USDA Announces Investments for Tribal Communities and Acequias and Finalizes Agreements with Irrigation Districts to Produce Water-Saving Commodities

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En Espanol

WASHINGTON, Nov. 22, 2024 - Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced next steps and selections within the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Water-Saving Commodities program to support agricultural commodity production while reducing water losses in communities across the West. Today, USDA is announcing the preliminary selection of three Congressionally-authorized Indian Irrigation Projects supported by the U.S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and a new initiative to support acequias in the Southwest through a partnership with New Mexico and Colorado associations of conservation districts.

In August, USDA announced the preliminary selection of 18 irrigation districts for the production of water-saving commodities. USDA has entered into formal agreements with all 18 districts to implement water-saving strategies across the West. With the addition of today's preliminary selections, these Water-Saving Commodities partnerships - which support irrigation organization projects and producers in using innovative water saving technologies and farming practices while continuing to produce crop commodities in the face of continued drought - are expected to conserve up to 50,000 acre-feet in water use across 250,000 acres of irrigated land in production, while expanding and creating new, sustainable market opportunities.

"The United States is experiencing the devastating and unpredictable effects of climate change, and in the West this often means grappling with drought and limited water availability, the staggering effects of which our agricultural communities feel first-hand," Vilsack said. "In doing everything we can to support the health of American agriculture and our natural resources, we are leveraging this effort and the expertise in the western irrigation districts, tribes, and acequias to help not only our producers, but also the American consumer. It is paramount that we make opportunities like this accessible to all agricultural communities, including Tribal and underserved communities."

This effort is part of a larger all-of-government approach to address drought throughout the West. In regions like the Colorado River, Rio Grande, and Deschutes River basins, this integrated approach and partnership with local farmers is important in ensuring a more sustainable and resilient future for rural communities.

Tribal Communities

Reflecting USDA's priorities and goals to broaden the scope and reach of its conservation programs to engage underserved communities, USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) has dedicated $45 million specifically for Water-Saving Commodities assistance to help Tribal communities with BIA Irrigation Projects. These investments will help the selected projects strengthen their irrigation practices in places experiencing the impacts from drought, reducing water losses, while continuing agricultural commodity production.

USDA held a Tribal consultation this summer, engaged with BIA, and applied a similar criteria that was used to select the irrigation projects to target funding within the Tribal set-aside.

The BIA Irrigation Projects initially selected for funding are:

- Colorado River Indian Irrigation Project, Arizona
- San Carlos Irrigation Project, Arizona
- Navajo Indian Irrigation Project, New Mexico

"The Gila River Indian Community is grateful to be working with USDA on multiple water saving strategies within the San Carlos Irrigation Project service area. This relationship is highly valued in that it supports tribal growers seeking to reclaim their agricultural economy and way of life. To have the opportunity to continue this partnership in a manner that benefits water conservation efforts in the southwest and within the Community while at the same furthering the goals of tribal growers to use water as efficiently as possible is of great cultural importance," said the Gila River Indian Community. "Working together we can enhance the Community's blue-green economy of being good stewards of the water resources provided by our creator and utilizing those resources in an environmentally friendly manner."

Acequia Partnerships

Similarly, USDA has dedicated $15 million specifically for Water-Saving Commodities partnerships with two state associations of conservation districts for helping community operated irrigation systems known as acequias produce water-saving commodities. As a community, acequias are the stewards of surface waters that not only flow to their crop fields but help replenish rivers, wetlands and groundwater. These partnerships enhance existing cooperative efforts by local conservation districts to provide education, outreach, and technical services needed to keep production up while responsibly utilizing water and other natural resources during drought conditions.

The state associations of conservation districts preliminarily selected for funding are:

- Colorado State Association of Conservation Districts
- New Mexico State Association of Conservation Districts

Final Agreements with Irrigation Districts

There has also been, to date, 18 grant agreements signed with irrigation districts. These organizations were initially selected based on several commodity production and water management-related criteria to maximize achieving program objectives, leveraging available data from the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Reclamation to ensure close alignment and partnership.

- Black Canyon Irrigation District, Idaho
- Brooklyn Canal Company, Utah
- Central Oregon Irrigation District, Oregon
- Central Arizona Irrigation and Drainage District, Arizona
- Corcoran Irrigation District, California
- East Columbia Basin Irrigation District, Washington
- Elephant Butte Irrigation District, New Mexico
- Glenn - Colusa Irrigation District, California
- Greybull Valley Irrigation District, Wyoming
- Hidalgo & Cameron Counties Irrigation District 9, Texas
- Huntley Project Irrigation District, Montana
- Imperial Irrigation District, California
- Maricopa - Stanfield Irrigation and Drainage District, Arizona
- Palisade Irrigation District, Colorado
- Quincy Columbia Basin Irrigation District, Washington
- Solano Irrigation District, California
- Sutter Mutual Water Company, California
- Truckee-Carson Irrigation District, Nevada

Up to $15 million in eligible payments may be disbursed through each of these agreements for water-saving activities carried out by irrigation districts and eligible producers within their water delivery area.

Depending on available funding, additional awards may be possible.

Participating producers will receive payments from the irrigation districts for voluntarily reducing water losses while maintaining commodity production. The needs of producers will determine the specific strategies for water conservation, including irrigation improvements, shifts in management practices, shifts in cropping systems, and other innovative strategies. USDA will learn from the diversity of strategies used and identify additional opportunities to maintain and expand water-saving commodity production in the future.

Irrigation districts and participating producers will commit to ensuring continued commodity production in the areas where water supplies are impacted by drought. Work plans under development will describe the water-saving strategies and activities being funded, commodities to be produced, specific budgets, and methods for quantifying water savings.

Following the approval of work plans, irrigation districts and eligible producers will carry out the plans and be eligible for reimbursement of costs or advanced payments as needed and approved.

More Information

Visit the Water-Saving Commodities program webpage for frequently asked questions, and other resources.

USDA touches the lives of all Americans each day in so many positive ways. Under the Biden-Harris administration, USDA is transforming America's food system with a greater focus on more resilient local and regional food production, fairer markets for all producers, ensuring access to safe, healthy and nutritious food in all communities, building new markets and streams of income for farmers and producers using climate smart food and forestry practices, making historic investments in infrastructure and clean energy capabilities in rural America, and committed to equity across the Department by removing systemic barriers and building a workforce more representative of America. To learn more, visit usda.gov.

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