

In 2016, AWWA embarked on an ambitious campaign to produce legislation that recognizes the connection between smart, efficient farming practices and safe drinking water. Thanks in large part to the tireless work of AWWA members and partners, the 2018 U.S. Farm Bill that was signed into law as the Agriculture Improvement Act (AIA) of 2018. AIA included virtually every one of the Association's legislative priorities.

- Source water protection is now a goal and specific focus of USDA's conservation programs
- The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is directed to work with water utilities and the NRCS State Technical Committees to identify priority source water protection needs
- A larger federal cost-share for producers is authorized for conservation measures that have a significant downstream benefit
- 10% of NRCS conservation program funds (except for the Conservation Reserve Program) will be spent on source water protection. This is a stunning \$4 billion over the next 10 years.

To effectively prioritize and spend these funds for the greatest benefit to utilities and ultimately water consumers, utilities need to be involved. NRCS financial and technical assistance decisions are made more in the state offices than in the national office. In this decentralized model, AWWA Sections and Source Water Protection Committee can help.

Some suggested actions:

1. *Develop a relationship with your NRCS state conservationist*
2. *Attend, and offer to join (or encourage local utilities to join) the State Technical Committee and any applicable local workgroups*
1. *Encourage utilities with source water concerns – whether they are dealing with specific problems or simply want to protect high-quality source waters, both surface and ground water – to reach out to NRCS to form partnerships*

AWWA recognizes that for many water utilities, this is a new area of focus. AWWA has developed a suite of tools available to AWWA members -- housed on the Section Services Microsite -- to help, and AWWA staff is here to assist, along with knowledgeable consultants to offer support. Listed below are some resources:

- [A YouTube whiteboard animation](#) that defined the issue of drinking water protection and AWWA's legislative priorities prior to the Farm Bill's passage
- [Working with the NRCS for Source Water Protection](#) is a two-page guide on getting involved to benefit source water protection
- [USDA Tools to Support Source Water Protection](#) goes into more details on the conservation programs, and explains how they can be applied
- [AWWA's G300 standard](#), which lays the foundation for source water protection programs

Over the past months, AWWA has continued to communicate with utility members regarding activities associated with AIA as carried out by NRCS. For example:

- Release of NRCS guidance to its state offices for implementing source water protection measures in 2019. The guidance document provides instruction for the NRCS state conservationists to identify priority source water protection areas in every state and focus resources to protect sources of drinking water within them. [Utilities are encouraged to contact their state conservationist to discuss priority source water areas and concerns that could be addressed with agricultural conservation programs and to work with their state technical committee, which provides feedback to the NRCS on many conservation issues. AWWA's Source Water Protection webpage provides resources on how to work with NRCS and utilize agricultural conservation programs for source water protection.
- Announcement of the opening of the application period for the Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) program. This program is designed to support development and adoption of new, innovative agricultural practices. With source water protection being a substantial focus within the 2018 Farm Bill, CIG could foster innovative agricultural practices that benefit source waters. [The latest funding opportunity was open to applications through July 30, 2019.]

- Consideration of new source water protection areas for the National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI). This agricultural conservation program spent about \$30 million last year providing technical and financial assistance to help agricultural producers improve water quality and assist in meeting both source water protection goals and ambient water quality needs. [Utilities with source water protection concerns related to agriculture should contact their NRCS state conservationist. NWQI uses a two-phase approach -- a “readiness” phase that details concerns and develops a plan to address them, followed by an “implementation” phase to deploy the practices. Therefore, it is not necessary to have every detail sorted out to get started. Nominations must be made by each state conservationist to NRCS headquarters by Sept. 20, 2019. Interested utilities should contact their state conservationist as soon as possible to discuss inclusion in this program. Additional resources are on AWWA’s Source Water Protection page. NRCS plans to continue NWQI in the future.
- Solicitation of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) applications. This program encourages partnerships to address natural resource concerns related to agriculture at scale. Utilities are encouraged to form partnerships with other interested stakeholders (such as conservation districts, agricultural groups, watershed groups, state source water coordinators, etc.) and apply for RCPP funding. Application details are available on NRCS’s website. The lead partner on each project should complete the application by December 3, 2019.

Examples of RCPP projects on source water protection (see

https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/PA_NRCSConsumption/download?cid=nrcseprd1386891&ext=pdf):

Mills River Source Water Protection Project (FY18); \$730K (State); Lead Partner: Mills River Partnership; Participating States: North Carolina (Lead State). This project will occur on the mainstem of the Mills River and on Foster Creek, a direct tributary in Henderson County, North Carolina. The goal is to help protect the source water for 85,000 people in the cities of Hendersonville, Asheville, and surrounding counties who depend on the Mills River for their drinking water. It focuses on completely restoring a mile-long stretch of a deeply incised eroding streambank, constructing an agrichemical handling facility along the mainstem of the Mills River, and on-farm work with cattle operations where bank sloping, riparian fencing, and off-channel watering tanks will be implemented. In addition to protecting drinking water, the project will also improve degraded fish and wildlife habitat, help ensure future agricultural productivity, foster locally produced foods, and expand a unique on-farm educational forum promoting sustainable agricultural practices.

Otter Lake Source Water Protection (FY18); \$833K (State); Lead Partner: Illinois Corn Growers Association; Participating States: Illinois (Lead State). Otter Lake lies in the heart of Illinois corn and soybean country, and its primary purpose is to provide drinking water for 19,000 rural residents. Every day, the lake provides the water supply for six towns, two villages and two rural water districts. Recently, nutrient-induced algae blooms have occurred, and the lake is also listed as impaired for phosphorus. Nitrogen loading is also a growing concern due to rapid expansion of tile drainage. This project will protect Otter Lake by reducing excessive levels of sedimentation and nutrient loading. A highly detailed watershed plan was just completed, enabling conservation practices to be micro-targeted to areas of greatest resource need. Additionally, farmers will receive an analysis of economic return at sub-field resolution paired with financially favorable conservation alternatives.

Milford Lake Watershed RCPP Project (FY18); \$2.88M (National); Lead Partner: Kansas Water Office; Participating States: Kansas (Lead State). The frequency of harmful algal blooms within Milford Lake has created a concern among lake stakeholders that blooms will adversely impact public water supplies, their ability to provide safe potable water, and negatively impact wildlife and water-based recreation. This project will bring partners together to work with NRCS on implementation of conservation practices within the Milford Lake Watershed. These partnership efforts will help improve water quality by reducing the amount of nutrients entering Milford Lake.