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\$320 mil. for Mississippi River Basin conservation projects

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Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced a new initiative Thursday to improve water quality and the overall health of the Mississippi River Basin. The Secretary made the announcement in taped remarks to the Gulf Hypoxia Task Force Meeting in Des Moines, Iowa.

Natural Resources Conservation Service Chief Dave White explained that “USDA is going to partner with farmers to implement a range of land stewardship practices, including conservation tillage, nutrient management, and other innovative practices.” He pointed out that “We all live downstream of other water users and this initiative will help make the Mississippi River Basin and the Mississippi River and its tributaries healthier for everyone.”

The new Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI) will provide approximately \$320 million over the next four years for voluntary conservation projects in priority watersheds located in Arkansas, Kentucky, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee, and Wisconsin. Participation in this initiative, which will be managed by USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), will be made available through a competitive process for potential partners at the local, state and national levels.

“The Obama administration is committed to taking bold steps with our state and local partners to clean up the entire Mississippi River Basin, a critical natural resource that provides drinking water for tens of millions of Americans,” Vilsack said. “Industrial, municipal, residential, and agricultural sources have all contributed pollutants to the waters of the Mississippi River Basin, and the MRBI will provide resources that will help us come together to address this issue.”

Secretary Vilsack’s announcement can be viewed online at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Rwi5rJ3eNE>

The natural capacity of the Mississippi River Basin to remove nutrients has been diminished by a range of human activities over the years, including modification of floodplains for agricultural and urban land. MRBI will help agricultural producers

implement conservation and management practices that avoid, control, and trap nutrient runoff. The initiative is performance oriented, which means that measurable conservation results are required in order to participate. By focusing on priority watersheds in these 12 states in the basin, USDA, its partner organizations, state and local agencies, and agricultural producers will coordinate their resources in areas requiring the most immediate attention and offer the best return on the funds invested.

In addition to other federal, state, and partner funding, NRCS is targeting \$80 million annually over the next four years through Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative, Conservation Innovation Grants, and the Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program. This is in addition to other NRCS program funding and assistance such as Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, and the Conservation Stewardship Program.

The Mississippi River Basin is a critical ecosystem to the United States. Its entire land mass, totaling 41 percent of the contiguous United States and 15 percent of North America, drains into the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico.

The Mississippi River runs 2,350 miles from its headwaters at Lake Itasca, Minnesota, to the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico and carries an average of 436,000 tons of sediment each day. It takes about 90 days for water to travel from the headwaters in Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico where water is discharged at an average rate of 600,000 cubic feet per second.

Assessment of the progress in implementing MRBI will be critical, as will evaluation of outcomes at the field scale/edge-of-field and on the watershed basis. Successful measures of the initiative will include a reduced nutrient footprint and environmental impact through more efficient use of nutrients for crop production in the priority watersheds.

For information about the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative, including eligibility requirements, please visit www.nrcs.usda.gov or your USDA Service Center.