



Perspective on CONSERVATION FINANCE

ABSTRACT

Federal funding for conservation in New England has declined sharply since 2008. Two **Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)** programs authorized by the 2008 Farm Bill—the **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)** and the **Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)**—are ideal for leveraging public and private investment and building multi-state conservation collaborations across New England. New England has great capacity for regional collaboration and could look to these two federal programs in the future to slow the loss of forest and agriculture land critical to the region’s economy and way of life.

The Role of NRCS Funding in Forwarding New England’s Conservation Vision

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A Brief Overview: NRCS Funding in New England

The New England region’s forests, which store carbon, filter pollutants, mitigate floods, and support rural livelihoods, are critical to human well-being. These forests are facing serious threats; 24,000 acres of New England forest are lost to development each year. New England voters understand the ecological and economic importance of their forests and have continually voiced their support for forest protection. Since 1996, 377 local and state referenda on land protection funding have passed with an average approval rate of 65%.¹ However, despite overwhelming public support, combined federal and state funding for land protection has declined by a dramatic 50% in New England since 2008.²

Two federal programs in particular show great promise in stemming the loss of forests and attracting additional private investment in the region’s forests and agriculture. The CIG and RCPP programs, which were both authorized under the 2008 Farm Bill and are managed by the Natural Resource Conservation Service, leverage private resources from landowners and investors to catalyze partnerships and grow investment in land protection.

- The **CIG** program, which was established in 2002 to drive public and private sector innovation in conservation, has funded more than 700 projects for a total of \$264 million since 2004. Over this time New England only received \$7.6 million, or 3%, of these funds to support a total of 28 projects (Figure 1). Since 2016, approximately 30% of CIG awards have been set aside to invest in public-private partnerships that offer innovative pay-for-success and private investment-based

1 Trust for Public Land LandVote 2016.

2 Highstead 2016. Public Conservation Funding in New England. <http://www.wildlandsandwoodlands.org/public-funding-report>

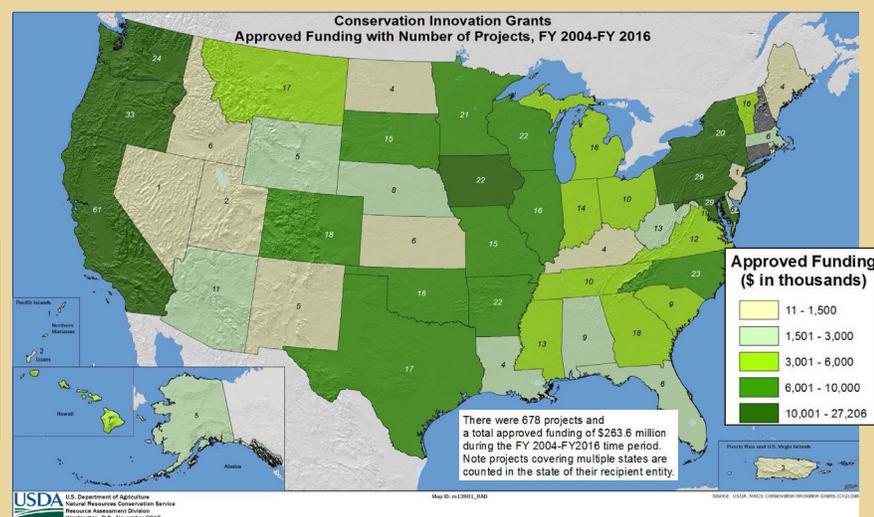
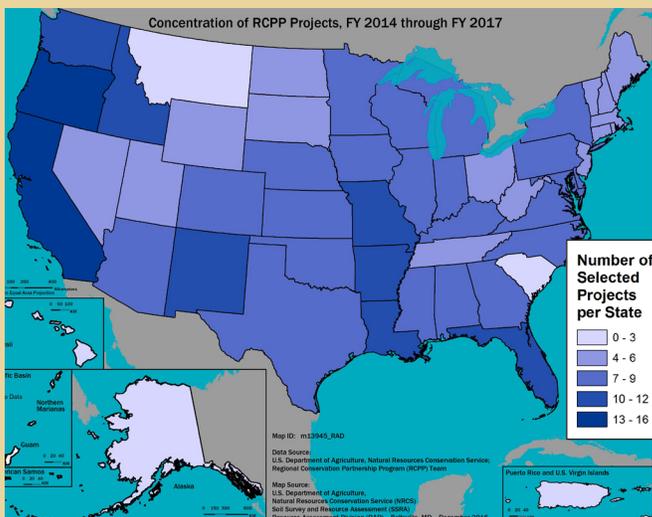


Figure 1. As a region, New England has been selected for fewer NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program projects than any other region in the country.

Figure 2. The New England states have received the lowest amount of funding through the NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant program of any region in the U.S.
Maps Source: Natural Resource Conservation Service.

conservation outcomes. These investments utilize markets for environmental services such as carbon sequestration and water purification to leverage small public investments in order to catalyze much larger private investments. These venture capital-like set-ups offer key opportunities for innovative conservation financing across New England in the future.

- The **RCP** invests in innovative regional conservation partnerships across the US. Since its inception in 2014 the RCPP has invested \$787 million in 286 conservation partnerships, only 7% (\$58 million) of which has funded work on a total of 23 projects in New England (Figure 2). Thirty-five percent of the program's funding (\$278 million) has been reserved for eight specific regions designated as 'Critical Conservation Areas.' At this time New England does not have such a designation, which limits its access to funds.

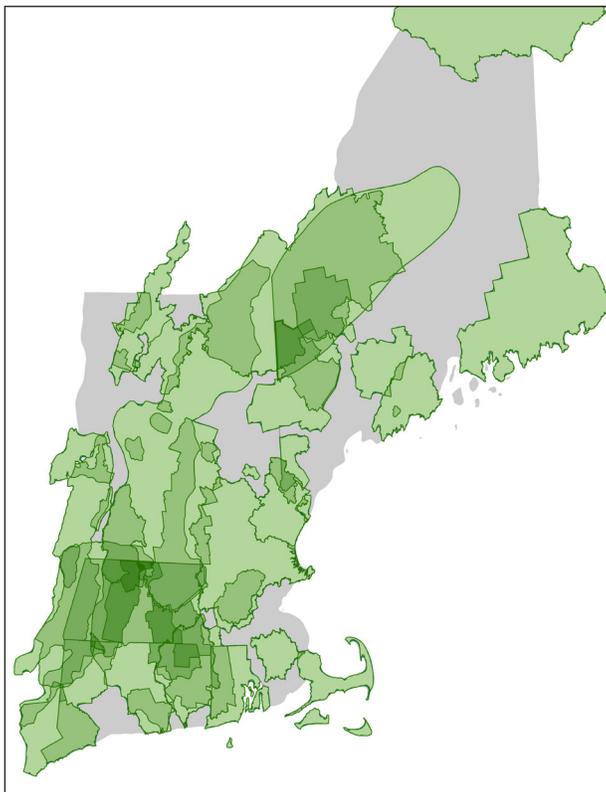


Figure 3. Forty-three Regional Conservation Partnerships covering about 60% of the region bring together NGOs, public and private agencies and private landowners to conserve large landscapes for environmental, economic and social values.

A Look to New England's Conservation Future

New England is currently the country's epicenter for conservation partnerships, which gives it the capacity and expertise to make good use of future NRCS funding. In addition, New England has a regional vision for conservation—Wildlands and Woodlands—that unites efforts being undertaken across the six states. A network of 43 Regional Conservation Partnerships (RCPs; not to be confused with the similarly named NRCS RCPP program) operates across more than 60 percent of New England and eastern New York by bringing together many of the more than 300 local land trusts with public agencies and NGOs across the region (Figure 3). Collectively these partnerships have already conserved 300,000 acres and are gearing up to conserve much more. These partnerships advance large-landscape conservation through regional conservation planning, recruiting landowners and municipal volunteers as peer leaders, aggregating multi-owner land protection projects, attracting significant private capital, and protecting connected landscapes across town, county, state, and even national lines.

NRCS support has proved invaluable to many of the region's large-scale, collaborative projects, and could play an increasing role in forwarding this work in the future. RCPP adds flexibility to other NRCS title programs—like the Healthy Forest Reserve Program and the Agriculture Conservation Easement Program—to deliver benefits to individual and family landowners through greater coordination of land protection and stewardship at regional scales. New England states have already banded together to put forward three successful multi-state RCPPs, receiving over \$29 million from NRCS. One example, the Long Island Sound Watershed RCPP, brought together five New England states and New York to use forest and agriculture conservation practices including permanent land protection of large forested habitats to reduce nitrogen pollution along the Connecticut River. This investment helps landowners and conservationists reduce toxic nutrient loading in the Long Island Sound, reducing risk to the ecosystem, commercial fisheries and recreational assets.

Despite these examples and having some of the country's greatest regional capacity for delivering on-the-ground conservation benefit, the six New England states are not fully leveraging the CIG and RCPP programs. Increased access to and utilization of NRCS funds could be instrumental in forwarding New England's conservation goals and conserving the region's cultural heritage, working landscapes, and the ecosystem services critical to providing clean air and water.

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3 www.WildlandsandWoodlands.org

About Highstead

Highstead is a non-profit conservation organization dedicated to conserving the New England landscape and achieving the Wildlands and Woodlands Vision. Highstead applies science and catalyzes regional collaboration in conservation, conservation finance, ecological research, policy analysis, and land stewardship. Highstead, founded in 1982, is an independent operating foundation based in Redding, CT.