

**NEW NRCS PARTNERSHIP PROMOTES VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION**

*Natural Resources Conservation Service and Department of Defense Collaborate for Working Forests*

**U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, Greenville, SC**

For IMMEDIATE RELEASE (**November 9, 2016**)

The U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, Inc. (Endowment) today announced a new Memorandum of Understanding with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). The partnership will provide \$7,520,000 to landowners in Mississippi, Georgia, and North Carolina for conservation easements and habitat restoration projects. Projects will focus on working forest lands, including longleaf pine, and will enhance restoration of Threatened and Endangered Species. Funding is also provided for projects that help preclude the potential listing of other species.

In Georgia, for example, RCPP funding will be used to help implement the Gopher Tortoise Initiative, led by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. This bold collaborative of government agencies, not-for-profit organizations, and businesses seeks to protect prime gopher tortoise habitat and preclude listing of the species in the eastern portion of its range. Should the gopher tortoise be federally listed as Threatened or Endangered, there would be significant impacts to landowners. RCPP funding will support voluntary, proactive measures to help keep this from happening.

The Department of Defense Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program is providing matching funds for selected projects that will protect the military mission by helping remove or avoid land-use conflicts near installations and by addressing regulatory restrictions that inhibit military activities.

“Families and private businesses own and manage the vast majority of the forest land in the southeast, typically 90 percent or more in most states,” noted Carlton Owen, the Endowment’s President and CEO. “Providing voluntary incentives to retain and improve management of their forests benefits these owners economically while returning broader societal benefits such as rural forestry jobs, cleaner water, and wildlife habitat. Voluntary conservation works. The Regional Conservation Partnership Program is accelerating implementation of important projects.”

This new RCPP partnership supports the goals of the Sentinel Landscapes Partnership ([www.sentinellandscapes.org](http://www.sentinellandscapes.org)). As described on their website, the Sentinel Landscapes Partnership enables the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Defense, and the Interior, to achieve their established priorities with at greater cost-sharing, on a wider-scale, and with broader stakeholder buy-in. By aligning programs with state and local governments and non-governmental organizations, private landowners receive better coordinated delivery of Federal programs that provide assistance. Sentinel Landscapes are working or natural lands important to the Nation’s defense mission – places where protecting the working and rural character of key landscapes strengthens the economies of farms, ranches, and forests;

conserves habitat and natural resources; and protects vital test and training missions conducted on those military installations that anchor such landscapes.

The Endowment's RCPP award is one of dozens announced earlier this year. Collectively, these partnerships will provide up to \$260 million to improve the Nation's water quality, combat drought, enhance soil health, support wildlife habitat, protect agricultural viability, and in many cases ensure that our fighting men and women are prepared to ensure national security.

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**For more information contact:**

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The **U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities** (the Endowment) is a not-for-profit public charity working collaboratively with partners in the public and private sectors to advance systemic, transformative, and sustainable change for the health and vitality of the nation's working forests and forest-reliant communities – [www.usendowment.org](http://www.usendowment.org)