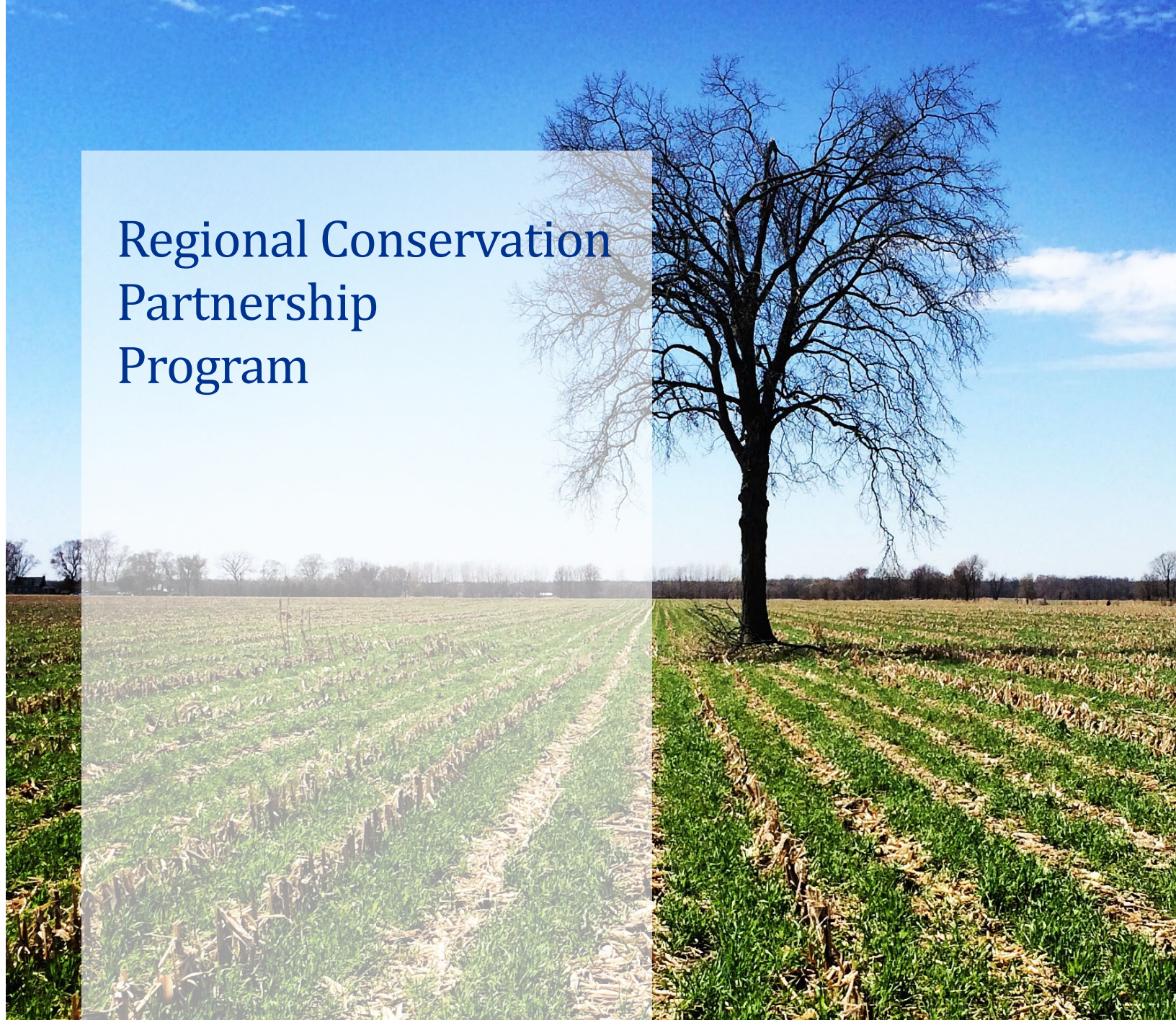




Regional Conservation Partnership Program

**Fiscal Year (FY) 2022
Regional Conservation Partnership Program
Classic
Notice of Funding Opportunity (NFO)**



**Announcement: USDA-NRCS-NHQ-RCPP-22-
NOFO0001136**

Date Issued: January 13, 2022



**United States
Department of
Agriculture**

Natural Resources Conservation Service

Programs Deputy Area
Financial Assistance Program Division
Projects Branch

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Summary Information

Federal Awarding Agency Name: U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC)

Funding Opportunity Title: Announcement for Program Funding for NRCS's Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) for Federal Fiscal Year (FY) 2022.

Funding Opportunity Number: USDA-NRCS-NHQ-RCPP-22-NOFO0001136

Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance Number: 10.932, Regional Conservation Partnership Program

DUE DATE: Proposals must be received by NRCS by **11:59 p.m. Eastern Time on April 13, 2022.**

NOTE: The FY22 RCPP Alternative Funding Arrangement (AFA) provision is implemented through a separate funding announcement, USDA-NRCS-NHQ-RCPPAFA-22-NOFO0001137.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) promotes coordination of NRCS conservation activities with partners that offer value-added contributions to expand our collective ability to address on-farm, watershed, and regional natural resource concerns. Through RCPP, NRCS seeks to co-invest with partners to implement projects that demonstrate innovative solutions to conservation challenges and provide measurable improvements and outcomes tied to the resource concerns they seek to address.

Using guidance contained in this notice, potential RCPP partners propose projects that generate conservation benefits by addressing specific natural resource objectives in a State/multistate area or address one or more priority resource concerns within an NRCS-designated critical conservation area (CCA). NRCS and partners collaborate to design, promote, and implement RCPP projects on agricultural and nonindustrial private forest land. Through RCPP, NRCS may provide both financial and technical assistance funds to project partners and agricultural producers to carry out projects. RCPP proposals are evaluated through a competitive proposal process based on four criteria: impact, partner contributions, innovation, and partnership and management.

Up to \$200 million is available for RCPP projects through this announcement. Proposals are accepted from all 50 States, the Caribbean Area (Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands), and U.S. territories in the Pacific Island Areas (Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands).

SUBMISSIONS: Proposals must be submitted through the RCPP portal. See section VIII of this announcement for information on using the RCPP portal to submit proposals. Registration with USDA's eAuthentication system is required to access the RCPP portal.

Time-sensitive information on registering for eAuthentication access is included in section VIII of this notice.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Applicants are encouraged to contact the appropriate State RCPP Coordinator(s) with questions. A list of State RCPP coordinators, as of the date of this announcement's posting, is on the [RCPP website](#). Applicants can also email the RCPP inbox—rcpp@usda.gov--with questions about the announcement. The [national RCPP website](#) is also a great source of current information about the program.

Interested applicants are encouraged to participate in a webinar with general information about the Classic and AFA funding announcements. The webinar is scheduled for January 20, 2022 from 3-4:30 p.m. Eastern. Instructions for participating in the webinar are below:

The conference begins at 3:00 PM Eastern Time on January 20, 2022; you may join the conference 10 minutes prior.

To join the conference, click: <https://ems8.intellor.com/login/842136>

Join the Zoom event and follow the prompts to connect audio by computer or telephone.

Need to join via phone only?

888-251-2949 or 215-861-0694 - [Need an international number?](#)

Access Code: 2626600# .

Zoom Support: 800-345-0857

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I. FUNDING OPPORTUNITY DESCRIPTION

A. Legislative Authority

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is authorized by Subtitle I of Title XII of the Food Security Act of 1985 (the 1985 Act), as amended by Sections 2701 through 2707 of the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018. The Secretary of Agriculture has delegated the authority to administer RCPP to the Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). NRCS is an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). NRCS has promulgated regulations for RCPP implementation at 7 CFR Part 1464. All actions funded under this announcement are subject to RCPP statute and regulations.

B. Delivering Assistance Through Partnerships

RCPP requires coordination between NRCS and its partners to deliver conservation assistance to producers, landowners, and communities. After announcing RCPP project selections, NRCS negotiates an RCPP programmatic partnership agreement (PPA) for each project with the lead partner before entering into contracts, easements, or other awards with producers and landowners and partners.

RCPP applicants must work closely with NRCS throughout the proposal, negotiation, and implementation process, through appropriate NRCS State office(s) and designated State RCPP Coordinator(s) to—

1. Determine if proposed project(s) align with RCPP's goals and policies;
2. Develop and submit a project proposal using the guidance in this notice; and
3. If a proposal is selected to become a project, develop a PPA and implement the project.

C. Vision and Goals of the Program

RCPP is an innovative program that has as its critical feature a co-investment approach through which NRCS and partners collaborate to implement natural resource conservation activities. Following are four key principles of RCPP:

1. **Impact**—RCPP proposals must propose effective and compelling solutions that address one or more natural resource concern to help solve natural resource challenges. Partners are responsible for evaluating a project's impact and results.
2. **Partner Contributions**—Partners are responsible for identifying any combination of cash and in-kind value-added contributions to leverage NRCS's RCPP investments. It is NRCS's goal that partner contributions at least equal the NRCS investment in an RCPP project. Substantive and sizable partner contributions are given priority consideration as part of the RCPP proposal evaluation criteria.
3. **Innovation**—NRCS seeks projects that integrate multiple conservation approaches,

implement innovative conservation approaches or technologies, build new partnerships, or effectively take advantage of program flexibilities to deliver conservation solutions.

4. Partnerships and Management—Partners must have experience, expertise, and capacity to manage the partnership and project, provide outreach to producers, and quantify the environmental (and when possible, economic and social) outcomes of an RCPP project. RCPP ranking criteria give priority consideration to applicants that meaningfully engage historically underserved farmers and ranchers.

Successful RCPP applicants bring an array of financial and technical capabilities to projects, demonstrate experience working effectively and collaboratively with agricultural producers and landowners across the landscape, and propose innovative, sustainable, and measurable approaches to achieving compelling conservation outcomes.

D. Administration Priorities

Climate-Smart Agriculture

NRCS intends to award a significant portion of the available funding to proposals that include Climate-Smart Agriculture and Forestry approaches, systems, and practices that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and sequester carbon.

Urban Agriculture

NRCS also strongly encourages the submission of RCPP proposals addressing the conservation needs of urban farmers in metropolitan areas. Interest in urban agriculture continues to grow. Urban farmers face unique natural resource concerns related to energy conservation, water conservation, soil health, and the long-term protection of land.

Racial Justice & Equity

For the history of the United States, and the history of the USDA, too many Black, Indigenous and People of Color farmers have faced discrimination—sometimes overt and sometimes through deeply embedded rules and policies. USDA is committed to ensuring equity across the Department, removing barriers to access, and building a workforce more representative of America. We are committed to ending discrimination in all its forms wherever it exists.

E. Historically Underserved Producers

The RCPP authorizing language requires USDA and RCPP partners to conduct outreach to Historically Underserved (HU) farmers and ranchers to encourage participation in RCPP projects. NRCS is committed to the success of our nation's HU producers, businesses, and partners. HU producers play a vital role in securing a healthy agricultural economy for our country and are often leaders in protecting, enhancing, and sustaining our valuable natural resources.

NRCS gives priority consideration to RCPP proposals that propose meaningful and measurable engagement with and benefit to HU farmers, ranchers, and landowners. HU producers may be eligible for special incentives to encourage their participation in RCPP projects.

NRCS intends to award a significant amount of the available RCPP funding to projects that benefit HU producers.

The HU producer definition includes beginning, limited resource, socially disadvantaged, and veteran producers. The definitions for these terms are available at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/people/outreach/slbfr/>. The narrative question section of the proposal in the RCPP portal provides an opportunity for applicants to explain how their project will substantively engage and benefit HU producers.

During the proposal evaluation process, each proposal receives an HU index rating that reflects the extent to which the proposed project engages and benefits HU producers. The index ratings are:

- A—partnership targets a majority of project conservation funding to HU producers.
- B—proposal includes clear plan for HU producer participation and includes partner(s) with history of trusted relationships with HU producers.
- C—proposal indicates a substantive plan for HU producer outreach.
- D—proposal does not include explicit HU producer engagement.

F. Overview of the RCPP Proposal Process

Applicants submit a full project proposal following the guidance in section V of this funding announcement. The RCPP proposal evaluation process is detailed in section VI.

Applicants with an existing RCPP project may compete for a new project related to an existing project (e.g., to work with additional producers and landowners or to expand into a new geographic area, or to add new resource concerns/conservation benefits, etc.) or unrelated to an existing project. When considering a proposal related to an existing RCPP project, NRCS considers previous performance and project outcomes as part of the evaluation criteria.

Existing RCPP partners with expiring projects may also request a noncompetitive project renewal through a separate process. A partner selected for a noncompetitive renewal will not be selected for funding for a substantively similar project through this competitive announcement.

G. Final Rule

The RCPP final rule was published in the *Federal Register* on January 14, 2021. RCPP regulations are found at 7 CFR part 1464.

II. FUNDING AVAILABILITY

For the FY22 RCPP Classic and AFA competitions there is a total of up to \$225 million available (the FY 2022 AFA competition will be implemented through a separate funding announcement). Fifty percent of RCPP funding is dedicated to NRCS-designated critical conservation area (CCA) projects and 50 percent to projects in the State/multistate category.

The maximum RCPP funding available for any project (combined financial and technical assistance) selected under this announcement is \$10 million. The minimum funding amount for an RCPP project is \$250,000.

RCPP funds, at the time of PPA execution, are committed by NRCS for the duration of the project, generally not to exceed 5 years from the date of PPA execution. Partners may request a PPA term of longer than 5 years in exceptional circumstances (see section V). RCPP funds are committed for specific purposes based on proposed activities (e.g., land management/restoration, rental, easements, public works/watershed structures) and subsequently obligated through contracts with agricultural producers and supplemental agreements with eligible partners. For all RCPP PPAs, a single one-year, no-cost extension is available at the discretion of NRCS.

RCPP funding may not be expended until a PPA is fully executed.

A. Fund Pools and Priority Resource Concerns

RCPP applicants must identify in their proposals whether they are applying to the CCA or State/multistate fund pool.

CCA Pool—There are eight CCAs that represent landscapes with common resource concerns. For each CCA, NRCS has identified priority resource concerns. CCA proposals must address at least one of the relevant CCA's priority resource concerns. CCAs and associated priority resource concerns for the FY 2021/2022 RCPP competition are:

RCPP Critical Conservation Areas	Priority Resource Concerns
Great Lakes Region (IL, IN, MI, MN, NY, PA, OH, WI)	• Water quality degradation • Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates
Chesapeake Bay Watershed (DE, MD, NY, PA, VA, WV)	• Water quality degradation • Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates
Mississippi River Basin (AR, KY, IA, IL, IN, LA, MN, MO, MS, OH, SD, TN, WI)	• Water quality degradation • Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates • Excess/insufficient water/drought
Longleaf Pine Range (AL, FL, GA, LA, MS, NC, SC, TX, VA)	• Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates • Degraded plant condition • Water quality degradation
Western Waters (ID, OR, WA, CA)	• Excess/insufficient water/drought • Water quality degradation • Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates
Northeast Forests and Waters (CT, MA, ME, NH, NY, RI, VT)	• Water quality degradation • Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates • Degraded plant condition
Prairie Grasslands Region (CO, KS, IA, MO, MN, MT, ND, NE, NM, OK, SD, TX, WY)	• Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates • Degraded plant condition • Excess/insufficient water/drought

RCPP Critical Conservation Areas	Priority Resource Concerns
Colorado River Basin (AZ, CA, CO, NM, NV, UT, WY)	• Excess/insufficient water/drought • Water quality degradation • Soil quality degradation • Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates

CCA projects must take place wholly within a CCA (counties traversed by a CCA border are considered within the CCA boundary). For more information about CCAs, including the maps of CCA boundaries, visit the [RCPP website](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/rcpp/) (<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/rcpp/>)

State/multistate Pool—Proposals in the State/multistate category must be carried out either within a single State or in multiple States. For multistate projects, priority consideration is given to proposals identifying a manageable number of States.

B. Adjusted Gross Income Waivers

The RCPP statute explicitly states that the 1985 Act’s adjusted gross income (AGI) limitation does not apply to RCPP partners. The AGI limitation does apply, however, to producers and landowners participating in RCPP projects. During PPA negotiations following the announcement of project awards, a lead partner may request a waiver of the applicability of the AGI provisions for the entire RCPP project or one or more activity (e.g., Land Management, Entity-held Easements, etc.) within a project. A project- or activity-level AGI applicability waiver eliminates the requirement for a producer or landowner to obtain an individual AGI determination or to meet the AGI limitation requirements.

If the RCPP lead partner does not request or receive a project-level waiver of the applicability of AGI, a participating producer or landowner must obtain an individual AGI determination and those who exceed the AGI limitation may individually seek a waiver of the AGI limitation. A waiver of the AGI limitation on an individual basis may only be granted if NRCS determines that the waiver would result in the protection of environmentally sensitive land of special significance (see 7 CFR part 1400).

C. Interim Practice Standards

NRCS conservation practice standards form the environmental and scientific basis for the majority of NRCS land improvement and land management activities. Applicants are encouraged to work with the appropriate NRCS State RCPP Coordinator(s) to identify existing NRCS conservation practices (and other eligible activities) best suited for addressing project resource concerns and generating conservation benefits associated with an RCPP project.

In instances where approved conservation practice standards are not available or currently suitable to support proposed work, RCPP partners may work with NRCS to develop interim conservation practice standards consistent with NRCS authority, policy, and procedure. Development and establishment of interim conservation practice standards requires deliberate consideration and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis; therefore, partners

are strongly encouraged to identify the need for any interim conservation practice standards during the proposal process or during PPA negotiations. Requests to establish an interim conservation practice standard during project implementation may be considered, but potential for inclusion in RCPP projects and contracts may be hampered by interim conservation practice standard development timeframes.

III. ELIGIBILITY INFORMATION

A. Eligible Partners

Entities that are classified as one of the following organizational types can serve as an eligible RCPP partner:

- An agricultural or silvicultural producer association or other group of producers.
- A State or unit of local government.
- An Indian Tribe.
- A farmer cooperative.
- A water district, irrigation district, acequia, rural water district or association, or other organization with specific water delivery authority to agricultural producers.
- A municipal water or wastewater treatment entity.
- An institution of higher education.
- An organization or entity with an established history of working cooperatively with producers on agricultural land, as determined by NRCS, to address—
 - Local conservation priorities related to agricultural production, wildlife habitat development, or nonindustrial private forest land management; or
 - Critical watershed-scale soil erosion, water quality, sediment reduction, or other natural resource issues.
- An entity, such as an Indian Tribe, State government, local government, or a nongovernmental organization that has a farmland or grassland protection program that purchases agricultural land easements, as defined in 7 CFR Section 1468.3.
- A conservation district.

Eligible partners can serve as a lead partner. Each project must have a single lead partner, which is the entity that submits an RCPP proposal and negotiates a PPA with NRCS. The lead partner is ultimately responsible for ensuring completion of project deliverables, delivering all partner contributions, and assessing project outcomes.

Eligible partners, whether the lead partner or not, may be awarded a supplemental agreement, as agreed to in the PPA, to carry out technical assistance activities, facilitate the conveyance of an easement to an eligible entity by a producer, implement an eligible watershed operations activity, or facilitate the implementation of an eligible activity as determined by NRCS. Partners holding supplemental agreement awards assume responsibility for all deliverables under such awards.

NRCS is prohibited by statute from paying for partner administrative expenses. This prohibition is discussed in greater detail in Section IV. D. of this notice.

B. Contributing Partners

In addition to any contributions coming from the lead partner, RCPP projects may include direct or in-kind contributions from other entities, known as “contributing partners.”

Contributing partners may be an eligible partner (entities described in the list in section III.A above) and may also be a third-party individual or organization (even a non-USDA Federal agency) that would not qualify as an eligible partner by the statutory definition. Note, however, that the lead partner is ultimately responsible for delivery of all partner contributions.

C. Producers and Landowners

Agricultural producers or private landowners receiving funding as part of RCPP projects must—

- (1) Provide a tax identification number. Where applicable, American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Pacific Islanders may use another unique identification number for each individual eligible for payment;
- (2) Where applicable, provide the percent interest share in a payment consistent with operation or ownership shares;
- (3) Comply with the highly erodible land (HEL), wetland conservation (WC), and Farm and Tract (FTE) eligibility requirements of the 1985 Act; and
- (4) Comply with the AGI provisions or receive a waiver as described in section II.B of this announcement.

Qualified partners awarded supplemental agreements to implement entity-held easements or public works activities are not subject to the HEL, WC, Farm Tract Eligibility (FTE), and AGI requirements. Any landowners or producers receiving a payment under these agreements (for example, an entity-held easement) are subject to these requirements.

Once NRCS selects a project and executes an RCPP PPA with a lead partner, eligible producers or landowners may participate in an RCPP project in one of two ways. First, they may engage with RCPP project partners and either delegate (using a power of attorney) a project partner to act as their representative in working with NRCS, or request that the partner consider their producer application and submit it as part of a partner bundle of applications for NRCS consideration. Second, eligible producers or landowners seeking to carry out eligible activities consistent with an RCPP project in the project’s geographic area may apply directly to NRCS.

NRCS may give priority ranking consideration to “bundled applications” submitted by an RCPP partner. Bundled applications are one or more producer or landowner applications (for contracts or easements) that the lead partner presents to NRCS for priority consideration as part of an RCPP project.

Any “cost-share” that is provided by a producer or landowner associated with implementation of an RCPP contract (such as land management activities or landowner donations associated with U.S.-held easements) cannot be counted as partner contribution.

D. Land Eligibility

RCPP projects must be carried out on agricultural or nonindustrial private forest land or on associated land on which NRCS determines an eligible activity would help achieve conservation benefits. Generally, eligible land must be shown in Farm Service Agency records as private or Tribal and be used for agricultural or forestry purposes.

“Associated land” is defined as land associated with farms and ranches that is not purposefully managed for food, forage, or fiber and is typically associated with nearby production or conservation lands. Associated land, such as wetlands, riparian areas, grasslands, or floodplains, may comprise the entirety of an enrolled area or may be incidental areas on an enrollment that includes agricultural or nonindustrial private forest land, by including areas such as idle center pivot corners, odd areas, ditches and watercourses, riparian areas, field edges, seasonal and permanent wetlands, and other similar areas. In all cases, to be included in an enrolled area, RCPP funded activities implemented on associated lands must be functionally related to and address resource concerns on agricultural or nonindustrial private forest lands in the project area.

Below are the two limited circumstances in which public lands may be eligible to be part of an RCPP project:

- A watershed/public works structure is constructed on public lands but the benefits (e.g., flood control, water supply) accrue to private agricultural lands.
- A producer who has demonstrated control of a patchwork of private and public lands seeks to apply a land management activity on public lands as part of a system of improvements to address resource concerns on both public and private lands in the producer’s operation.

RCPP funding cannot be used to place conservation easements on land already protected through its ownership by a land trust or other entity that is required by statute or organizational intent to protect land from development, with the exception of lands that are a part of a buy-protect-sell transaction for an entity-held easement.

When atypical land eligibility scenarios are proposed, NRCS may consider information provided by a lead partner in determining eligibility. Land eligibility is discussed in more detail in the RCPP regulations at 7 CFR Part 1464.

E. Eligible Activities

The RCPP statute includes several USDA programs, referred to as “covered programs,” that NRCS uses as a guide for determining eligible RCPP activities. These covered programs are—

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) (excluding the Grassland Conservation Initiative authority)
- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)
- Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)
- Public Law 83-566 Watershed Program (excluding the Watershed Rehabilitation

Program at 16 U.S.C. 1012)

- Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

In accordance with this list of covered programs, a diversity of conservation activities are eligible for inclusion in RCPP projects. As detailed in appendix I, RCPP conservation activities are implemented through individual RCPP contracts with eligible agricultural producers and landowners, and through RCPP supplemental agreements with eligible partners. These contracts and agreements provide funding to carry out eligible activities similar to those authorized under one or more covered programs. Applications may propose that partner contributions be used to fund the same types of conservation activities that could otherwise be funded by NRCS.

Applications must explicitly request funding for at least one of the following eligible activity types, which correspond to eligible RCPP activities:

- Land management
- Land rental
- Entity-held easements
- U.S.-held easements
- Public works/watersheds

A single RCPP project proposal may propose any combination of these eligible activity types be included as part of an RCPP project. For example, an eligible partner could propose to improve wildlife habitat in a given geographic area by engaging producers to carry out land management activities, restore habitat, and place perpetual easements on agricultural lands. Eligible producer(s) would carry out the land management and habitat restoration activities through RCPP land management contracts, while entity-held or U.S.-held conservation easements would be purchased from the eligible landowner(s) through a separate award(s).

Though RCPP activities are either a practice, activity, land rental, agreement, easement, or related conservation measure that is available under a covered program's statutory authority, the individual RCPP contracts and agreements entered into under an approved RCPP partnership agreement generally provide producers and landowners greater flexibilities than are available for such activities under the covered programs. In particular, RCPP partnership agreements focus on addressing RCPP project resource concerns and are not subject to the covered program's regulations and eligibility criteria. This flexibility allows for innovation, streamlining of project implementation, and facilitation of project success within a controlled template-based system designed to ensure NRCS can maintain financial and environmental integrity. Applicants should carefully read 7 CFR part 1464 and appendix I of this announcement for additional information on eligible RCPP activity types, including participant eligibility, contract and agreement purposes, and contract and agreement expectations and responsibilities.

IV. RCPP Project Funding

RCPP funding provided by NRCS is divided into two categories—financial assistance (FA) and technical assistance (TA). Each RCPP project will receive a maximum commitment of

funding as follows at the time of proposal selection:

- At least 70 percent FA—These funds are held by NRCS and provided directly to producers/eligible partners to implement eligible, negotiated RCPP activities.
- Up to 30 percent TA—These funds are used to support implementation (e.g., project management, conservation planning, practice design, practice verification) of the RCPP project.

All budgets proposed by partners must be consistent with this funding breakdown. Where a specific project may benefit from a different FA/TA ratio, the anticipated need for a waiver can be included in the application. If an application with a proposed waiver is selected, the lead partner must submit a policy waiver request during the PPA negotiation process. If approved, the waiver will result in an adjustment to the project's allocated funds.

Technical Assistance (TA) is an umbrella term that, for RCPP, includes all project management and producer assistance required to carry out and report on RCPP conservation activities.

A. Technical Assistance

NRCS maintains substantial responsibility for ensuring that RCPP conservation activities are implemented consistent with Federal and agency statutes, regulations, and policies. Some of NRCS's responsibilities are non-delegable, meaning that they must be performed by NRCS. For these non-delegable responsibilities, NRCS typically retains a minimum of five percent of the total project RCPP funding. Some of these responsibilities are listed in the table below.

NRCS Non-Delegable Technical Assistance Responsibilities
Collaborate with lead partners to develop and manage RCPP agreements and associated components.
HEL/WC, FTE, AGI, and NEPA-related compliance activities.
Eligibility determinations and other producer contract activities.
Project-related communications and coordination activities.

Implementation Technical Assistance

Technical assistance is required for conservation planning, practice design, installation and verification, U.S.-held easement due diligence, and other needs associated with supporting the implementation of RCPP conservation activities. For RCPP, these activities are known as Implementation Technical Assistance, or TA-I.

NRCS is ultimately responsible for ensuring that RCPP conservation activities are implemented consistent with Federal and agency statutes, regulations, and policy. To that end, TA-I funding defaults to NRCS but may be awarded, through project negotiations, to qualified partners to provide eligible TA-I services. Whether TA-I activities are carried out by NRCS or by partners or a third party, they must be carried out according to applicable Federal requirements, including NRCS planning procedures, conservation practice standards, and job approval authority. Any partner TA-I activities must be carried out at defensible rates approved by

NRCS.

18 percent of the total funding request is set-aside for TA-I activities. Below is a list of common TA-I activities for RCPP projects.

Implementation Technical Assistance—Eligible Activities
Pre-application activities related to RCPP producer contracts, watershed activities, or easements. This can include completion of inventories or data collection to support environmental evaluations and other NEPA-related activities.
Conservation planning to producers or landowners directly related to installation or management of eligible conservation activities.
Practice design related to land management, rental, or watershed activities.
Assistance with practice installation and verification.
FA contract support services (i.e., securing and managing contracts for third-party services like engineering studies, surveys, appraisals, etc.) for US-Held Easements and watershed projects.

Consistent with other NRCS entity-held easement programs, RCPP TA funds may not be used for partner/entity due diligence expenses associated with entity-held easements or any other conservation activity type (e.g., construction permit costs, etc.).

TA-I budgets in project proposals are tentative. The flexible RCPP agreement structure allows for TA-I to be either expended by NRCS or obligated to a partner at any time during the life of a project. At the start of PPA negotiations, all TA-I will be reserved for NRCS use. During both PPA and any subsequent supplemental agreement negotiations, NRCS will work with lead partners to refine proposal budgets so that TA-I is expended as efficiently as possible to ensure project success. This could include the allocation of TA-I funding to partners that have the capacity and capability to perform the work according to NRCS planning and practice standards.

Enhancement Technical Assistance

Enhancement TA (TA-E) can be earned by partners for project-level activities—all conservation implementation technical assistance carried out in concert with producers or landowners are funded by TA-I. Enhancement activities include things such as project management, outcomes assessment and others listed in the table below. Like other RCPP funding, TA-E awards are not grants and payments are only made for verifiable completion of eligible, negotiated tasks. During PPA and subsequent supplemental agreement negotiations, NRCS will work with partner(s) to establish eligible TA-E deliverables and valuation methods.

A maximum of 7 percent of the total RCPP funding request is available as TA-E. It is anticipated that not all items potentially eligible for TA-E will be funded in selected projects due to the 7 percent cap. Where additional TA-E is required for project success, partners must provide contributions for enhancement activities when the cap is exceeded.

If applicants do not request TA-E as part of their proposal, that TA funding will be folded back into program funding as determined by NRCS. Proposals submitted without TA-E requests

may be allowed to convert unneeded TA-I to TA-E during proposal negotiations, but such conversions are at the sole discretion of NRCS.

The table below (and in the Portal's TA deliverable table) includes eligible TA-E activities.

Enhancement Technical Assistance—Eligible Activities
Develop and manage RCPP agreements with NRCS.
Other RCPP project-related producer outreach and education, including inventories, analyses, and tools needed to inform outreach.
Project-related communications and coordination activities.
Development and calculation of quantifiable project outcomes.
Development of innovative conservation approaches such as pay-for-performance or environmental credit markets.
Project management and partnership development to accomplish project goals.

IMPORTANT: Official NRCS approval of reimbursable TA activities included in an RCPP proposal does not occur when RCPP project selections are announced. RCPP financial awards are not grants and function similar to contracts. Specific TA funding, deliverables, and valuation methods are negotiated between NRCS and partners following project selection. All TA payment rates and performance standards will be specified and agreed to as part of these negotiations and may be subject to additional documentation requirements or approvals beyond those included in a selected proposal.

B. Administrative Costs

The RCPP statute prohibits NRCS from reimbursing partners for administrative costs, which include, but are not limited to, expenses for rent and utilities, durable equipment and software acquisitions, space used by staff, copiers, phones, information technology support, and similar costs or expenses that are not directly related to the implementation of the project. It is incumbent upon RCPP partners to provide sufficient evidence for NRCS consideration that any costs for which they are seeking reimbursement are directly related to the RCPP project.

Equipment bought for a RCPP project using NRCS funding may only be used for the duration of the project and follow standard rules and procedures for disposition of durable equipment/software upon project expiration.

C. Partner Contributions

It is NRCS's goal that partner contributions at least equal the NRCS investment in an RCPP project. Partner contributions consist of any combination of cash and in-kind support, and may complement either NRCS's FA or TA, or both. Certain RCPP activities such as entity-held easements and public works activities have specific minimum matching fund requirements (as detailed in appendix I) which may count as partner contributions if they meet requirements detailed in this announcement.

NRCS strongly recommends that partners propose value-added contributions that enhance the overall impact and efficacy of an RCPP project. The magnitude and significance of partner contributions factors into the project evaluation criteria listed in section VI. NRCS may approve proportional reductions in proposed contributions if a project is funded at less than the proposed amount.

To count as partner contributions, partner expenditures must be:

- expended during the life of the RCPP project;
- expended within the project's geographic boundary; and,
- expended in support of the project's goals and objectives to benefit eligible lands and eligible producers.

Funding from non-USDA Federal agencies may be counted as partner contribution, provided such funding meets the contribution requirements above.

Expenditures for project development activities such as producer outreach carried out by RCPP project partners between the time of project selection announcement and PPA execution may be counted as partner contributions if identified in the proposal budget and approved by NRCS after project selection.

The table below includes potentially eligible Partner Contributions.

Potentially Eligible Partner Contributions
Deliver financial assistance and benefits to producers or landowners to complement RCPP funding, addressing one or more project resource concerns.
Develop and manage RCPP agreements with NRCS.
Other RCPP project-related outreach and education, including inventories, analyses, and tools needed to inform outreach.
Inventories and data to support environmental evaluations.
Providing information or tools needed by NRCS to support agency eligibility determinations, evaluation, and ranking.
Develop and enter into FA contracts or agreements to implement RCPP-eligible activities using non-NRCS funds.
TA to producers or landowners for planning directly related to installation or management of eligible conservation activities.
TA to support delivery of eligible FA or resource assessment services (e.g., securing and managing contracts for third-party services like engineering studies, surveys, appraisals to satisfy NRCS requirements for U.S.-held easements or watershed projects).
Project-related communications and coordination activities.
Due diligence activities for Entity-held easements.
Development and calculation of quantifiable project outcomes.
Manage the leveraging of other funds related to the RCPP project goals and objectives.
Development of innovative conservation approaches.
Project management and partnership development to accomplish project goals.
Staff development/training/capacity building.

Developing/maintaining connections to related conservation efforts.
Administrative costs (see Section IV.D. for limits on eligible administrative costs)

If a proposal is selected for an award, NRCS will further evaluate contribution eligibility and acceptable contribution valuation methods during PPA negotiations. Contribution valuations must demonstrate actual costs incurred by partners during the project life. Where NRCS determines that proposed contributions, valuation methods, or quantities delivered do not satisfy negotiated requirements, the lead partner will be responsible for identifying replacement contributors acceptable to NRCS. If replacements cannot be agreed to NRCS may reduce award amounts, require PPA amendments and additional oversight, or even recommend termination of the PPA.

Partners providing technical assistance as a project contribution may count some of their indirect costs as a partner contribution, with the following limitations:

- Organizations that have an active Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement (NICRA) with the Federal Government must use the rate identified in the NICRA to determine the indirect costs to be included in a negotiated PPA as contributions. Current NICRAs must be uploaded as part of the RCPP project proposal in the RCPP portal where applicable.
- Entities without a NICRA may use a de minimis rate of up to 10 percent indirect costs rate.
- To determine the amount of indirect costs that may be counted as partner contribution for RCPP, the NICRA rate or the de minimis rate may only be charged against the same partner's negotiated TA contributions.
- Due to the unique nature of RCPP agreements, NRCS may identify certain partner expenses as administrative costs that are not defined as indirect costs in an organization's NICRA. Partners may request that such partner expenses be considered partner contribution beyond the NICRA rate (partners may flag this in the proposal's Contributions deliverables table and discuss with NRCS if the proposal is selected for an award).
- Where indirect costs are to be included in partner contributions, they must be identified in the contributions deliverables table as "Other Eligible Contributions" and listed separately so that NRCS can clearly determine that 1) the appropriate rates are being used and 2) the indirect contributions are only being claimed against the partner provided TA as required above.

V. RCPP PROPOSAL REQUIREMENTS

A. Format and Instructions

RCPP proposals must be submitted through the RCPP portal by the deadline in this notice. NRCS evaluates proposals according to the criteria in section VI of this notice.

At least 4 weeks prior to the proposal deadline, and before starting a proposal in the RCPP portal, entities interested in applying to RCPP are advised to request a meeting with the appropriate NRCS State RCPP Coordinator(s). Communication with State RCPP coordinators is critical to help partners—

- Frame conservation benefits in terms of NRCS resource concerns;
- Understand RCPP eligible activities and which activities are best suited to treat NRCS resource concerns within the project area;
- Develop their approach for measuring conservation (and potentially economic and social) outcomes of RCPP projects;
- Establish mutual understanding of program and partner capacities and rules (for both NRCS and partner(s)). The RCPP funding model depends on close coordination and collaboration between partners and NRCS to achieve project success.

A list of State RCPP coordinators, as of the date of this announcement's posting, is on the [RCPP website](#).

NOTE: RCPP proposals become the property of NRCS for use in the administration of the program and will not be returned to the applicant. Proposal details will not be shared publicly, but summary data of successful proposals, such as project title, RCPP funding requested, total contribution proposed, geographic target area, and proposed project activities and benefits will be made publicly available.

B. Proposal Content

RCPP proposals must adhere to the guidance below, which is consistent with the proposal entry screens of the RCPP portal. Any materials submitted but not specifically required below will not be considered in the review process.

1. Basic Project and Contact Information—Lead partners must list a primary and alternate contact to help ensure effective communication with NRCS staff. The primary contact should be the project director (i.e., the individual coordinating project activities) and the alternate contact should be the administrative contact (i.e., the individual managing administrative components of the project such as project payments, etc.).

Lead partners must select the primary (and secondary, if relevant) natural resource concern addressed by the project. For CCA projects, the primary resource concern must be a priority resource concern listed in section II of this notice.

RCPP PPAs for selected projects expire after 5 years. Applicants may request a PPA length longer or shorter than 5 years only if such a request is submitted and justified as part of a proposal. NRCS may grant such requests only in exceptional circumstances.

2. List of Project Partners—Identify the lead partner (the only party with which NRCS will execute a PPA) and all nonlead partners that are providing partner contributions or are proposed to receive RCPP implementation or enhancement TA funds. Briefly describe the role of each partner.

3. Narrative Questions—In the RCPP portal, applicants must provide answers to questions related to the evaluation criteria found in section VI of this notice. These questions require the applicant to describe the compelling conservation need for the project, the goals and objectives, the geographic focus, estimated number of participating producers/landowners, and project management capacity of the identified partners, among other items. The RCPP portal restricts answers to a set amount of characters, including spaces.
4. Project Outcomes—All RCPP lead partners are responsible for reporting on conservation outcomes (and, to the extent possible, economic and social outcomes) of their projects. A guidance document for outcomes reporting is posted on the [RCPP website](#). All lead partners should carefully review the guidance document prior to drafting their portal proposal.
5. Deliverables and Contributions—The RCPP portal guides applicants to fill out two tables: one connects proposed project deliverables with funding requested (both FA and TA), and the other table collects partner contribution information.

In the deliverables table, applicants must request RCPP funding by project year and anticipated RCPP activity types (e.g., land management/land improvement or rental contracts U.S.-held easements, entity-held easements, public works/watershed funding), typical conservation activities, and TA category (for all TA funding). Funding requests in the project proposal are estimates; however, applicants should propose the most realistic and accurate funding levels possible. If a proposal is selected for funding, final budgets of selected projects will be negotiated during the PPA development phase, with proportional changes required if either contributions or RCPP funding amounts change.

In the partner contributions table, applicants must list the lead partner and any contributing partners providing a contribution and identify contributions as cash or in-kind. Contributions also must be listed by activity type. For each contribution, applicants have the option of describing two things:

- a. Tie to Project Scope—how the contribution furthers project implementation for the benefit of producers.
- b. Cost Basis—how the value of the contribution was determined (e.g., XX staff members @ \$XXX/hour, equipment costs, vehicle mileage) and how the partner intends to track the contributions (e.g., timesheets, mileage logs, etc.).

If a proposal is selected for an award, NRCS will use this contribution information to ensure that contributions are eligible and verifiable, and that partners have an auditable system for tracking contributions. NRCS analysis of contributions during PPA negotiations may result in changes to eligible contributions in the PPA.

In the Portal contributions table, applicants may upload the same Tie to Project Scope and Cost Basis for multiple similar contributions from the same partner.

As described in Section IV.D above, partner contributions can include partner administrative expenses, within limits. To help NRCS to evaluate the eligibility of

administrative expense contributions, applicants should either include them as a separate line item(s) or make the administrative expenses clear if they are included in a contribution line item (e.g., personnel costs).

6. Contribution Commitment Letters—Lead partners must provide a commitment letter from each nonlead partner or other third-party providing contributions, including cash and in-kind services. Dollar amounts entered in the RCPP Portal must match the amounts identified in the commitment letters. If discrepancies are noted, NRCS will use the lower of the two amounts. Letters offering general support for the project will not be considered and should not be submitted through the RCPP portal.

For all projects, the lead partner (the only party with which NRCS will execute a PPA) assumes responsibility for ensuring that all contributions are delivered as included in the PPA.

7. Project Map—Lead partners must upload a file (jpg. or pdf.) that clearly delineates the geographic scope of the project. Once a project is selected for funding, lead partners will work with an NRCS State RCPP Coordinator to develop a more sophisticated project map using GIS.
8. DUNS Number—A Dun and Bradstreet Data Universal Numbering System (DUNS) number is a unique nine-digit sequence recognized as the universal standard for identifying and keeping track of over 70 million businesses worldwide. All RCPP applicants must have or obtain a DUNS number and include it in their proposal. Information on how to obtain a DUNS number can be found at <http://fedgov.dnb.com/webform> or by calling 1-866-705-5711. Please note that DUNS registration may take up to 14 business days to complete.
9. SAM Number—All RCPP applicants must also have or obtain a current System for Award Management (SAM) number and include it in their proposal. SAM is the official U.S. Government system that consolidated the capabilities of the Central Contractor Registration, Federal Register, Online Representations and Certification Application, and Excluded Parties List System. To register, go to <https://www.sam.gov/portal/public/SAM/>. SAM registration must be renewed annually. Applicants should allow ample time to obtain or renew a SAM number.

VI. PROPOSAL REVIEW CRITERIA

Before undergoing technical review, NRCS screens proposals for completeness and partner eligibility. Proposals determined by NRCS to be substantially incomplete (i.e., cannot be properly assessed by the technical reviewers) or ineligible are eliminated from the RCPP competition. NRCS notifies lead partners of any proposals that have been removed from competition prior to the technical review.

RCPP proposals that successfully pass this initial vetting are evaluated against the following technical review criteria. It is recommended that applicants use these criteria as a guide during proposal development.

- Impact (25 percent)
 - Does the proposal describe a compelling conservation need and clear project goals and objectives?
 - Does the proposal propose to generate substantial conservation benefits, and are those benefits likely to be achieved based on proposed project methods and approaches?
 - Is the project area the appropriate scale for the resource concern(s) and goals identified?
 - Does the proposal describe measurable and achievable environmental project outcomes? What about economic and social outcomes?
- Partner Contributions (25 percent)
 - To what extent are partner contributions value-added and bringing unique and qualified expertise or resources to the project to enhance project outcomes (e.g., cash vs. in-kind, FA vs. TA, TA skills and expertise)?
 - Do proposed contribution deliverables, contribution commitment letters, and valuation methods demonstrate a clear and compelling relationship to project deliverables and outcomes?
 - Are contribution deliverables and valuation methods clearly documented?
- Innovation (20 percent)
 - Does the project propose innovative methods or approaches for conservation planning, implementation, or assessment, or propose the use of promising new technologies that have a demonstrated likelihood of success?
 - Does the project take advantage of the unique programmatic and implementation elements afforded by RCPP (e.g., multiple activity types, easement flexibilities, contract bundling, etc.)?
 - Is this a project that is most effectively carried out through RCPP rather than other NRCS Farm Bill programs?
 - Does the partner plan to target project funding to particular locations or producers/landowners based on a scientific assessment or research-based plan?
- Partnerships and Management (30 percent):
 - Is the proposal supported by a robust partnership that includes a diversity of entities and organizations? Is the partnership of a size and composition required to achieve the proposed conservation benefits?
 - Is the project timeline realistic, reflecting the time, tasks, and expenses needed to carry out project planning, implementation, and evaluation needs?
 - Does the lead partner demonstrate experience managing similar conservation projects, executing deliverables, and successfully getting conservation on the ground?
 - For multistate projects, is the number of States included in the project a reasonable number to facilitate effective project management?
 - Do the partners have a history of collaboration and engagement with agricultural producers and private landowners to ensure high levels of participation? Does the proposal include a strategy for partner-led outreach and education to agricultural producers and private landowners?
 - Does the proposal meaningfully encourage or include the participation of historically underserved producers and landowners, including socially disadvantaged, beginning, limited resource and veteran farmers and ranchers?
 - Does the partnership include an organization(s) that has a history of collaborating

with or representing HU producers?

A. Proposal Evaluation Process

All RCPP technical evaluations are carried out by NRCS State offices using the criteria outlined above. Multistate and CCA proposal evaluations are coordinated by the relevant States. NRCS State Conservationists will consult with State Technical Committees on the RCPP review process.

NRCS leadership reviews the results of the State evaluations and makes recommendations for funding to the Chief. The Chief may consider available funding, geographic diversity, applicant diversity, and other factors in making the final project selections.

B. Environmental Review Requirements

Some RCPP conservation activities may require national, State, and as necessary, local permits. All required national, State, and local permits must be acquired prior to initiation of project activities. Applicants should consider tasks and requirements associated with obtaining necessary permits when establishing a project scope and timeline. Applicants must provide appropriate documentation of any relevant permitting requirements as part of the proposal packet. NRCS cannot provide RCPP funding until the environmental review requirements demonstrating how compliance with NEPA and other Federal, State, and local laws and regulations will be met. NRCS may not approve, or may withdraw, funding for projects that it determines do not realistically account for the time or expense of addressing environmental concerns, or where the project may result in unacceptable adverse environmental impacts.

Once an RCPP PPA is executed, NRCS policy requires site-specific environmental evaluations (EEs) during the planning phase of all individual awards (e.g., producer contracts or supplemental agreements) for land improvement/land management, rental, and easement activities to ensure compliance with NEPA, and other Federal, State, and local laws and regulations and NRCS policy. In addition, where the NRCS conservation planning process or conservation practice standards are to be supplemented or replaced with innovative measures, or public works/watershed activities are included in an RCPP proposal, NEPA analysis is required at the RCPP project level, and an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement is likely to be required.

Project proposals should incorporate explicit acknowledgment of any NEPA and other environmental compliance needs and reflect such information in the project timeline and budget. Expense of such analyses must be included in total projects cost as either a partner TA contribution, or (to the extent approved during PPA negotiations) as a potentially reimbursable implementation TA item (see TA description in section IV). NRCS is responsible for compliance with section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and section 7 of the Endangered Species Act and may not delegate these responsibilities to partners. Subject to NRCS-approved processes and review, partners may arrange and pay for any cultural resource or species occupancy surveys needed for NRCS to assess project effects and be involved in required consultations.

Partner contributions to the RCPP project that would not occur *but for* RCPP funding received

from NRCS (i.e., connected actions) must be analyzed in any relevant site-specific EEs conducted during the NRCS conservation planning process, and/or evaluated in a project-level NEPA analysis as determined necessary by NRCS in collaboration with the lead partner or designee. Cost (and delays) of such analyses shall be the responsibility of the partner unless otherwise agreed to in PPA negotiations.

VII. PROJECT INFORMATION AND ADMINISTRATION

A. RCPP Programmatic Partnership Agreements

After a proposal is selected to become an RCPP project, the lead State Conservationist will initiate negotiations with the lead partner to define the final scope and responsibilities of the RCPP PPA. PPAs are designed to be completed by NRCS staff, with input and concurrence from the lead partner. The lead NRCS State office will lead PPA negotiations and ensure the agreement is finalized and signed by the deadline included in the award announcement. This process will include detailed discussions on the roles of the lead partner, contributing partners, and NRCS in implementing the project, including the provision of TA funding (refer to section IV of this announcement for details of TA). Project negotiations will also confirm or refine contribution deliverables and valuation methods.

The RCPP PPA serves as the agreement guiding the project. No RCPP funding is obligated through the PPA itself. Rather the PPA includes lead partner deliverables, timelines, and expectations for future RCPP awards and partner contributions based on the negotiated terms of an approved project, available RCPP funding, and other program considerations.

Following execution of the RCPP PPA, future RCPP awards associated with that agreement may include RCPP producer contracts and supplemental agreements with eligible partners (e.g., TA agreements, easement agreements, public works/watershed agreements). These RCPP awards are subject to negotiation and will be managed according to NRCS-developed terms and conditions necessary to ensure program and financial integrity.

RCPP partnership agreements are not subject to 2 CFR Part 200, the regulation that governs many Federal financial awards. NRCS retains final authority for all RCPP payment eligibility determinations.

RCPP applicants should anticipate a project start date of December 31, 2022.

B. Reporting and Reimbursement Requirements

Reporting requirements are included in RCPP PPAs. Lead partners must submit annual progress reports to NRCS. These reports must include information on project deliverables, partner contribution expenditures, producer and landowner outreach and participation, and quantifiable project outcomes. Lead partners must also submit a final report and fact sheet that can be shared with the public. Failure of an RCPP lead partner to stay current with annual and final reporting requirements, project timelines, or contribution expenditures may result in NRCS requiring additional project oversight, adjustments to enhancement or implementation TA, or ultimately terminating a PPA.

Any associated RCPP award executed through a supplemental agreement, such as TA

agreements, may require additional reporting.

Any RCPP partner or third party that is the recipient of a supplemental agreement is responsible for requesting payment from NRCS for completed deliverables. As a condition of supplemental agreement(s), NRCS and a partner may negotiate, subject to NRCS approval, technical requirements and valuation methods for supplemental agreement deliverables. For example, if the lead partner requests payment for an enhancement TA task like producer outreach activities, submission of actual partner costs incurred to host meeting, meeting agendas and a list of participants may be required before NRCS remits the payment. Similarly, completion and documentation standards to establish payment eligibility for implementation TA or FA tasks must be included in SA. Specific documentation requirements must be agreed to by NRCS and the awardee partner prior to execution of any supplemental agreement.

RCPP partners must maintain documentation of expenses paid by NRCS and partner contribution expenditures for 3 years beyond the expiration of a supplemental agreement. NRCS intends to audit a random sample of RCPP projects annually.

NRCS will provide to RCPP lead partners:

- A semiannual report indicating the status of each pending and obligated RCPP contract associated with a lead partner's PPA; and
- An annual report of NRCS use of TA expenditures associated with the lead partner's PPA.

C. Notifications

All applicants will receive notification of selection or non-selection. Following notification of selection, the appropriate NRCS RCPP State coordinator will contact the lead partner to initiate negotiation and development of an RCPP PPA. Partners with projects not selected for funding will receive reviewer feedback on their proposals.

NRCS anticipates making announcements of RCPP project awards in August 2022.

D. Withdrawal of Proposals

Lead partners may withdraw their RCPP proposal after the submission deadline by pressing "withdraw" in the Portal proposal record, accompanied by an email to the [national RCPP inbox \(rcpp@usda.gov\)](mailto:rcpp@usda.gov) notifying NRCS of the withdrawal.

VIII. SUBMISSION INFORMATION

Applicants must submit proposals through the RCPP portal at <https://nrcs-sites.secure.force.com/>.

Applicants must have eAuthentication (eAuth) level-2 credentials to access the RCPP portal. This is a Departmental requirement and is non-negotiable. The steps for obtaining eAuth permissions to submit an RCPP project proposal are—

1. Identify a single system user for your organization.

2. Establish a USDA level-2 e-Auth account (designated user only) following the guidance accessed at the following web address <https://www.eauth.usda.gov/mainPages/index.aspx>.
3. After an eAuth credential is secured, request RCPP portal system access (designated user only) (<https://nracs-sites.secure.force.com/>) under “New Users” click “Start Here.”
4. Develop full proposal in RCPP portal.

The RCPP portal automatically sends applicants an email to acknowledge receipt at the time of submission. Applicants are solely responsible for ensuring timely submission through the portal and are strongly advised to allow sufficient time to obtain eAuth and RCPP portal access, and to complete the proposal in the RCPP portal. Applicants are advised that steps 2 and 3 above may take several weeks to complete. Difficulties related to these or other proposal submission requirements will not result in an extension of the proposal deadline.

NRCS will not consider proposals that do not meet the proposal requirements, are incomplete, are submitted after the deadline date listed in this notice, or are submitted through registered or certified mail, submitted by facsimile, or delivered by courier.

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication (e.g., Braille, large print, audio tape) should contact the USDA TARGET Center at: (202) 720–2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339.

IX. AGENCY CONTACTS

Partners with questions are encouraged to contact the appropriate NRCS State RCPP coordinator with proposal-related questions. State Coordinators are often the person best suited to answer partner questions about proposals and RCPP in general. The [RCPP website](#) maintains a list of NRCS State RCPP Coordinators updated for each funding opportunity. Potential applicants may also contact national RCPP staff by email at rcpp@usda.gov with questions.

Appendix I – RCPP Agreements, Contracts and Conservation Activities

RCPP Funding Overview

Once an RCPP proposal is selected for funding, the lead partner and NRCS negotiate the terms of an RCPP PPA. The PPA documents the relationship between NRCS and the lead partner but does not obligate any funding. RCPP funding will flow to eligible partners through supplemental agreements and to producers, including eligible landowners, through producer contracts.

Producer contracts (between NRCS and an eligible producer or landowner) are used to implement land management, rental, and U.S.-held easement activities. Supplemental agreements (between NRCS and an eligible partner) are used to award technical assistance funding, to implement watershed/public works projects, or to implement an entity-held easement agreement.

Producer Contracts, Supplemental Agreements, and Third-party Contracts

A majority of RCPP funding provided to farmers, ranchers, and landowners of eligible agricultural, nonindustrial private forest land or associated lands. RCPP proposals must describe the types of eligible activities included in a project, but partners are not necessarily expected to identify the farmers, ranchers, and landowners that may ultimately participate in the project.

The following principles guide the development of RCPP contracts and supplemental agreements:

- Existing NRCS covered programs are used as a guide to identify eligible activities, but the regulations of the existing covered programs do not necessarily apply to RCPP. At the same time, foundational aspects of NRCS contracting processes are maintained for RCPP producer contracts and supplemental agreements (e.g., planning processes, conservation practice standards, and payment schedules) to maintain scientific rigor and financial integrity.
- RCPP producer contracts and supplemental agreements associated with a given RCPP PPA are expected to be of limited duration to increase the likelihood that conservation benefits are generated during life of an RCPP project. However, once executed, the individual RCPP producer contracts or supplemental agreements may remain in effect even if they extend beyond the expiration of the RCPP PPA where determined necessary by NRCS.
- In general, all SA and producer contract applications involving FA will be ranked using NRCS ranking processes. Bundled applications, discussed in Section III.C. of this notice, may receive ranking priority. There may be instances, particularly for easement projects or where particular lands are critical to realizing project outcomes, where lead partners in their proposal may choose to “pre-select” a specific farm, ranch or forestland for project activities. In such cases, the proposal’s narrative question responses should include identification of the pre-selected parcel(s). Pre-selection does not equate to selection, as all RCPP producers and lands must meet applicable eligibility requirements.

- Supplemental agreements providing TA funding to partners in general do not need to go through ranking, unless determined otherwise by NRCS.
- Five types of RCPP FA activities are proposed within RCPP to address the wide range of eligible activities available in covered programs and RCPP projects.

RCPP Activity Type	Associated Covered Program Authorities
Land management	EQIP, CSP, ACEP-Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) (restoration), HFRP (restoration), all PL-566-like infrastructure and land treatment work for benefit of specific producers or absent an approved watershed plan
Land rental	CRP
Easement (U.S.-held)	ACEP-WRE, HFRP (easement); expanded to include land uses other than those traditionally eligible under the covered programs (e.g., grasslands, floodplains, agricultural lands, riparian areas)
Easement (entity-held)	ACEP-Agricultural Land Easement (ALE); expanded to include easements on land uses other than those traditionally eligible under the covered programs (e.g., wetlands, non-industrial private forest lands, floodplains)
Public works/watersheds	Public Law 83-566

During proposal development, the Portal allows partners to identify potential contracting mechanisms for project related obligations of RCPP FA and TA funds. While contract types included in proposals, like funds for various activities themselves, may have to be revised during PPA negotiations (or even later during PPA management), partners are advised to consider the following contract types and limits on their use in developing proposal budgets:

RCPP Contract Type	Associated Activities
Producer Contracts	Contracts between NRCS and an eligible producer on eligible lands. These contracts are used for land management and rental activities.
Supplemental Agreements	Contracts between NRCS and a partner to support delivery of financial or technical assistance. Supplemental agreements are not grants but are used to reimburse partners for the delivery of specific project deliverables. Supplemental agreements are used to implement RCPP easements, watershed projects and occasionally land management activities.
Third-party Contracts	Contracts between NRCS and a third party (e.g., engineering firm, easement appraiser) to support implementation of project activities.

Land Management Activities

Land management (including land restoration and improvement) producer contracts will be offered based on an EQIP/CSP-like contracting model between NRCS and an eligible producer, including private landowners, committed to addressing RCPP project resource concerns on eligible lands. The conservation activities included under this category also

include restoration and land management practices authorized under ACEP-WRE, HFRP, and the land treatment component of Public Law 83-566.

Producer participants must meet the 1985 Act's eligibility requirements (HEL/WC, FTE, AGI, etc.). Producer contracts will be managed by NRCS based on NRCS developed templates, with direct ties to project conservation benefits and partner ranking/selection considerations refined for selected proposals during PPA negotiations.

Financial assistance funds awards for LM producer contracts will be managed using proven NRCS planning, implementation, and contracting methodology, and are expected to be based principally on NRCS conservation practice standards, existing CSP enhancements, stewardship activities, and existing payment schedules.

Application, ranking, and contracting will emulate similar aspects of EQIP and CSP program implementation. Producer and land eligibility restrictions tied to specific EQIP and CSP regulatory requirements, such as CSP "whole operation" requirements or EQIP irrigation history requirements do not apply to RCPP land management contracts.

Processes will be provided for consideration of adjustments to payment percentages, payment scenarios and/or the development and use of interim practice standards, subject to NRCS consideration and approval in accordance with agency policy. Additional flexibilities that may be afforded to RCPP partners include project/partner-driven ranking pools, the potential for blending of previously distinct program activities in a single contract, and the potential for leveraging partner contributions for greater conservation benefits.

NRCS, working with a lead partner, may determine that producer contracts alone will not fully realize project goals and objectives—in such cases, RCPP authorities allow for NRCS to enter into a supplemental agreement to facilitate land management activities IF the supplemental agreement is linked to producer contracts for associated activities. For example, land treatment elements of a "watershed activity" (even in the absence of a NRCS-approved watershed plan) could be carried out using a combination of a supplemental agreement (to address off-farm conservation activities) and producer contracts (for on-farm conservation activities). For example, irrigation improvements to both large mains (off-farm) and on-farm supply lines could be carried out using this approach.

Land Rental Activities

Land rental activities will be offered based on a combination of the EQIP and CRP contracting model between NRCS and an eligible producer committed to addressing RCPP project resource concerns on eligible lands. Application, ranking, and contracting will emulate applicable aspects of NRCS ranking processes.

However, unlike the traditional CRP program, RCPP land rental authority is not generally expected to be used for landscape-scale soil erosion protection. Rather, NRCS will consider funding rental components of RCPP project proposals in which the lead partner proposes RCPP land rental activities that focus on short-term, targeted rental needs in the context of a larger RCPP project. Examples include paying 1–3 years of foregone income to incentivize

adoption of an innovative cropping system or to transition to an organic production system.

Producer rental contracts incorporate proven aspects of NRCS planning, implementation, and contracting methodology, and are based either on an estimate of foregone income, or on RCPP PPA-negotiated scenarios. Partners must ensure that any rental payments are not duplicative of other producer practice or activity payments.

Anticipated flexibility and benefits of rental activity awards will be in the definition of project specific rental scenarios, availability of project/partner driven ranking pools, potential for partner innovation in proposed conservation purposes warranting short-term rental payments, and in the potential for leveraging partner contributions for greater conservation benefits.

RCPP Conservation Easements

RCPP easements retain some elements of ACEP and HFRP easements while differing in substantial ways. An RCPP conservation easement may be either U.S.-held or entity-held and both types are available for a wider variety of land uses and conservation purposes which are driven by the conservation benefits and resource concerns identified in the RCPP project rather than being limited to the land eligibility requirements of the covered programs. Under NRCS covered programs, U.S.-held easements are only available for agricultural wetlands and associated riparian areas (ACEP-WRE) or forestlands (HFRP), and entity-held easement are only available for the protection of eligible agricultural lands, including grasslands (ACEP-ALE) or floodplains (P.L. 83-566). In contrast, an RCPP easement whether it is U.S.-held or entity-held may be acquired on any lands eligible for RCPP with an agriculturally linked land use, such as preservation of high-quality cropland or grasslands, restoration or protection of degraded or natural wetlands, floodplains, or riparian areas buffering agricultural lands, or protection of nonindustrial private forest lands. Application, ranking, easement acquisition processes, and contracting for RCPP easements emulate applicable aspects of existing NRCS easement covered programs.

Lead partners may help inform NRCS funding decisions through project-ranking criteria and/or bundled applications. Additional flexibilities of RCPP easements include the possibility of partner-driven ranking pools, potential for partner innovation in providing outreach and project development with interested landowners to build robust easement applications, and the potential for leveraging partner contributions for greater conservation and/or participants benefit.

Below is a table summarizing the RCPP easement types (U.S.-held or entity-held) with explanatory narratives on some of the aspects unique to the particular easement types provided below the table.

	U.S.-Held Easements	Entity-Held Easements
Easement Holder	Acquired and held by the United States by and through USDA NRCS	Acquired and held by an eligible entity that meets the requirements of 7 CFR § 1468.3.

	U.S.-Held Easements	Entity-Held Easements
Easement Deed Requirements	Must use one of three warranty easement deeds provided by NRCS: 1 RCPP Warranty Easement Deed for Protection of Conservation Values (Highly restrictive); 2. RCPP Warranty Easement Deed for Conservation Uses (Moderately restrictive); 3. RCPP Warranty Easement Deed for Working Lands (Minimally restrictive).	Must attach the RCPP minimum deed terms provided by NRCS to the eligible entity's own conservation easement deed terms. NRCS minimum deed terms available: 1. RCPP Minimum Deed Terms for Protection of Conservation Values (Highly restrictive); 2. RCPP Minimum Deed Terms for Conservation Use with Compatible Agricultural Uses (Moderately restrictive); 3. RCPP Minimum Deed Terms for Agricultural Use (Minimally restrictive). NOTE: Two versions of each set of the above-listed RCPP minimum deed terms are available, one with and one without the terms related to a U.S. right-of-enforcement.
Duration	Easements are perpetual or maximum duration allowed under State law	Easements are perpetual or maximum duration allowed under State law.
Potential Eligible Land Types	Private agricultural land, nonindustrial private forest land, or associated lands (e.g., riparian areas, floodplains, seasonal or flooded wetlands).	
Basis for RCPP Compensation Cap	RCPP funds pay Landowner* a percentage of the value of the easement. - Up to 100% of easement value for the highly restrictive easement (similar to current ACEP-WRE) - Up to 75% of easement value for the moderately restrictive easement (similar to current ACEP-WRE with reservation of grazing rights or HFRP) - Up to 50% of easement value for the minimally restrictive easement (similar to current ACEP-ALE) *A partner may pay a Landowner additional compensation for an easement conveyance to NRCS.	RCPP cost-share provided to the eligible entity for their purchase of an easement based on a percentage of the value of the easement. - Up to 50%—with U.S. right of enforcement - Up to 25%—without U.S right of enforcement
Valuation Methodology	Easement value determined via appraisal. Or GARCs, where allowed.*	Easement value determined via appraisal of before-and-after fair market value of the offered acres.
Partner Match	Matching funds provided by partners are not required but contributions are encouraged to further RCPP project objectives. Any landowner donation or charitable contribution associated with U.S.-held easements cannot count as partner contribution for the project.	Partner match is required and may consist of any combination of landowner donation toward easement value or partner cash contribution toward payment of easement compensation to the landowner.

	U.S.-Held Easements	Entity-Held Easements
RCPP award type for easement purchase	Producer contract entered into directly with eligible landowners.	Supplemental agreement entered into with an eligible entity that will hold the easement on eligible land.
Allowed uses of RCPP financial assistance	Cost of easement itself, acquisition-related costs (e.g., appraisal, survey, due diligence, title and closing services), restoration implementation costs.	Cost of easement itself, costs for NRCS technical appraisal review, and NRCS environmental database search. RCPP financial assistance funds awarded for an entity-held easement may not be used for any other purposes.

*Use of approved Area-Wide Market Analysis (AWMA) and the associated Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC) values for a U.S.-held RCPP easement may be authorized through a national policy waiver in limited circumstances where the attributes of the land and the easement deed terms, including the conservation values statement, match the AMWA and GARC value conditions. Prior to proposal submission, an applicant interested in using an approved AWMA-based GARC value for a U.S.-held RCPP easement must first consult with the relevant RCPP Coordinator and include in the proposal an intention to seek a waiver should the application be selected for an award.

U.S.-Held Conservation Easements

RCPP awards for U.S.-held conservation easements are offered through producer contracts with eligible landowners of eligible lands. U.S.-held easements are perpetual or for the maximum duration allowed under State law.

Application, ranking, easement acquisition processes, and contracting of RCPP U.S.-held easements emulate applicable aspects of ACEP-WRE and HFRP. The acquisition of a U.S.-held easement under RCPP, like other NRCS easement programs that result in an easement held by the United States, are subject to U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) title standards and approval by the USDA Office of the General Counsel (OGC). Therefore, a U.S.-held easement acquired under RCPP must use one of three standard warranty easement deeds provided by NRCS (the standard warranty easement deeds [are available on the RCPP website](#)). These standard warranty easement deeds each contain a set of terms that establish the level of restrictiveness of the easement by identifying the easement purposes, the rights being acquired by the United States, the rights being retained by the landowner, the allowable uses, restrictions, and prohibitions.

The availability of these options allows NRCS, in consultation with the partner, to determine which of the three standard warranty easement deeds (categorized as highly, moderately, and minimally restrictive) is most appropriate to achieve the identified RCPP project purposes for a given project and protect the conservation values to be stated in the individual easement. Selection of the appropriate warranty easement deed that will be used is a foundational component of landowner application, evaluation, and ranking.

NRCS will only acquire an easement on lands it has determined to be eligible and meet all applicable requirements, including appropriate statement of conservation values and use of the appropriate corresponding warranty easement deed, and on which OGC has approved the sufficiency of title to the land for the purpose for which the easement is being acquired.

RCPP financial assistance that may be provided for the easement itself is based on the value of the easement as determined by an appraisal via a methodology to be determined by NRCS. The more restrictive the terms of the easement, the higher the percentage of the easement value that may be provided under RCPP. For example, the use of the highly restrictive RCPP warranty easement deed to acquire a wetland easement with restrictions and requirements similar to an ACEP-WRE easement (through which the landowner sells most of the property rights to the United States) will be eligible to receive a higher percentage of the easement value than a less restrictive wetland easement acquired using the minimally restrictive RCPP warranty easement deed wherein the landowner sells fewer property rights in exchange for greater certainty regarding the ability to conduct future land management activities compatible with the easement (e.g., future timber harvest).

NRCS may use supplemental agreements to procure easement related surveys, appraisals, closing services, or other realty-related services consistent with applicable DOJ acquisition processes and requirements. Partner contributions may be used to complement NRCS funding and provide additional compensation to a landowner.

Entity-Held RCPP Conservation Easements

RCPP awards for entity-held easement will be offered through supplemental agreements and require collaboration between NRCS, an eligible entity, and an eligible landowner. Only an eligible entity meets the requirements of 7 CFR §1468.3 may apply to be the holder of an RCPP entity-held easement.

Partners and landowners must follow easement acquisition and closing processes similar to ACEP-ALE and must attach or incorporate the NRCS-provided RCPP minimum deed terms to their conservation easement deeds. The RCPP minimum deed terms provided by NRCS establish one of three levels of restrictiveness of the easement (categorized as highly, moderately, or minimally restrictive) by identifying the easement purposes, the allowable uses, the limitations on use, and prohibitions. Additionally, each set of minimum deed terms has two versions, one that includes a U.S. right of enforcement and the associated provisions and one that does not include such terms. The availability of these options allows the partner, in consultation with NRCS, to determine which of set of RCPP minimum deed terms (categorized as highly, moderately, and minimally restrictive) and which version (with or without a U.S. right of enforcement) is most appropriate to achieve the identified RCPP project purposes on a particular property. Selection of the minimum deed terms that will be used is a foundational component of landowner application, evaluation, ranking, and determining valuation through an appraisal.

RCPP financial assistance that may be provided for the easement itself is based on the value of the easement as determined by a before-and-after appraisal via a methodology to be determined by NRCS. In order to determine the value of the easement, the appraisal must take into consideration the terms of the conservation easement, including the conservation values the easement will protect and the level of restrictiveness of the easement. The more restrictive the easement, the greater the value difference between the before-and-after conditions, which results in a higher easement value than a less restrictive easement would on the same piece of land.

Based on the before-and-after appraisal, NRCS may provide up to 50 percent of the easement value for entity-held easements that include a right of enforcement for the United States, and up to 25 percent of the easement value for entity-held easements that do not include a U.S. right of enforcement. Partner-matching funds toward the cost of the easement itself are required and may consist of any combination of landowner donation toward the easement value and partner cash contribution toward payment of easement compensation to the landowner. Entity-held Easement matching funds may be counted as RCPP partner contributions for the project, if otherwise included in PPA and accepted by NRCS.

Similar to ACEP-ALE, easement acquisition-related costs and easement management costs are the responsibility of RCPP partners and cannot be reimbursed by NRCS. These costs may be counted as partner contributions (not project-level contribution) based on final agreement terms and negotiated project deliverables.

RCPP applicants may propose projects that incorporate buy-protect-sell transactions for acquisition of entity-held conservation easements. The applicant should identify in the proposal how buy-protect-sell transactions further the applicant's project goals. The same cost-share requirements and limitations that apply to entity-held easement transactions generally also apply to buy-protect-sell transactions. Any buy-protect-sell transactions, if funded, must satisfy NRCS requirements for such transactions. At a minimum, an eligible entity cannot hold simultaneously both the fee simple title and the conservation easement under an RCPP buy-protect-sell transaction. For RCPP, State or local government agencies are eligible to enter into buy-protect-sell transactions, provided all other required elements of such transactions are satisfied.

Public Works/Watersheds

Through the public works/watershed projects component of RCPP, eligible partners may receive financial assistance awards to support implementation of structural works of improvement to address watershed-scale issues for the benefit of eligible land, similar to many projects completed under Public Law 83-566.

Unlike other RCPP contract types, RCPP project proposals must detail proposed public works/watershed activities to the fullest extent possible to provide project reviewers information needed to assess project viability. While RCPP projects could include planning, design, and installation of proposed public works/watershed projects, timing is critical to fully complete a project from start to finish in the 5 (or potentially longer) years of an RCPP project, so details of both TA and FA requests associated with public works projects must be included in the questionnaire section of the proposal in the RCPP portal. Projects requesting lump-sum planning, design, or public works installation funding that do not include proposals for defensible and trackable documentation of specific tasks and schedules may be penalized in the ranking process.

NRCS retains approval authority for planning, design, and environmental responsibilities (including adherence to NEPA and applicable Principles, Requirements, and Guidelines for Federal water projects) for RCPP public works activities. NRCS will generally satisfy these responsibilities by following NRCS watershed and engineering policy, except when negotiated otherwise.

RCPP project proposals containing public works activities should identify: 1) any proposed deviations from NRCS policy, and/or 2) prior approved plans and designs that might help accelerate implementation of RCPP public works activities. Final disposition of any deviations or prior approved plans and designs are subject to both project negotiations and individual NRCS review and evaluation processes.

NRCS may discontinue assistance if the negotiation, planning, or design phases of a project indicate that timely project completion is unlikely. It is NRCS's intent that only those proposals with robust work plans, detailed cost proposals, and proven partner capacities advance for funding consideration.

Applicants are reminded that all RCPP public works/watershed projects must have demonstrable ties to proposed RCPP project conservation benefits and eligible agricultural lands. In contrast to Public Law 83-566, for example, RCPP program purposes do not include recreation and municipal water supply.

When RCPP public works/watershed financial assistance funds are budgeted and awarded in a project, actual supplemental agreement match (vs. project-level contributions) may be required. Public works improvements targeting non-flood control purposes have a minimum 35 percent cash-match requirement. Flood control projects may request up to 100 percent RCPP financial assistance, though ranking may preclude their selection without substantial partner contributions (a feature of all RCPP projects). With NRCS approval, public works project match may be counted as RCPP project contributions, but proposed partner contributions not directly associated with the public works activities cannot be counted toward public works match requirements.

Matching funds requirements may be reduced or waived if funding is awarded to a project in which the benefits will principally accrue to communities or regions where most residents meet limited resource or socially disadvantaged criteria as included in the 1985 Act, as amended by the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018.

Additional flexibilities associated with these awards include the potential for innovative contracting for experienced partners with demonstrated design, contracting, and implementation skills, and the potential for leveraging partner contributions for greater conservation and/or participants benefit.

As a reminder, Public Law 83-566-like land treatment activities will be funded under land improvement/ management/restoration contracts with the producer rather than public works supplemental agreements.