can bring data, technical capabilities, useful state and local perspectives, and links to other key stakeholders.
- Learn from your colleagues. Read the 1-page Success Stories in the box to the right.

Current Opportunities

Use the steps in this toolkit to contact your NRCS State Conservationist's office about current opportunities in your state.

- **2018 Farm Bill** emphasizes protection of drinking water sources. [Learn more here.](#)
- American Water Works Association (AWWA) has [Farm Bill information and tools for utilities here.](#)
- Continuing NRCS Initiatives:
 - **National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) Source Water Protection Project** expands the original scope of NWQI to include source water protection for both surface and ground water. [Find information here.](#)
 - **Regional Partnership Program (RCPP)** can target source water concerns through voluntary conservation partnerships. [Learn more about RCPP's current funding opportunity and success stories here.](#)
- [Learn more through the SWC's Learning Exchange case stories here.](#)
- **Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership (NRCS & Forest Service)** has projects in many states and Puerto Rico. [Learn more about the partnership here.](#)

Learn About Others' Success

These case studies demonstrate key steps in partnering source water protection USDA programs:

- [Indiana \(Wellhead protection\)](#)
- [Iowa \(Little River Lake\)](#)
- [Iowa \(Middle Cedar Partnership Project - NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program \(RCPP\)\)](#)
- [New Hampshire/Maine \(Salmon Falls Watershed\)](#)
- [Minnesota](#)
- [North Carolina](#)
- [Pennsylvania \(Maiden Creek Watershed\)](#)



"Wetlands recharge groundwater, store floodwaters, provide a filter for sediment and chemicals as well as provide wildlife habitat" South Dakota

Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS



Understand How Key USDA Conservation Programs Can Help Protect And Improve Sources Of Drinking Water

Source water protection results when key state and local leaders and stakeholders collaborate to encourage land use practices that protect and improve water quality – for agriculture this means systems of conservation practices. USDA has a suite of voluntary programs implemented at the state and local level that provide financial assistance to willing private landowners and operators* to protect and improve soil and water quality. It's a good idea to find out who USDA NRCS and FSA work with in your state. We are using "private landowners and operators" as a general term throughout this toolkit. NRCS and FSA may work with a variety of producers – farmers, ranchers, poultry and livestock producers, dairy farmers, forest landowners, and including those who rent land.

This online guide is intended to provide background information and some simple steps to help connect source water stakeholders and USDA leadership at the state and local levels, to encourage a collaborative approach to protecting and improving water quality and our sources of drinking water.

USDA

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners and operators for their voluntary implementation of systems of conservation practices.

Some of their key partners include the [National Association of Conservation Districts](#) and the [National Association of State Conservation Agencies](#).

NRCS and source water protection programs share a common goal of protecting and improving water quality, and both are voluntary programs

- State Conservationists have decision-making authority and considerable flexibility to offer technical and financial assistance to private landowners and operators.
- Specific projects can bring key partners to the table to leverage resources and expertise to protect and improve watersheds that yield drinking water.

Farm Service Agency (FSA)

FSA provides farm commodity, credit, conservation, disaster, loan, and price support programs.

FSA has two important programs directly protecting sources of drinking water:

- Source Water Protection Programs, with National Rural Water Association: Use the links to the [State Rural Water Association](#) websites to find the source water specialists listed under the “staff” tab. These specialists provide technical assistance to identify priority areas, and work with local teams to develop Rural Source Water Protection plans to protect ground water sources of drinking water through adoption of voluntary practices, including conservation practices.
- The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is a voluntary land retirement program that helps agricultural producers protect environmentally sensitive land, decrease erosion, restore wildlife habitat, and safeguard ground and surface water. CREP is an offshoot of the country's largest private-lands environmental improvement program - the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

This is just a quick introduction. More details about NRCS and FSA organization and staff are provided in the following steps.

Note: This information presents just a limited view of USDA offices and programs that are relevant to source water protection efforts. [A complete USDA organization chart can be found here](#). NRCS's source water protection webpage with a national map of updated priority areas [can be found here](#).



Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS

STEP 2

Define What Your Source Water Program Can Offer

Consider reaching out to NRCS or FSA staff in your locality or state to help your source water protection efforts. In Step 1, you read a brief overview to help orient you to NRCS and FSA. Now, you'll need to consider what you (or your source water program) can offer. Here are a few ideas to help you get started:

- Understand NRCS/FSA programs and specific state information through a quick check of these websites: [nrcs.usda.gov](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov) (browse by location – NRCS State Offices) and fsa.usda.gov (State Offices tab).
- Note that NRCS and FSA staff (and the private landowners and operators they work with) may be most aware of the regulatory nature of state and federal environmental programs, so it is important to convey that your focus is on opportunities to work collaboratively and voluntarily.
- Identify a specific geographic area or project to propose for collaboration, where systems of conservation practices could help protect and improve drinking water sources. Information on conservation practices can be found [here for FSA](#) and [here for NRCS](#).
- Share source water data, particularly GIS maps and source water assessment results, with NRCS and FSA to identify opportunities to protect and improve water quality, and sources of drinking water. Link source water data to geographic areas where NRCS/FSA programs could protect water quality or quantity. Be aware that USDA does not share locational, ownership, or other specific information about farms, ranches or other properties – this is covered by Farm Bill Section 1619 (confidentiality of producer information). However, NRCS and FSA can share aggregated information on systems of conservation practices or acres with conservation practices.
- Consider how source water protection partners could help promote private landowner and operator participation or document progress by monitoring water quality.

The following infographic highlights what source water programs and NRCS State Conservationists can bring to a collaborative effort to protect sources of drinking water. Print these two pages for a meeting handout.

COLLABORATION CAN PROTECT SOURCES OF DRINKING WATER



Note: It's a good idea to find out who USDA NRCS work with in your state. We are using "private landowners and operators" as a general term in this infographic. NRCS may work with a variety of producers - farmers, ranchers, poultry and livestock producers, dairymen, forest landowners, including those who rent land.

 **sourcewater**
COLLABORATIVE
SourceWaterCollaborative.org

The Source Water Collaborative, twenty-nine national entities representing federal, state, and local partners, works together to protect drinking water sources for generations to come.

2018 FARM BILL EMPHASIZES PROTECTION OF DRINKING WATER SOURCES

H.R. 2 – 92

(d) SOURCE WATER PROTECTION THROUGH TARGETING OF AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES - Section 1244 of the Food Security Act of 1985 (16 U.S.C. 3844) (as amended by subsection (b)) is amended by adding at the end the following:

“(n) SOURCE WATER PROTECTION THROUGH TARGETING OF AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES.

“(1) IN GENERAL.—In carrying out any conservation program administered by the Secretary, the Secretary shall encourage practices that relate to water quality and water quantity that protect source water for drinking water (including protecting against public health threats) while also benefitting agricultural producers.

“(2) COLLABORATION WITH WATER SYSTEMS AND INCREASED INCENTIVES.

“(A) IN GENERAL.—In encouraging practices under paragraph (1), the Secretary shall

“(i) work collaboratively with community water systems and State technical committees established under section 1261(a) to identify, in each State, local priority areas for the protection of source waters for drinking water; and

“(ii) subject to subparagraph (B), for practices described in paragraph (1), offer to producers increased incentives and higher payment rates than are otherwise statutorily authorized by the applicable conservation program administered by the Secretary.

“(B) LIMITATION.—An increased payment under subparagraph (A)(ii) shall not exceed 90 percent of practice costs associated with planning, design, materials, equipment, installation, labor, management, maintenance, or training.

“(3) RESERVATION OF FUNDS.

“(A) IN GENERAL.—In each of fiscal years 2019 through 2023, the Secretary shall use to carry out this subsection not less than 10 percent of any funds available for conservation programs administered by the Secretary under this title (other than the conservation reserve program established under subchapter B of chapter 1 of subtitle D).

“(B) LIMITATION.—Funds available for a specific conservation program shall not be transferred to fund a different conservation program under this title.”.



Take Action

NRCS and FSA are two USDA agencies that can provide technical and financial assistance for systems of conservation practices on working and retired lands. These programs provide environmental benefits including water quality. NRCS state offices will have the broadest perspective regarding available conservation programs and priorities. Key NRCS state contacts, information about Local Working Groups, and tips to help you reach out are identified below.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

Based on feedback from NRCS, we suggest you start by contacting your Assistant State Conservationist for Programs. Some State Conservationist's offices may suggest a different point of contact. In your initial conversation, so that you identify the right contacts, be clear that you are seeking to develop a partnership based on mutual understanding of source water concerns and NRCS programs that can protect sources of drinking water in your state. Once you have the initial conversation, they may refer you to the Resource Conservationist, or others.

Call your Assistant State Conservationist for Programs to schedule a meeting to seek guidance about working with NRCS state and local programs.



Print this educational handout as a "leave-behind" for your meeting. It summarizes key elements of source water protection.



Contact your State Conservationists office to let them know of your interest in attending a State Technical Committee (STC)



- [Click here](#) to see a handy organizational structure
- [Click here](#) to find your State Conservationist's office contact information
- [Click here](#) for tips to help you set up a meeting. A good first step is to meet with the Assistant State Conservationist for Programs
- [Click here](#) for a draft agenda and talking points for your meeting

STCs provide advice and recommendations to State Conservationists and guidance to Local Working Groups. After you get to know your STC, you may want to give a presentation to the group.

These resources will help you get started.

- [Click here](#) for a quick overview of STCs
- [Click here](#) for information about NRCS Local Working Groups
- [Click here](#) for NRCS's eDirective on Local Working Groups
- [Click here](#) for some basic source water protection slides you might borrow from to insert into a more specific state presentation to your State Technical Committee



STEP 4

Find Resources

Useful Conservation Resources

- [Overview of NRCS Conservation Programs](#)
- [Overview of FSA Conservation Programs](#)
- Find [Local or State Contacts](#) through the National Association of Conservation Districts Directory
- [NRCS Conservation Practices](#)

Useful Source Water Resources

- [State Drinking Water Programs](#)
- [Find Allies through the Source Water Collaborative](#)
- [EPA Drinking Water Mapping Application to Protect Source Waters \(DWMAPS\)](#)
- [Watershed Projects \(Watershed Central\)](#)
- [Resources for Utilities Working with NRCS](#)
- [EPA Funding Integration Tool \(FITS\)](#)



Coordinate With Other Partners

Partnerships can enhance the likelihood that your project will be successful. Partners bring data, technical capabilities, useful state and local perspectives, link to other key stakeholders, and sometimes have resources to support project elements. Including key partners in your project-specific meeting with the State Conservationist or the Assistant State Conservationist for Programs can strengthen your presentation and make the discussion more productive.

- [EPA Regional Source Water Protection Contacts](#)
- [State Source Water Program contacts](#)
- State Clean Water Programs
 - Reach out to your state Clean Water Act 319 program and engage with them in identifying priority watersheds for the [National Water Quality Initiative](#). Provide coordinated input to the State Conservationist and State Technical Committee.
 - Clean Water Act section 319 funds have supported source water protection projects. Explore the possibility of linking your project to watershed plans developed for section 319 projects.
 - [Click here](#) to find state 319 programs.
 - [Click here](#) to find EPA regional contacts for tribal 319 programs.
- [National Estuary Programs](#)
- Drinking Water Utilities & Municipalities
 - [Find Your Water System](#)
- [Cooperative Extension System & State Land Grant Universities](#)
 - [Find Your State Land Grant University](#)
- [State Forest Action Plans](#)
- [i-Tree Tools](#)
- US Forest Service
 - Forests to Faucets map: [Click here](#) for an interactive map that illustrates the crucial role forests play in sustaining the quality of surface drinking water. [Click here](#) for more information on forests and the drinking water supplies they protect in New England and the upper Midwest.
 - Forest Action Plans
 - i-Tree Tools
- US Geological Survey
 - <http://water.usgs.gov/nawqa/>
 - <http://water.usgs.gov/nawqa/nutrients/>
 - http://water.usgs.gov/nawqa/studies/public_wells/
 - http://water.usgs.gov/nawqa/studies/domestic_wells/
- [Next Generation Water Observing System](#)



"NRCS District Conservationist, Zapata, TX, and landowner discuss range plans, while doing a study to determine grass stand and quality. [Slide 97CS3022]" Texas

Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS

STEP 6

Communicate Your Success

Share Your Feedback

Let us know how you used the information in this toolkit by sending an email to the SWC. We'd like to hear your successes and continuing challenges. Your feedback will help us continue to improve this toolkit.

Email the SWC: info@sourcewatercollaborative.org

Promote the Toolkit

Help get the word out to source water colleagues by promoting this toolkit at your next meeting, conference, or through emails and newsletters.

- [Click here](#) for the 2-page infographic for a meeting handout.
- [Click here](#) for PowerPoint slides that explain the toolkit (Useful for your next workshop or meeting.)



"A water tank in a pasture combined with fencing keeps cattle out of critical riparian area in Lamar County, Georgia."

Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS



sourcewatercollaborative.org