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**USDA Invests $225 Million in Innovative Conservation Partnerships**
*Vermont project will expand woodland management program to create healthy and productive forests*

*COLCHESTER, VERMONT- January 3, 2017* - Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced that 88 high-impact projects across the country will receive $225 million in federal funding as part of the USDA's Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). In addition, partners have proposed to contribute up to an additional $500 million to improve the nation's water quality, combat drought, enhance soil health, support wildlife habitat and protect agricultural viability.

Vermont’s [*Cold Hollow to Canada (CHC)*](https://www.coldhollowtocanada.org/), a regional conservation partnership operating in seven towns along the western spine of the Green Mountains, will expand an existing cross boundary management initiative. The [*Cold Hollow Woodlots Program*](https://www.coldhollowtocanada.org/what/woodlots/) initially engaged twelve landowners spanning over 2,000 acres in the town of Enosburg. RCPP will help expand this work to 50 landowners and 8,000 acres by adding woodlots in Richford and Montgomery, as well as serving the existing woodlot group in Enosburg.

The effort will encourage Vermont’s private forest owners to manage wildlife habitat, find solutions for the effects of climate change, and develop ways to help forests adapt to changing conditions. By securing resources for conservation practice implementation for the pilot group in Enosburg and two new groups in the towns of Richford and Montgomery, the project seeks to expand the base of engaged landowners in this target region and foster the stewardship of forest health, integrity and resiliency into the future. This effort will be supported with RCPP project funds totaling $640,000.

CHC’s Board Chair Charlie Hancock says the funding made available through RCPP will galvanize landowners towards a more collaborative approach to management, and provide the financial capacity to leverage a greater impact. “We’re so pleased to be able to bring these resources to private landowners in our region, and to support the stewardship of our working forests’ health, integrity and resiliency into the future, for both people and wildlife.” *-continued-*

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The peer-to-peer woodlands management approach of the Cold Hollow Woodlots Program is unique because it engages landowners with contiguous properties in prioritized forest blocks. “With more than two-thirds of Vermont’s forests privately owned, it falls to individual forest owners to manage wildlife habitat, to find solutions for the effects of climate change, and to develop ways to help forests adapt for the future,” says Bridget Butler, Program Director for Cold Hollow to Canada.

Across the nation, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is investing a total of $825 million in 286 projects, bringing together more than 2,000 conservation partners who have committed an estimated $1.4 billion in financial and technical assistance. By 2018, NRCS and its partners, including Indian tribes, nonprofit organizations, state and local governments, private industry, water districts, universities and many others, will have invested at least $2.4 billion through RCPP, which was created by the 2014 Farm Bill.

"RCPP plays a critical role in connecting partners with producers to design and implement conservation solutions that benefit both natural resources and agriculture," said Vermont NRCS State Conservationist Vicky Drew. In 2015 and 2016, a total of five RCPP projects were initiated in Vermont. Learn more about the collaborative conservation projects at [www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/vt/programs/farmbill/rcpp/](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/vt/programs/farmbill/rcpp/).

RCPP offers new opportunities for the NRCS, conservation partners and agricultural producers to work together to harness innovation, expand the conservation mission, and demonstrate the value and efficacy of voluntary, private lands conservation. The program is increasing investment in conservation from a diversity of partners, leading to cleaner and more abundant water, improved soil and air quality, enhanced wildlife habitat, and stronger rural economies.

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