

USDA 'climate-smart agriculture' funds up for grabs

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Virginia agricultural producers may stand to receive more funding from the Department of Agriculture's Regional Conservation Partnership Program, as the organization announced another \$1.5 billion is available for eligible conservation and climate projects throughout the country.

The program looks to help producers implement "climate-smart agriculture," or farming practices that replenish natural resources and minimize climate change. This latest tranche of funding comes from the Farm Bill and the Inflation Reduction Act, which the Biden administration has dubbed the "largest climate investment in history."

An **interactive map** on the USDA's website displays where more than \$1 billion of taxpayer funds were disbursed in 2023 – including three locations in the commonwealth.

Nearly \$7 million was awarded to a Climate Smart Switchgrass Cropping System Transition project led by FDC Enterprises, Inc., in Nottoway County. The project will replace existing growth with

switchgrass in 5,000 acres of unproductive farmland, expiring Conservation Reserve Program acres and degraded cool season grass pastureland. Switchgrass is used for soil conservation, reduced nutrient runoff and carbon sequestration or storage.

The American Farmland Trust was awarded \$5 million to protect 1,000 acres of farmland from urban expansion. Farmers can sell their land to the Trust, which protects the land from development and, in some cases, restores parts of the property to functional agricultural use. This buy-protect-sell model is a land transition model “that can help farmers without heirs transfer property to a new generation of producers,” according to the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The Farmland Trust then sells the property for a reduced price to next-generation farmers to sustain the agricultural way of life in America.

Finally, \$10 million was awarded to outreach efforts by the Maryland & Virginia Milk Producers Cooperative Association, though the lead state on the project is Pennsylvania, so that they can teach others about “conservation practices and their benefits to dairy farmers in Maryland, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Virginia.”

Projects are also meant to advance President Joe Biden’s Justice40 Initiative, which brings federal climate and clean energy ventures to disadvantaged communities.