

Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds

2024 Progress Report

Known as “America’s River,” the Mississippi River flows over 2,300 miles through America’s heartland to the Gulf of America. The basin not only provides drinking water, food, industry, and recreation for millions of people, it also hosts a globally significant migratory flyway and home for over 325 bird species.

This vital river’s elevated levels of nutrients and sediment can impact the quality of life for the tens of millions of people who live in and rely on the Mississippi River Basin. NRCS works with farmers and conservation partners to implement conservation practices in small watersheds that help trap sediment and reduce runoff of nutrients to improve local water bodies. Collectively, local watershed efforts contribute to improvement in the overall health

of the Mississippi River. MRBI is one of many efforts that support the goals of the Hypoxia Task Force action plan to reduce nutrient loads to the Gulf of America

NRCS and the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative

Launched in 2009, the 12-state Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI) uses several Farm Bill programs, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), to help landowners sustain America’s natural resources through voluntary conservation. The primary goal of MRBI is to improve water quality while ensuring economic viability of agricultural lands. Additional benefits include restoration of wetlands and wildlife habitat enhancement.

States within the Mississippi River Basin have developed nutrient reduction strategies to minimize the contributions of nitrogen and phosphorus to surface waters within the basin, and ultimately to the Gulf of America. MRBI uses a small watershed approach to support the states’ reduction strategies. Avoiding, controlling and trapping practices are implemented to reduce the amount of nutrients flowing from agricultural land into waterways and to improve the resiliency of working lands.



Outcomes and Impacts

MRBI has shown that focused water quality efforts in high priority areas can be effective in building strong partnerships, increasing trust and collaboration with landowners and farmers, and getting more conservation systems on the ground.

From 2010 to 2024, over \$514 million was obligated for MRBI project contracts through EQIP, providing treatment on over 1.97 million acres. These targeted investments have increased the adoption of critical water quality conservation practices, such as cover crops, no-till, residue management, grassed waterways and nutrient management by over 30% (based on practice obligations) compared to Focus Area watersheds without MRBI.

To date, segments of the Cache River, Fork Point and St. Francis River in Arkansas, and Flowers Creek in Indiana, have had measured water quality improvement and now meet water quality standards, so they have been scheduled for delisting from the states’ impaired waters list.

Treating Acres for Surface Loss



Fiscal Year 2024 Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative NRCS Financial Assistance (EQIP FA) for Active and Completed Contracts

State	Acres	NRCS Investments	Contracts
Arkansas	22,542	\$12,197,863	119
Illinois	1,476	\$454,714	7
Indiana	722	\$405,623	8
Iowa	7,228	\$4,565,816	63
Kentucky	999	\$626,779	7
Louisiana	790	\$107,584	2
Minnesota	462	\$1,170,334	10
Mississippi	15,161	\$11,262,575	73
Missouri	3,004	\$1,304,533	17
Ohio	2	\$113,195	1
Tennessee	5,213	\$3,497,371	45
Wisconsin	1,050	\$145,985	6
Total	58,649	\$35,852,372	358

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

NRCS Goals

NRCS developed edge-of-field pollutant reduction goals-or milestones-for MRBI to demonstrate progress in supporting the states' nutrient reduction strategies. 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 added emphasis to set the milestones above where previous reduction goals were exceeded. MRBI aims to reduce sediment loss from cropland by 4 million tons, phosphorus loss by 8 million pounds and nitrogen loss by 44 million pounds on cropland from 2010 to 2028. These reductions are the collective results across all MRBI watershed projects, and complement the Conservation Effects Assessment Project basin-level results.

Overall Summary FY 2010–24

Total NRCS Investment \$514,985,129
 Number of Contracts 11,330
 Total Acres Contracted..... 1,979,348

2028 Milestones

Reduce Sediment Loss (tons)		
Milestone	Achieved	Percentage Toward Milestone
4,671,138	3,492,851	75%
*3,129,839 tons reduced in FY 2010–2023; 363,012 tons in FY 2024		
Reduce Phosphorus Loss (lbs)		
Milestone	Achieved	Percentage Toward Milestone
8,466,720	6,056,147	72%
*5,731,094 lbs reduced in FY 2010–2023; 325,053 lbs in FY 2024		
Reduce Nitrogen Loss (lbs)		
Milestone	Achieved	Percentage Toward Milestone
44,168,535	30,028,598	68%
*26,410,036 lbs reduced in FY 2010–2023; 3,618,562 lbs in FY 2024		

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



Milestone Achieved

