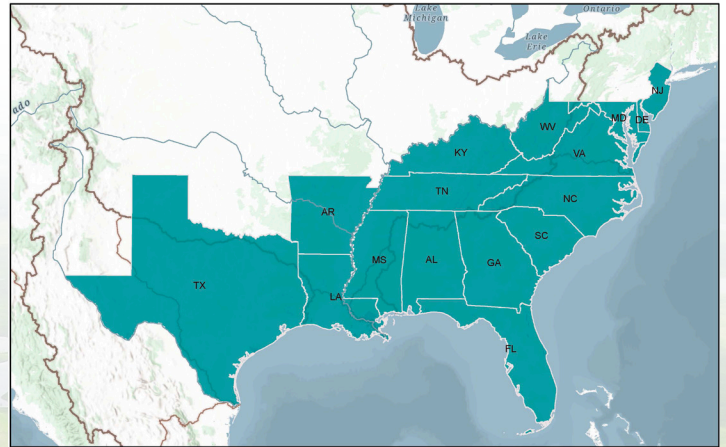


USDA WORKING LANDS FOR WILDLIFE

# Healthy Waterways and Farmlands

**W**orking Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) uses win-win solutions to target voluntary, incentive-based conservation that improves agricultural productivity and wildlife habitat across large landscapes. The Aquatic Connectivity Framework (ACF) is a WLFW partnership effort that brings together public and private partners to tackle critical threats to watersheds across 16 states in the eastern and central U.S. These watersheds are vital to biodiversity conservation and have also been flagged as key to the agricultural economy of the U.S. due to their long growing seasons and more reliable soil moisture compared to other regions. Stretching from the Gulf and South Atlantic coasts to Appalachia and the southern Ozarks, the ACF aims to protect water quality, support wildlife, and promote sustainable agricultural practices for resilient and productive landscapes.

Through the Farm Bill, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Services Agency (FSA) provide technical and financial assistance to landowners who voluntarily commit to improving their lands. USDA and their partners help agricultural producers address significant threats to aquatic ecosystems while boosting agricultural revenues. Many of the conservation practices employed also mitigate risks to agricultural operations from low water availability, low water quality, and negative climate influences.



States participating in the Aquatic Connectivity Framework

## BUILDING ON A LEGACY OF SUCCESS

The Aquatic Connectivity Framework builds on the aquatic conservation successes of Working Lands for Wildlife initiatives (<https://landscapepartnership.org/networks/working-lands-for-wildlife>), including species-specific efforts like the Eastern Hellbender, Bog Turtle, and American Black Duck initiatives, as well as watershed-focused efforts like the Conasauga River and Colorado River Initiatives in Georgia and Texas respectively. These initiatives have demonstrated how collaborative efforts between USDA, farmers, livestock producers, and other partners can improve habitat health, protect at-risk species, and promote effective watershed management. This Framework expands on the WLFW initiatives by prioritizing the restoration or preservation of aquatic connectivity and addressing key threats to aquatic systems across a large network of watersheds. The ACF also enhances work that NRCS accomplishes under the National Water Quality Initiative (<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/national-water-quality-initiative>) to deliver benefits to clean water across the entire U.S.



# A Framework for Conservation Action



# Conservation Objectives and Planned Actions

## JOINING FORCES TO ADDRESS CRITICAL THREATS

The ACF addresses four significant threats to aquatic ecosystems: wetland and farmland losses, stormwater runoff, elevated stream temperatures, and barriers to aquatic movement. By focusing efforts on priority watersheds and integrating scientific research, expert knowledge, and local priorities, the ACF directs conservation actions to where they are most urgently needed.



### THREAT: WETLAND AND AGRICULTURAL LAND LOSSES

**Objective:** Protect and restore connected wetlands while addressing threats to productive agricultural lands from sea level rise.

**Planned Actions:** Restore and protect vital functions of wetlands across all watersheds. Offer landowners affected by sea level rise engineering and financial alternatives to address changing conditions.



### THREAT: STORMWATER RUNOFF

**Objective:** Reduce risks of soil erosion and pollutant runoff from agricultural lands entering waterways.

**Planned Action:** Install sustainable crop and grazing conservation practices like reduced tillage, prescribed grazing, and field buffers.



### THREAT: ELEVATED IN-STREAM WATER TEMPERATURES

**Objective:** Establish riparian buffers to provide essential shade, stabilize streambanks, and reduce evaporation, creating healthier aquatic environments for temperature-sensitive species like trout. Additionally, use lessons learned in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene (2024) to use forest buffers to reduce farm and community impacts from storm surges.

**Planned Action:** Restore riparian buffers to regulate water temperatures, improve habitat quality, and mitigate storm damages along streams.



### THREAT: INSTREAM BARRIERS

**Objective:** Reconnect fragmented waterways to restore water flow, enable fish and other species to migrate, reproduce, and thrive while supporting recreational fishing and boating and boating safety.

**Planned Action:** Remove outdated culverts and small dams to restore physical stream connectivity to enhance habitat conditions and recreation.

## GET INVOLVED

**Interested in taking action?** Contact your local NRCS service center to get started. For more information, visit the NRCS Service Center Locator: <https://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app?agency=nrcs> and select your state and county.

For more information about the Aquatic Connectivity Framework contact [josselyn.lucas@landscapepartnership.org](mailto:josselyn.lucas@landscapepartnership.org) or visit the aquatics page on the Landscape Partnership Portal at <https://landscapepartnership.org/aquatics>.

Aquatic  
Connectivity  
Framework

