

National Bulletin: 300-25-17

Date: 03/04/2025

Subject: LTP – Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds  
Initiative Watershed Updates for Fiscal Year 2026

### Action Required By: April 28, 2025

**Purpose:** This national bulletin provides state conservationists (STC) with procedures for participating in the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI) and updating watersheds for fiscal year (FY) 2026.

This guidance applies only to the 12 states that make up the MRBI boundary: Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee, and Wisconsin.

**Expiration Date:** September 30, 2025.

**Background:** MRBI was announced in FY 2009 with a primary focus of improving water quality while also restoring wetlands, enhancing wildlife habitat, and sustaining agricultural viability in small watersheds of the Mississippi River Basin. In FY 2015, MRBI was updated to align with the nutrient loss reduction strategies developed by member states in the Hypoxia Task Force. Guidance for NWQI can be found in [440 NI § 307.27](#).

Implementing MRBI requires a flexible approach tailored to individual watersheds and should support conservation systems made of practices that avoid, control, and trap sediment and nutrients. MRBI activities are guided by multiyear implementation plans that document annual targets for conservation activity and the related financial assistance need.

**Explanation:** This guidance establishes criteria and action items to:

- propose new priority watersheds for MRBI
- withdraw priority watersheds from MRBI
- update existing implementation projects.

### Instructions for Submitting MRBI Proposals

For the FY 2026 cycle, all MRBI proposals and changes must be submitted using the [MRBI Web Application](#). The application provides a user guide. States may select one or more contiguous watersheds in a proposal. Do not submit proposals through email.

### Watershed Selection for Implementation Phase

New priority watersheds for the implementation phase **must** meet [MRBI Priority Watershed Selection Criteria](#) and have a watershed assessment that meets the [NWQI/MRBI Watershed Assessment Guidance](#).

To propose an implementation watershed for MRBI, STCs should complete an implementation request in the MRBI Web Application. Implementation requests without a watershed assessment and a completed [Watershed Assessment Checklist](#) will not be considered for approval during the review process.

### **Watershed Selection for Planning Phase**

If a potential priority watershed does **not** meet the required level of planning in [NWQI/MRBI Watershed Assessment Guidance](#), then the watershed may be proposed for a planning phase. This planning phase will give time for watershed-level assessment, on-farm planning, and outreach to support development of the multiyear implementation plan.

To propose a planning phase watershed, STCs should complete the planning request in the [MRBI Web Application](#). Planning phase watersheds may be transitioned to the implementation phase once they meet the assessment criteria and multiyear implementation plan requirements.

STCs may receive support for preparing a watershed assessment including GIS resources, assessment guidance, and targeting tools. States may receive a one-time conservation technical assistance (CTA) allocation for watershed assessment and planning.

- CTA may fund more staff or develop partner agreements to help with watershed-level planning and outreach. CTA allocations are limited to \$50,000 per MRBI proposal with a maximum of \$150,000 per state.
- This limit applies to the **combined total** for National Water Quality Initiative and MRBI planning projects.
- STCs should work with state and local stakeholders in selecting priority watersheds that leverage local partnerships and address stakeholder conservation priorities.

### **Withdrawing Watersheds**

STCs can propose to withdraw MRBI watersheds if evidence supports that conservation goals have been achieved or if factors such as lack of producer engagement indicate conservation goals will not be reached. To withdraw a watershed, STCs should complete the withdraw option in the MRBI Web Application and include justifications with a letter of concurrence from the state water quality agency or equivalent.

### **Updating Existing Projects**

Existing projects may be updated if the original or amended watershed assessment supports additional watersheds with critical source areas or if producer engagement can support updated goals or budgets. STCs can update watersheds in an existing project or modify the project budget through the [MRBI Web Application](#). Any update must provide evidence that the original or amended watershed assessment supports the change.

Submit MRBI changes with attachments (if applicable) by **April 28, 2025**. More resources for response to this bulletin can be found in the [FY 2026 MRBI Directive SharePoint Folder](#).

**Contact:** If you have questions or need additional information, please contact John Bullough, MRBI coordinator for the Areawide Planning Branch, at [john.bullough@usda.gov](mailto:john.bullough@usda.gov).