

# NEW RICE-FOCUSED CONSERVATION PROGRAM SET TO LAUNCH THIS YEAR

BY DAVE WHITE

WASHINGTON, DC – The \$10 million joint effort undertaken by the USA Rice Federation and Ducks Unlimited (DU) to create a new rice-focused conservation program will kick off this summer and offer rice producers several on-farm conservation options. The overall purpose of the project is to work with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to assist rice producers address water quantity, water quality, and wildlife habitat in Arkansas, California, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Texas.

NRCS approved the proposal—Sustaining the Future of Rice—last January under the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). Since then, USA Rice and DU personnel have been meeting with NRCS to determine which conservation practices will be offered to growers. Final details have been sent to NRCS headquarters for approval and a decision is expected in April.

Of the \$10 million being provided by NRCS, \$7 million will be available through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and \$3 million from the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). Each state will receive at least \$1 million in funding.

Partners in the project are contributing another \$6.8 million to support the overall project, with the bulk of that coming from the Lower Colorado River Authority.

While specific dates may vary from state to state, sign-ups for EQIP are expected to begin this summer and run through early fall. After the sign-up ends, applications will be ranked and contracts awarded. After the contracts are set, on-farm work will begin.

In order to ensure project funds go to rice growers, NRCS, USA Rice, and DU are developing screening and ranking criteria targeted to rice lands.

The project will offer rice producers several conservation practices to choose from in both the EQIP and the CSP and all the practices will be geared to rice production. Examples include drainage water management, irrigation land leveling, irrigation reservoir construction, irrigation system automation, and wetland wildlife management. The conservation practices offered will generally be the same in all states, but there may be some tweaks in certain states to make sure the practices fit local conditions.

While EQIP will be the first out of the gate, the CSP won't be far behind. Work is underway to develop a specific package of enhancements for rice lands and it is expected that the sign-up will occur early in 2016.

USA Rice, DU, NRCS, and partners will notify rice producers of the specific dates when the sign-ups start in their state. Interested rice growers will sign-up in local NRCS offices like normal and just inform NRCS that the application falls under the Sustaining the Future of Rice RCPP project. The RCPP funds are in addition to regular EQIP and CSP, and other funding may be available to growers as well.

Conservation planning is one of the cornerstones of the project and growers who are interested can begin reviewing their conservation plans to see what is needed on their operations. Partners believe that up to 63,000 acres will benefit from the project.

Competition for contracts is expected to be high and it is unclear how long the funding will last. If the project is oversubscribed, the partners plan to reapply to NRCS for additional funding.

The Rice RCPP effort represents a first of its kind project—it's totally focused on rice growers and what works best on rice-producing lands. And, it is the first time that an entire commodity crop worked to establish a conservation program. 

*Dave White is the former NRCS Chief and is currently a partner and co-founder of 9b Group.*



**ABOVE:** Rice farms provide multi-species habitats.

**LEFT:** Precision leveling enhances sustainability.

Photo Courtesy of LSU AgCenter