

# Watershed Program Pays Farmers to Enhance Environment

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*A new USDA program will attract funding to pay farmers, ranchers and foresters to enhance nature's benefits, including water purification, erosion control and wildlife habitat.*

Sustainable Conservation, in partnership with Environmental Defense Fund, Environmental Incentives, Protected Harvest and the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, has been awarded a \$372,000 Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to develop a pilot program to measure environmental benefits in California's Mokelumne River Watershed. The program will attract funding to pay farmers, ranchers and foresters to enhance nature's benefits, including water purification, erosion control and wildlife habitat.

"Typically farmers and ranchers are paid to grow crops and raise livestock," said Ashley Boren, Executive Director of Sustainable Conservation. "But many of these individuals who manage their land responsibly provide important services that benefit nature and human well-being. We need to create ways to pay farmers and ranchers for these services."

The pilot program will develop uniform standards and payment mechanisms that allow private utilities, government agencies, communities, foundations and nonprofits to pay landowners and land managers to enhance and manage their land in ways that benefit people and the environment.

"This innovative pilot project will demonstrate that a watershed-wide approach to compensate landowners for conservation actions is the best way to achieve conservation goals that support local communities and provide environmental benefits to people outside the watershed, by improving water quality and water storage and increasing habitat for wildlife, said Belinda Morris, Regional Director of the Working Lands Program for Environmental Defense Fund. "This natural infrastructure will produce environmental benefits at a much lower cost than building man-made infrastructure to achieve comparable benefits."

The Mokelumne River begins high in the Sierra Nevada, flows through the foothills across the Central Valley and into the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, and empties into the San Francisco Bay. This watershed provides numerous environmental and economic benefits to the region. For example, the Mokelumne River delivers water to 1.4 million people in the East Bay, and provides agricultural water supply and storage to irrigate more than 800,000 acres of vineyards and other crops. The river also

provides recreational benefits like whitewater rafting and popular trout fishing, and is home to a variety of habitats that support numerous plants and animals. (See link to watershed map at: [http://www.suscon.org/images/Mokelumne\\_River\\_Map.JPG](http://www.suscon.org/images/Mokelumne_River_Map.JPG)).

“Our forested watersheds provide multiple benefits to downstream water users as well as to millions of other Californians by storing and filtering water in the snowpack and meadows, by providing a sustainable habitat for wildlife and plants, and through carbon sequestration,” said Sierra Nevada Conservancy Executive Officer Jim Branham. “The issues in the Mokelumne River Watershed are representative of other watersheds with headwaters in the Sierra, so we look to this pilot program as one that will provide information that is transferrable across the region.”

A scenic river, the Mokelumne faces multiple threats, including: groundwater overdraft, degradation of some managed lands, increased danger of uncharacteristically large fires, and climate change that reduces the snowpack that supplies water for the region. Landowners and land managers within the area are looking for ways to protect the existing natural resources and restore many of the watershed functions. The pilot program will devise ways to compensate the good land stewards.

This project, overseen by Sustainable Conservation, engages more than a dozen organizations, including:

- Amador Calaveras Consensus Group
- East Bay Municipal Utility District
- Environmental Defense Fund
- Environmental Incentives
- Foothill Conservancy
- Lower Mokelumne River Watershed Stewardship Steering Committee
- Mokelumne Watershed Stakeholder Working Group
- Protected Harvest
- San Joaquin County Resource Conservation District
- Sierra Nevada Conservancy
- The Nature Conservancy
- U.S. Forest Service Pacific Southwest Region
- U.S. Forest Service - Amador Ranger District, Eldorado National Forest
- U.S. Forest Service - Calaveras Ranger District, Stanislaus National Forest
- Vino Farms, LLC

Through CIGs, the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is investing nearly \$22.5 million via 52 grants in 40 states to support innovations that conserve and protect natural resources, while enhancing agricultural productivity. A summary of all proposals selected for 2011 is available at: [www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov).

"The grants will help to spur creativity and problem-solving to benefit conservation-minded farmers and ranchers," said USDA NRCS Chief Dave White. "Everyone who relies upon the sustainability of our nation's natural resources for clean water, food and fiber, or their way of life will benefit from these grants."

For more info, please visit [www.suscon.org](http://www.suscon.org).

Watershed map: [http://www.suscon.org/images/Mokelumne\\_River\\_Map.JPG](http://www.suscon.org/images/Mokelumne_River_Map.JPG)