

# National Water Quality Initiative

## 2024 Progress Report

Farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners recognize water as our Nation's most precious resource. Every day, new producers are stepping up to work hand-in-hand with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to plan and apply practices that improve water quality and strengthen agricultural operations.

**The National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI)**, now in its twelfth year, is a partnership among NRCS, state water quality agencies and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to improve and protect water quality through voluntary conservation. NRCS provides targeted funding for financial and technical assistance in small watersheds most in need and where farmers can use conservation practices to make a difference.

Conservation systems include practices that promote soil health, reduce erosion and lessen nutrient runoff, such as filter strips, cover crops, reduced tillage and manure management. These practices not only benefit natural resources but enhance agricultural productivity and profitability by improving soil health and optimizing the use of agricultural inputs.

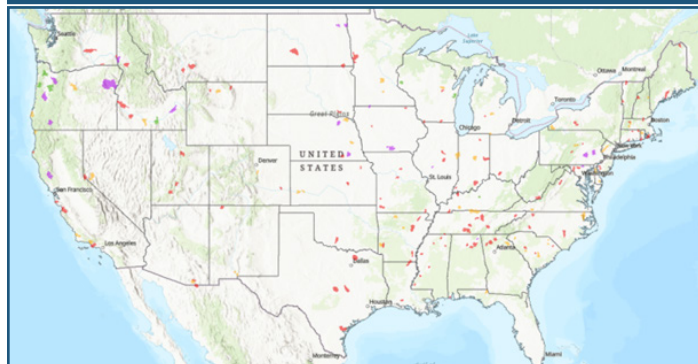
State water quality agencies and other partners contribute additional resources for watershed planning, implementation and outreach. They also provide resources for monitoring efforts that help track water quality improvements over time.

Based on the success of the FY 2017 pilot project, NRCS now has a "planning" phase to assist states with watershed-level assessment, on-farm planning, and outreach prior to receiving financial assistance for implementation. Technical assistance dollars can be used to support producer workshops, analyze water quality data, conduct GIS analyses, perform stream surveys, aid local coordinators and expand one-on-one planning and outreach with landowners.

In FY 2019, NRCS expanded NWQI to include source water protection as a purpose for the initiative. NWQI priority areas for source water protection may include surface and groundwater sources of drinking water. These efforts are designed to identify and address potential threats to clean drinking water from agricultural activities.

### FOCUS AREA

*(click on photo to go to NWQI map)*



## Outcomes and Impacts

As USDA's premiere water quality initiative, NWQI provides a way to accelerate voluntary, on-farm conservation investments and focused water quality monitoring and assessment resources where they can deliver the greatest benefits for clean water.

NWQI has led to a four-fold increase in the acres treated with water quality practices in targeted watersheds. The average annual funding for conservation and the number of producers assisted in these watersheds has roughly doubled.

Since 2012, NRCS has worked with more than 7,000 producers to adopt conservation practices on more than 1.5 million acres in priority watersheds through NWQI.

As of FY 2024, at least 19 impaired water bodies have been improved and subsequently scheduled for de-listing or otherwise removed from NWQI due to successful water quality improvements.





NRCS Goals

NRCS developed edge-of-field pollutant reduction goals-or milestones-for NWQI to demonstrate progress in achieving water quality improvements in small watersheds. The original milestones were based on reductions achieved through FY 2018, and the subsequent milestones set through FY 2023 were met or exceeded by the FY 2023 progress report.

In FY 2024, new milestones were created based on the observed progress through FY 2023, but with a renewed focus to achieve roughly 30% more of a reduction in edge of field losses by FY 2028.

NWQI aims to reduce sediment loss from cropland by 1.9 million tons, phosphorus loss by 5 million pounds and nitrogen loss by 25 million pounds. These reductions will help to address water quality impairments or concerns identified in each watershed and contribute towards restoring their beneficial use and ecological function.

By FY 2028, NRCS hopes to see a total of 27 impaired stream segments in NWQI watersheds restored back to their intended water quality standards.

| Fiscal Year 2024 National Water Quality Initiative NRCS Financial Assistance (EQIP FA) for Active and Completed Contracts |         |                  |           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|------------------|-----------|
| Region                                                                                                                    | Acres   | NRCS Investments | Contracts |
| Central                                                                                                                   | 108,082 | \$14,602,345     | 229       |
| Northeast                                                                                                                 | 8,646   | \$6,766,132      | 57        |
| Southeast                                                                                                                 | 19,157  | \$12,416,020     | 156       |
| West                                                                                                                      | 43,388  | \$17,311,919     | 126       |
| Total                                                                                                                     | 179,272 | \$51,096,416     | 568       |
| Data source: FPAC Economics and Policy Analysis Division, January 2025                                                    |         |                  |           |

Overall Summary FY 2012 – 2024

|                             |               |
|-----------------------------|---------------|
| Total NRCS Investment ..... | \$385,315,860 |
| Number of Contracts .....   | 7,283         |
| Total Acres Contracted..... | 1,569,865     |

| 2028 Milestones                                                   |            |                             |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|
| Reduce Sediment Loss (tons)                                       |            |                             |
| Milestone                                                         | Achieved   | Percentage Toward Milestone |
| 1,940,796                                                         | 1,509,285  | 78%                         |
| *1,365,243 tons reduced in FY 2010–2023; 144,042 tons in FY 2024  |            |                             |
| Reduce Phosphorus Loss (lbs)                                      |            |                             |
| Milestone                                                         | Achieved   | Percentage Toward Milestone |
| 5,055,570                                                         | 3,801,214  | 75%                         |
| * 3,643,619 lbs reduced in FY 2010–2023; 157,595 lbs in FY 2024   |            |                             |
| Reduce Nitrogen Loss (lbs)                                        |            |                             |
| Milestone                                                         | Achieved   | Percentage Toward Milestone |
| 25,060,054                                                        | 18,870,046 | 75%                         |
| *17,000,838 lbs reduced in FY 2010–2023; 1,869,208 lbs in FY 2024 |            |                             |
| Stream Segment/Lake Recommended Delistings                        |            |                             |
| Milestone                                                         | Achieved   | Percentage Toward Milestone |
| 27                                                                | 19         | 70%                         |
| *19 delistings in FY 2012–2022; 0 in FY 2024                      |            |                             |

Data source: FPAC Economics and Policy Analysis Division, January 2025

