**USDA NRCS National Water Quality Initiative Source Water Protection Pilot**

Starting in FY19, NRCS will initiate a [National Water Quality Initiative](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/water/?cid=stelprdb1047761)(NWQI) pilot for source water protection, providing special consideration for proposed NWQI watershed areas that address surface and/or ground water sources of drinking water. Under this “Readiness Phase” pilot, NRCS will work with state water programs (including drinking water programs), drinking water utilities, and other partners in developing or enhancing watershed and/or aquifer protection assessments or plans to address agricultural-related impacts to source water quality.

**Action**: States interested in working with NRCS and other partners to plan in FY ‘19 for implementation of source water quality conservation in FY ‘20 (assessments will be done during FY ‘19 and implementation with financial assistance in FY20) are strongly encouraged to reach out to NRCS and state clean water programs to discuss partnering in the NWQI Readiness—Source Water Protection Pilot.

**Background:** Through the NWQI, NRCS invests in targeted assistance to help agricultural producers institute practices that improve water quality in high-priority waterbodies across the country. NWQI provides an opportunity for partners to work with NRCS on a shared vision for water quality priorities. Since 2012, NRCS has partnered with state water quality agencies and EPA to identify and address nutrient, sediment and/or pathogen impaired waterbodies through voluntary agricultural conservation.

**NWQI Readiness--Source Water Protection (SWP) Pilot Details:**

* NRCS will be expanding NWQI to provide planning resources in new selected source water protection areas (i.e. delineated watershed or aquifer areas) in FY19.
* NRCS state offices will receive resources to work with state water quality and drinking water agencies and other partners (e.g. drinking water utilities) in 1) developing and enhancing a source water protection area-level assessment and outreach plan, and 2) to begin developing conservation plans with interested landowners in these areas.
* NWQI SWP pilot areas can be selected independently and in addition to NWQI Readiness watersheds identified for surface water assessment or implementation, i.e. pilot areas do not have to coincide with impaired, threatened, or critical waterbodies as determined by the state.
* Accelerated financial assistance to implement these source water assessments and conservation plans will be provided in some protection areas the following year (FY20) when successful pilot areas will enter into Implementation Phase.

**NRCS Technical Assistance and Guidance for Source Water Assessments:**

* NRCS may provide technical resources which could be used for partner agreements with NRCS for partners to lead/perform the watershed assessments and outreach. Or partners can contribute/lead with their own resources. NRCS can also provide Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) to states to assist with staff time and/or partner agreements for these assessment and outreach activities.
* For Source Water Protection projects to be approved for NWQI, the affected drinking water utilities must have an existing source water protection plan or assessment already developed by the state or utility that delineates the area or areas of protection.
* NRCS will support NRCS offices with GIS and other analysis tools and products, as well as training and guidance for area wide planning where state NRCS offices lack staff with expertise.

**State Agency and Partner Roles:**

* NRCS has identified state drinking water agencies and utilities as potential key partners in selecting and supporting NWQI SWP pilots.
* State drinking water agencies are uniquely positioned to know of drinking water utilities and/or source water protection partnerships in their states that may wish to participate and/or would benefit from the NWQI investment in agricultural conservation.
* NRCS is looking for state and local source water protection projects that can, in the course of one year, pull together existing plans, assessments, and outreach efforts, including critical areas analysis to ready themselves for NWQI funding for implementation in FY20.
* States and/or drinking water utilities may wish to share with NRCS their analytical techniques used to complete source water assessments, reach out to watershed or conservation organizations that wish to be involved in the pilot, or support pilots selected by NRCS that coincide with priority areas for state source water programs.

**NWQI Program Details:**

* Since 2012, NRCS has provided conservation planning and financial assistance to more than 3,500 producers to adopt voluntary conservation practices in priority watersheds to reduce nonpoint sources of nutrients, sediments, and pathogens.
* NRCS has worked closely with state water quality agencies and U.S. EPA to select watersheds associated with impaired, threatened, and/or critical waterbodies (as determined by state agencies) to receive conservation assistance.
* NRCS launched a “Readiness” pilot in FY17 to assist states with watershed-level assessments, on-farm planning, and outreach prior to receiving financial assistance for implementation.
* Beginning FY19, for a watershed to receive accelerated financial assistance for implementation of conservation practices (i.e. to be approved for Implementation Phase), there must be an actionable watershed plan that identifies critical source areas.
* Starting in FY20, NRCS will focus on long term implementation and planning, requiring multi-year implementation budgets.