

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) State Conservationist's office (part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture).

This toolkit, developed as a result of extensive collaboration between members of the Source Water Collaborative and the NRCS, offers a step-by-step approach. The resources inside are useful for anyone working in source water protection: from those who already know their State Conservationist, 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 from state and regional source water coordinators who recently fostered effective partnerships.

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.

- 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 as well as current opportunities in your state and success stories.
- Step 5 links to key partners who can bring data, technical capabilities, useful state and local perspectives, and links to other key stakeholders.
- Step 6 gives information on how to easily stay connected.

*Visit www.sourcewatercollaborative.org/swp-usda to access the Collaboration Toolkit, which includes links to these websites and resources.

Want to collaborate with local conservation districts to get agricultural conservation practices in place to protect drinking water sources?

The Source Water Collaborative is also working to develop a local supplement to this toolkit through our partnership with the National Association of Conservation Districts. By early 2013 this toolkit will include a step-by-step process for collaborating with conservation districts.

STEP 1

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.

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)

**under the Under Secretary for Natural Resource and Environment*

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

**under the Under Secretary for Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services*

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: This Map shows the 33 states where rural source water technicians 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 at: http://usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=USDA_ORG_CHART

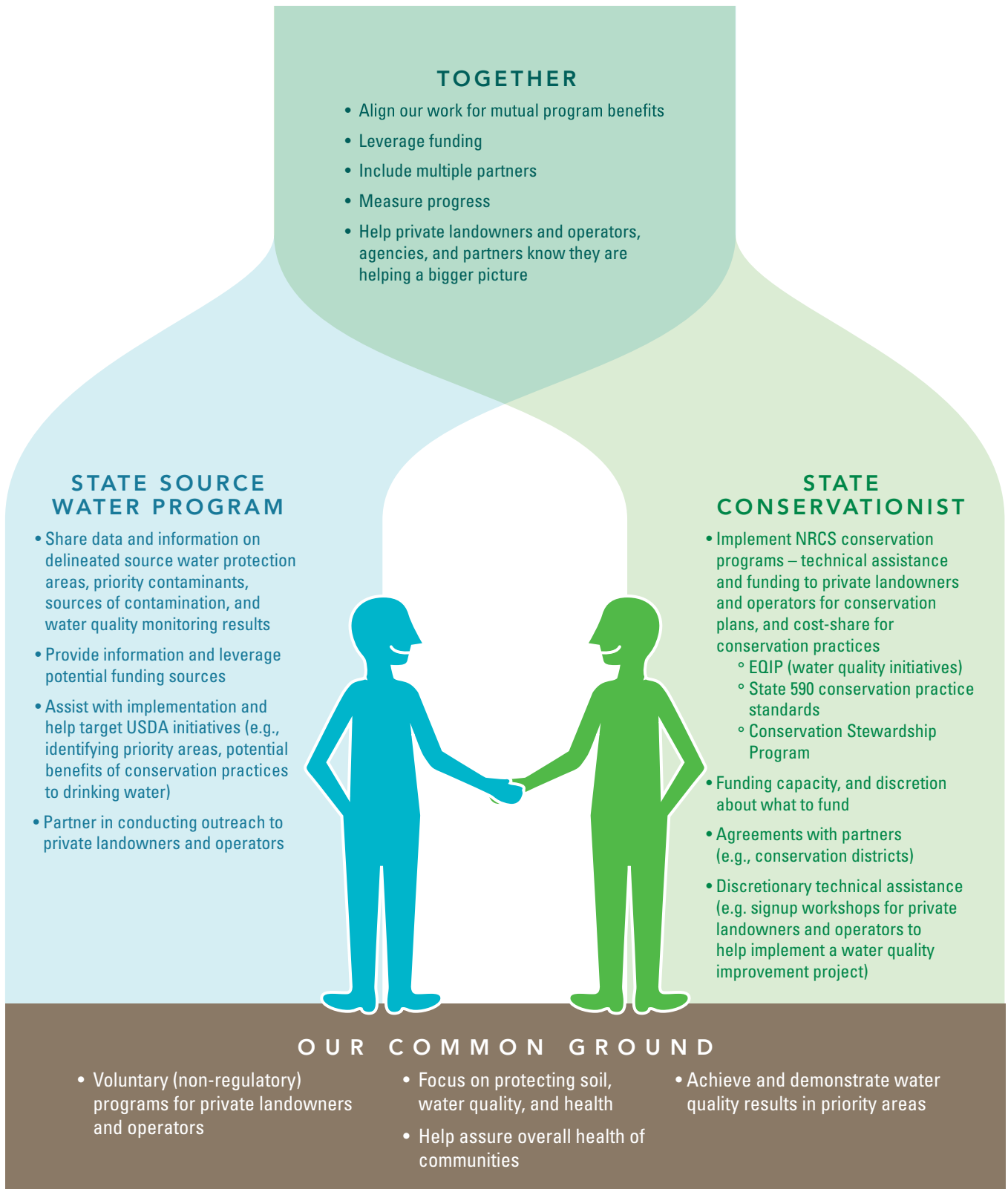
STEP 2 DEFINE WHAT YOUR SOURCE WATER PROGRAM CAN OFFER

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 (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.
- 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. 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.

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.

SOURCE WATER PROTECTION & USDA CONSERVATION PROGRAMS: WHAT ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES?

WHAT IS SOURCE WATER?

Source water includes all current and future sources of drinking water:

- Surface water (rivers, streams, lakes and reservoirs)
- Ground water (aquifers)

WHAT IS SOURCE WATER PROTECTION?

Actions to prevent drinking water contamination to protect public health and local economy, and lower drinking water treatment costs.

HOW DOES SOURCE WATER PROTECTION WORK?

Problem identification: Assessments of potential threats, sources and vulnerability

Source Water Protection Plans: Community or subwatershed scale (HUC-12 or smaller), to address priority contaminants and their sources

State and Local Partnerships: Local, state, and federal policies, programs, and voluntary actions that together can keep contaminants from entering sources of drinking water

- **Local partners:** public water systems, community leaders and land-use decision makers, agricultural leaders, and the public
- **State partners:** state land use and water agencies
 - State drinking water programs implement source water programs; may be in environmental or public health departments
 - State clean water programs implement Clean Water authorities, e.g. 319 grants, TMDLs; generally in environmental or natural resources departments
- States can fund many source water protection activities through the Drinking Water and Clean Water State Revolving Funds (SRFs) and can work with other state and other federal funding programs to protect sources of drinking water when those programs develop priority ranking factors for projects that include drinking water source water protection

SOURCE WATER & CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

- Developing updated state 590 standards
- Implementing National Water Quality Initiative in priority watersheds
- Implementing NRCS conservation programs and Landscape Conservation Initiatives
- State nutrient strategies
- Specific source water protection projects

HOW TO CONTACT YOUR FEDERAL AND STATE SOURCE WATER PROTECTION PROGRAMS

State Source Water Program Contacts:

www.asdwa.org/sourcewatercontacts

EPA Regional Source Water Protection Coordinators:

<http://water.epa.gov/infrastructure/drinkingwater/sourcewater/protection/epaheadquartersregionalandstatecontacts.cfm>



TAKE ACTION

Visit www.sourcewatercollaborative.org/swp-usda to access the Collaboration Toolkit, which includes links to these websites and resources.

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 benefit 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)

CALL YOUR ASSISTANT STATE CONSERVATIONIST FOR WATER PROGRAMS TO SCHEDULE A MEETING

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.

Visit www.sourcewatercollaborative.org/swp-usda to find:

- A handy organizational structure
- Your State Conservationist's office contact information
- Tips to help you set up a meeting. A good first step is to meet with the Assistant State Conservationist for Programs
- Draft talking points for your meeting

PRINT THE PREVIOUS PAGES AS A "LEAVE-BEHIND" FOR YOUR MEETING. IT SUMMARIZES KEY ELEMENTS OF SOURCE WATER PROTECTION

PARTICIPATE IN A STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE (STC) MEETING AND CONSIDER JOINING AS A MEMBER

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.

Visit www.sourcewatercollaborative.org/swp-usda for these resources that will help you get started.

- A quick overview of STCs
 - Information about NRCS Local Working Groups
 - A quick overview of Local Working Groups
 - NRCS's eDirective on Local Working Groups
 - Basic source water protection slides you might borrow from to insert into a more specific state presentation to your State Technical Committee
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FIND RESOURCES

Visit www.sourcewatercollaborative.org/swp-usda to access the Collaboration Toolkit, which includes links to these websites and resources.

USEFUL CONSERVATION RESOURCES

- Overview of NRCS & FSA Conservation Programs
- Find Local or State Contacts through the National Association of Conservation Districts
 - State Contacts
 - Local Districts
- NRCS Conservation Practices

USEFUL SOURCE WATER RESOURCES

- State Drinking Water Programs
- Find Allies through the Source Water Collaborative
- Maps of nutrient loading and drinking water: Nitrogen & Phosphorus Pollution Data Access Tool
- From Field to Faucet: Protecting Your Drinking Water
- Watershed Projects (Watershed Central)

Current Opportunities

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

- NRCS Nutrient Management Conservation Practice Standard 590 – Updated State Standards due to NRCS January 2013
- The 2013 USDA National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) offers an opportunity to increase installation of conservation practices to address nutrient concerns for drinking water sources in selected watersheds. States can work with NRCS to identify additional watersheds in FY 2013.
 - Coordinate with your state's Clean Water Act Section 319 program, and contact your State Conservationist's office to provide input to watershed selection.

Visit www.sourcewatercollaborative.org/swp-usda to access these resources and read more

Learn About Others' Success

Success Stories

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

- **Indiana (Wellhead protection)**
- **Iowa (Little River Lake)**
- **New Hampshire/Maine (Salmon Falls Watershed)**
- **Minnesota**
- **North Carolina**
- **Pennsylvania (Maiden Creek Watershed)**

Visit www.sourcewatercollaborative.org/swp-usda to access these case studies

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COORDINATE WITH OTHER PARTNERS

Visit www.sourcewatercollaborative.org/swp-usda to access the Collaboration Toolkit, which includes links to these websites and resources.

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.
 - Find state 319 programs.
 - 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 or local extension office
- Other Federal Agencies
 - US Forest Service
 - Forests to Faucets map: Visit www.sourcewatercollaborative.org/swp-usda for an interactive map that illustrates the crucial role forests play in sustaining the quality of surface drinking water and 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/

STEP 6

COMMUNICATE YOUR SUCCESS & STAY UP-TO-DATE

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. Visit www.sourcewatercollaborative.org/swp-usda to download:

- A two-page handout
- PowerPoint slides that explain the toolkit (Useful for your next workshop or meeting.)
- A brief narrative describing the toolkit, along with supportive quotes. (Useful for email, newsletter, web, social media updates to your members and colleagues)

Stay Up-to-Date

Sign up for email alerts and we'll let you know when the toolkit is updated with new resources. Visit www.sourcewatercollaborative.org/swp-usda to sign up.