



U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Commodity Credit Corporation
Financial Assistance Programs Division
Programs Deputy Area

Regional Conservation Partnership Program
The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is authorized by Subtitle I of Title XII of the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended by Section 2401 of the Agricultural Act of 2014. The Secretary of Agriculture has delegated the authority to administer RCPP to the Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), who is Vice President of the Commodity Credit Corporation. NRCS is an agency of the Department of Agriculture.

Announcement No. USDA-NRCS-NHQ-RCPP-17-01

For Fiscal Year 2017

Date Issued: March 14, 2016

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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

ANNOUNCEMENT TYPE: Announcement for Program Funding

AGENCY: Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC)

CATALOG OF FEDERAL DOMESTIC ASSISTANCE (CFDA) NUMBER: 10.932

DATES: Applications must be received by NRCS before 5:00 p.m. (Eastern Daylight Time).

Pre-proposal applications due:	May 10, 2016
Announcement of selected pre-proposals:	Week of July 18, 2016
Full-proposal applications due:	September 19, 2016
Announcement of selected full proposals:	December, 2016

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

NRCS is the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) conservation agency working with farmers, ranchers, and private forest landowners nationwide to identify and address natural resource objectives in balance with operational goals in order to benefit soil, water, wildlife, and related natural resources locally, regionally, and nationally. NRCS works in partnership with other entities to accelerate getting conservation on the ground.

Through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), NRCS seeks to co-invest with partners in innovative, workable, and cost-effective approaches to benefit farming, ranching, and forest operations, local economies, and the communities and resources in a watershed or other geographic area.

RCPP partners develop project applications, as described in this notice, to address specific natural resource objectives in a proposed area or region. Partnering organizations design, promote, implement, and evaluate the project outcomes.

NRCS will select final RCPP projects following a two-phase application process that includes: (1) a pre-proposal application and (2) a full-proposal application. NRCS will assess and evaluate RCPP project applications against four criteria: solutions, contributions, innovation, and participation. The full-proposal process is only open to applicants whose pre-proposal applications are selected by the agency to go forward from the pre-proposal stage. All RCPP applications become the property of NRCS for use in the administration of the program and will not be returned to the applicant.

RCPP Federal assistance is delivered in accordance with the authorities of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP), and in certain geographic areas, the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention program. NRCS and partners implement RCPP projects by working with agricultural producers and owners of agricultural and forest land.

The purpose of this notice is to announce the availability of CCC funding for RCPP and to solicit applications from potential partners. Subject to fiscal year (FY) 2017 appropriations action, NRCS anticipates the availability of up to \$263 million in funding for RCPP. Applications will be 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).

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ADDRESSES:

Applicants may submit applications through any one of the following three methods:

1. *Email*: RCPP@wdc.usda.gov (Preferred submission method).

Applicants may submit pre- and full-proposal applications, as described in section IV or V, to the RCPP email address shown above. A Dun & Bradstreet Data Universal Numbering System (DUNS) number and current registration in the System for Award Management (SAM) is not required at the pre-proposal stage, but must be obtained if the applicant is invited to submit a full proposal. The standard forms **must be completed in accordance with**: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/?cid=stelprdb1257063>.

2. *Mail* (Registered or Certified Mail will not be accepted):

Mark A. Rose, Director
Financial Assistance Programs Division
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
RCPP Application
Post Office Box 2890
Washington, D.C. 20013-2890

3. *Grants.gov*:

Applicants may submit pre- and full-proposal applications, as described in section IV or V, via Grants.gov. Please note that the Grants.gov electronic submission system is relatively complex for first-time users and involves several preliminary registration steps before the applicant can submit the application. To register, go to www.grants.gov, click on “Applicants”, and then click on “Get Registered.”

If you have completed a prior application, you may already have completed the registration process. Please allow sufficient time to submit the application electronically in grants.gov and for possible computer delays.

For registered applicants to submit an application:

1. Go to www.grants.gov. Information about submitting an application using Grants.gov is located on the Grants.gov Web site with supplementary materials.
2. Select the “Applicants” tab.
3. Select the “Apply for Grants” heading, click on “Apply for Grants.”
4. Follow all steps. Select “Download a Grant Application Package” and enter the CFDA number 10.932.

Submitting an RCPP application through Grants.gov requires completing a variety of standard forms including requiring applicants to include a DUNS number and current registration in SAM in order to submit either a pre-proposal or a full proposal.

NRCS **will not** consider applications that do not meet the application requirements, are incomplete, are submitted after the deadline date listed in this notice, or are submitted via 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 TDD).

For additional information contact:

Mark A. Rose, Director
Financial Assistance Programs Division
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
RCPP Application
Post Office Box 2890
Washington, D.C. 20013-2890
Telephone: (202) 720-1844; email: mark.rose@wdc.usda.gov

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

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 Section 2401 of the Agricultural Act of 2014 (the 2014 Act). The Secretary of Agriculture has delegated the authority to administer RCPP to the Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), who is Vice President of the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC). NRCS is an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

RCPP assistance is delivered through the authorities and rules of the following programs, referred to throughout this notice as “covered programs:”

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), 16 U.S.C. 3839aa-3839-8; 7 CFR part 1466;
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), 16 U.S.C. 3838d–3838g; 7 CFR part 1470;
- Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP), 16 U.S.C. 6571–6578; 7 CFR part 625;
- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), 16 U.S.C. 3865–3865d; 7 CFR part 1468; and
- For Critical Conservation Areas only: Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program (hereafter Watershed Authorities), 16 U.S.C. 1001, *et seq.*; 7 CFR part 622. Please note that Watershed Authorities are not covered programs as defined in statute and the adjustment of terms discussed below does not apply. We include the authority here to simplify terminology.

Delivering Assistance through Covered Programs

NRCS provides RCPP assistance to project participants in accordance with the authorities and rules of the covered programs. Applicants identify the specific conservation activity and the appropriate covered program for delivery. For example, a watershed-scale drought mitigation project may be delivered through EQIP and CSP, allowing for implementation of on-farm irrigation improvements and enhancements. In this case, the applicant would estimate the financial assistance (FA) and technical assistance (TA) funds (EQIP) and acres to be treated (CSP) for each program to accomplish the project objective. In other cases, for example to achieve wildlife habitat and agricultural viability objectives, easements through ACEP may be the appropriate program authority, or in combination with EQIP and CSP.

Adjustment of Program Terms

RCPP allows some flexibility to adjust the terms of ACEP, CSP, EQIP, and HFRP in order to achieve the purposes of the program. This flexibility applies only to the non-statutory regulatory terms or provisions of a covered program and does not extend to Watershed Authorities. For example, terms that may be adjusted include:

- a. Operational guidance and requirements for a covered program;
- b. Use of a threshold score to approve applications without further evaluation prior to the end of an application or ranking period; and
- c. Modifying program application ranking criteria for applications within the RCPP project area.

Applicants seeking to adjust program terms should contact NRCS for additional information while developing their pre-proposals to confirm whether the particular adjustment is non-statutory. Statutory requirements are not subject to this flexibility. For example, NRCS cannot adjust:

- a. Payment rates to exceed the maximum payment limitation of the estimated incurred cost for practice implementation to all EQIP participants;
- b. Eligibility requirements, such as compliance with Highly Erodible Land and Wetland Conservation Provisions, program land eligibility, or participant eligibility; and
- c. Compliance with other applicable Federal laws (e.g., National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Clean Water Act (Section 404 and other permits), Endangered Species Act, etc.)

Applicants must provide a detailed explanation of anticipated Adjustment of Program Terms in their pre-proposals and full proposals. Approval is on a case-by-case basis.

Adjusted Gross Income Limitation Waiver

RCPP allows waiver of the Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) limitations for participating producers if the Chief determines that the waiver is necessary to fulfill the objectives of the program. Applicants should indicate in their pre-proposals and full proposals if they anticipate that AGI waivers will be requested. Blanket AGI waivers will not be granted. Refer to Appendix A for AGI Waiver definition.

B. Vision and Goals of the Program

RCPP is an innovative approach to investing in natural resource conservation that empowers partnerships to design solutions and deliver specific, measurable results. RCPP draws on local knowledge and networks to accelerate progress on critical conservation projects. Partners are in the “driver’s seat,” with technical and financial help from NRCS. Through RCPP, NRCS seeks to achieve:

1. Solutions. Investing in projects that generate near-term results that are measurable from environmental, economic, and social perspectives.
2. Contributions. Leveraging the Federal resources to at least double the total investment in conservation projects.
3. Innovation. Promoting innovative projects that integrate multiple conservation approaches to deliver comprehensive and measurable solutions.
4. Participation. Maximizing the number of partners and participants, including those with a proven track record and those new to NRCS-administered conservation programs, to participate in and contribute to projects.

Successful RCPP proposals will bring an array of financial and technical capabilities to projects, will demonstrate experience with working effectively and collaboratively with agricultural producers and private forest landowners across the landscape, and will present innovative, sustainable, and measurable approaches to achieving important conservation goals.

Environmental Markets and Conservation Finance: NRCS encourages RCPP applications that support environmental markets and conservation finance projects. For over a decade, NRCS has been a Federal leader in supporting the development of environmental markets, primarily water quality trading and greenhouse gas markets. In addition, recent years have seen a growing interest in leveraging private capital markets to foster impact investments in conservation, sustainable agriculture, and forestry. Potential applicants are advised that

RCPP funding could serve to leverage opportunities associated with environmental market projects and conservation finance transactions.

C. Overview of the RCPP Application and Selection Process

In this current announcement, NRCS is soliciting applications for fiscal year (FY) 2017 funding, subject to FY 2017 appropriations actions. RCPP project selection follows a two-phase application and evaluation process that includes a pre- and full-proposal application.

Applicants submit pre-proposals and full proposals in accordance with Part IV and Part V of this notice. NRCS will conduct thorough evaluations of pre-proposals and full proposals in accordance with Part VI of this notice. The full-proposal process is only open to applicants whose pre-proposal applications are selected by NRCS for further consideration. The agency decision for development and submission of a full proposal is final and there is no appeal process or opportunity for reconsideration.

Upon selection of final proposals for funding, NRCS will work with lead partners to develop and finalize Partnership Agreements for the project. A negotiation phase is part of the Partnership Agreement development process to ensure that each project is fully scoped and resourced to achieve identified objectives. RCPP is not a grant program. All RCPP funds are provided in accordance with the final Partnership Agreement.

II. ELIGIBILITY INFORMATION

A. Partner Eligibility

Eligible partners include:

- 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, 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; and
- 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.

Individual producers and landowners are not eligible to submit project applications under this notice. However, once NRCS selects a project and establishes a Partnership Agreement, individual producers and landowners may apply directly to NRCS for program assistance as part of the eligible project or they may work with the partner to participate in the project.

B. Land Eligibility

Applicants must describe the type of land that will benefit from the conservation activities in their proposals. Land eligibility is guided by the program authority to be used for the activity:

1. Covered Programs. The following private and Tribal lands are eligible for enrollment:

- Cropland;
- Grassland;
- Rangeland;
- Pastureland;
- Nonindustrial private forest land; and
- Other land incidental to agricultural production (including wetlands and riparian buffers) on which significant natural resource issues could be addressed under the program.

Public lands are eligible in EQIP under limited circumstances where an eligible producer has authority to operate on the public land (e.g., a grazing permit) for the length of the program contract.

2. Watershed Authorities. Lands within an eligible watershed area. The size of the watershed cannot exceed 250,000 acres, and the size of any single structure proposed for funding cannot exceed 12,500 acre-feet of floodwater detention capacity and no more than 25,000 acre-feet of total capacity.

Additional information about various aspects of the covered programs is summarized in Appendix C. Contact NRCS with any questions regarding covered program requirements.

III. FUNDING AVAILABILITY

The maximum NRCS funding available for any project (combined FA and TA) selected under this announcement is \$10 million.

A. FY 2017 Estimated Total RCPP Funding

The RCPP statute authorizes annually \$100 million in CCC funding, and reserves 7 percent of the funds and acres made available under covered programs to implement the program:

Estimated Total RCPP Funding for FY 2017

<u>Program</u>	<u>Estimated Funding</u>
EQIP	\$ 115,500,000
CSP *	\$ 12,600,000
ACEP	\$ 35,000,000
HFRP	\$ 0
RCPP	\$ 100,000,000
Total	\$263,100,000

*CSP is allocated in acres. The FY 2017 funding estimate in the above table is derived by calculating 7 percent of the available program acreage (456,680 acres) and multiplying by \$18/acre, which is the average rate established in statute (16 USC 3838g) for CSP.

Funding availability is subject to final congressional appropriations action. The Federal fiscal year is October 1 to September 30. Funding will be available for project implementation activities once final project selections are made in FY 2017 and Partnership Agreements are executed. Funds will be committed for the duration of the project, or through FY 2020.

B. Fund Pools and Funding Priorities

RCPP funding is allocated across three competitive fund pools as follows:

FY 2017 Funding Allocation Across Fund Pools

<u>Fund Pool</u>	<u>Funding Allocation</u>	<u>FY 2017 Estimated Funding</u>
Critical Conservation Areas	35 percent	\$ 92,085,000
National	40 percent	\$ 105,240,000
State	25 percent	\$ 65,775,000
Total	100 percent	\$263,100,000

Applicants must identify one specific fund pool in which to compete in accordance with the criteria established in this notice. Application proposals need to be distinctly different if applying under more than one fund pool. Applicants cannot change fund pools once they have formally entered the process. For additional information on fund pools, go to: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/farmbill/rcpp/>.

Critical Conservation Areas Fund Pool

USDA has designated eight Critical Conservation Areas (CCAs) that represent an opportunity for partners at a regional level to address common natural resource goals while maintaining or improving agricultural productivity. Project applications submitted for consideration through the CCA fund pool must address the resource concern priority listed for the CCA. In designating CCAs, priority was given to geographical areas with:

- Significant agricultural production;
- An existing plan adopted by a Federal, State, or regional authority;
- Substantial need for water quality or water quantity improvements; and
- Producers that may have a need for assistance in meeting or avoiding a natural resource regulation.

Authorities under the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (P.L. 83-566) except the Watershed Rehabilitation Program, hereafter referred to as "Watershed Authorities," are available to applicants in the CCA fund pool. Applicants requesting use of Watershed Authorities must follow all statutory and programmatic rules as outlined in 7 CFR Part 622 and the National Watershed Program Manual (Title 390, Parts 500-506), including the development of a watershed plan and NEPA Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Refer to Appendix D.

If a proposed project already has an NRCS-approved PL 83-566 plan, the applicant should state the name of the plan and date completed in their RCPP application. NEPA policy dictates that plans older than 5 years will need to be updated to evaluate current conditions. The need for a new or updated watershed plan-EA/EIS should be accounted for in the applicant's proposal and budget. Applicants are strongly encouraged to thoroughly review the specific requirements of the program before they begin the application process. NRCS is available to discuss and review the benefits and requirements of the Watershed Authorities; questions regarding proposed requests for use of Watershed Authorities in CCAs may be directed to: RCPP@wdc.usda.gov.

Projects in CCAs that include activities that are outside the CCA boundary are permitted, to a limited extent, so long as the project also includes a significant portion of conservation activities and resulting benefits that occur within the established CCA boundaries, and the project clearly addresses the resource concerns identified for the CCA. For example, if a county is partially within the CCA boundary but some of the project activity occurs in the part of the county that is outside the boundary, that part of the project must be integral to the overall

success of the project. This relationship must be clearly identified in the proposal. For a map of the exact areas identified, please see the Web site at:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/farmbill/rcpp/>

Resource Concerns for RCPP Projects

Pre- and full-proposal applications submitted for consideration must identify the resource concern(s) to be addressed through the project. National resource concern priorities established under this notice include:

- Excess/Insufficient Water/Drought;
- Water Quality Degradation;
- Soil Quality Degradation;
- Inadequate Habitat for Fish, Wildlife, and invertebrates;
- Air quality impacts;
- Degraded Plant Condition (specific to certain CCA only);
- Energy; and
- Climate Change

NRCS will give priority to national applications that address multi-State resource concerns and applications that provide detail on how specific resource objectives will be monitored to assess outcomes.

CCA Resource Concerns

Each CCA has specific resource concerns and projects must address at least one of the identified concerns listed.

CCA Included in RCPP:	Resource Concern(s)
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 (13-state area: 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
Columbia River Basin (ID, OR, WA)	Excess/Insufficient Water/Drought Water Quality Degradation Inadequate Habitat for Fish, Wildlife, and Invertebrates
California Bay Delta (CA)	Excess/Insufficient Water/Drought Water Quality Degradation Inadequate Habitat for Fish, Wildlife, and Invertebrates
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
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

State Resource Concerns

Project applications submitted for consideration through the State fund pool will address at least one of the resource concerns stated above and may also identify a State-identified priority. NRCS State Conservationists,

with advice from the State Technical Committees and Tribal Conservation Advisory Councils, may also define more specific resource concerns. State priorities are available from the NRCS Web site at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/farmbill/rcpp/?cid=stelprdb1254189> and State offices identified in Appendix B.

Projects competing under the State funding pool must be located entirely within one State. A funding level for State-level RCPP projects has been provided to each State Conservationist.

C. Alternative Funding Arrangements

Alternative funding arrangements provide additional flexibility for certain partners to manage the RCPP funds associated with the project. NRCS may enter into up to 20 alternative funding arrangements with multi-State water resource agencies or authorities to deliver RCPP technical and financial assistance funding. The application must describe how the alternative funding arrangement will meet the goals and objectives of RCPP. During the Partnership Agreement negotiations, NRCS will work closely with the multi-State water resource agency or authority to develop criteria to implement the RCPP project under the Alternative Funding Arrangement.

Under an Alternative Funding Arrangement, partners have all responsibility for delivering the technical and financial assistance for implementation of the RCPP project, including assisting participants to:

- Identify NRCS conservation practices or conservation enhancements to achieve the outcomes of the RCPP proposal;
- Develop a plan and the associated contractual agreement to install and maintain the conservation practices to address the identified natural resource concerns and objectives. This agreement will have a beginning and ending date, the practices to be installed with NRCS financial assistance, a timeline to install these practices, operation and maintenance for the practice, and additional information needed to ensure the producer (or landowner) and partner achieve the outcomes identified in the project agreement; and
- Provide TA, and assist producers to design and install conservation practices or conservation enhancements to meet NRCS standards and specifications.

Alternative Funding Arrangements will be implemented using a Cooperative Agreement between NRCS and the multi-State water resource agency or authority. The terms and conditions of the agreement will address, but will not necessarily be limited to:

Multi-State Water Resource Agency or Authority:

- Ensure that participating producers and landowners have farm records established with the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and assist in the establishment of farm records with FSA as needed. NRCS may provide limited assistance to the lead partner to establish these records with FSA;
- Submit to NRCS the names, business information, and tax identification numbers of producers and landowners participating in the project;
- Provide AGI waiver requests to NRCS for review and a decision by the Chief. AGI waivers will be reviewed on an individual case-by-case basis;
- Provide to NRCS upon completion of planning activities, a report by producer, location, a list of the NRCS practices or activities to be installed, and the payment amount made or attributed to the eligible producer; and
- Agree to:
 - Submit an annual independent audit to NRCS that describes the use of funds;
 - Provide any data necessary for NRCS to issue a report on the use of funds;
 - Not use any funds provided for administration or to provide for administrative costs through

- contracts with another entity;
- o Enter into a Cooperator Agreement to ensure the confidentiality of producer and landowner information in accordance with Section 1619 of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008; and
- o Meet any other requirements determined necessary by NRCS.

NRCS:

- Conduct program and payment eligibility determinations (e.g., AGI limitations at 7 CFR part 1400, conservation compliance requirements at 7 CFR part 12, and applicable program payment limitations) for each participating producer and landowner whose information is provided by the multi-State water resource agency or authority;
- Provide confirmation of producer and landowner eligibility to the multi-State water resource agency or authority, including identifying if AGI waiver requests are needed for any potential participant;
- Perform quality assurance reviews for a minimum of 10 percent of the installed practices and activities based on the report provided by the multi-State water resource agency or authority; and
- Provide RCPP funding as outlined in the Cooperative Agreement.

IV. PRE-PROPOSAL APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS FOR PARTNERSHIP PROJECTS

A. Format and Instructions

Applicants must submit a pre-proposal application by the application deadline, and in accordance with the instructions found in Appendix E of this announcement. NRCS will evaluate pre-proposals according to the criteria in Part VI of this notice, and applicants should limit the content of their submittal to the information required in this Part. Pre-proposal applications consist of a data worksheet and a fillable PDF form for the narratives, and maps. Applicants are encouraged to submit applications via email to: RCPP@wdc.usda.gov.

In addition to fulfilling the requirements of this part for the pre-proposal application, applicants are encouraged to read all of Part V in order to understand the additional information they will be required to submit if they are selected to advance to the full-proposal process. This additional information should **not** be submitted at the pre-proposal step in the process and will **not** be considered in the evaluation of pre-proposal applications.

Instructions can also be found at:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/farmbill/rcpp>

B. Content

All applicants **must contact the appropriate State Conservationist** to ensure coordination at the start of this process. National and CCA applicants must contact the State Conservationist that is most central to the proposed project area. The State Conservationist will work with the applicant to explain NRCS' roles and responsibilities under the program. A lead State Conservationist will be determined based on the proposed project area. Applications for all fund pools must also provide a copy of the pre-proposal application to the appropriate NRCS State Conservationist by email (preferred) or mail. (See list of NRCS State Conservationists and their addresses in Appendix B). Any materials not specifically required will not be considered or used in the review process.

1. Data (pre-proposal sections only):

Applicants must provide the following data items for pre-proposal applications using the FY 2017 Data Entry Tool. The tool is organized by section and will guide users to input required information. Use of the tool is strongly recommended in order to gather the information needed to evaluate proposals.

- A. Basic Project Information, Project Details, Executive Summary, Project Partners
- B. Project Financials: Pre-proposal budget figures are considered preliminary and it is understood that there may be changes to the budget in the full-proposal process. Applications must reflect the total estimated cost of the project, showing separately the Federal share requested and partner leverage as follows:
 - 1. Financial assistance (FA): Show FA funds, with the Total Project FA amount broken down by (see definitions in Appendix A):
 - a. FA amount being requested from NRCS by program; and
 - b. FA amount being contributed by the partners, by program (if appropriate).
 - 2. Technical assistance (TA): Show TA funds, with the Total Project TA amount broken down by:
 - a. TA amount being requested from NRCS by program to fund:
 - i. NRCS TA to implement contracts and agreements with producers, landowners, and (for agricultural easements under ACEP-ALE) eligible entities to carry out the purposes of the program; and
 - ii. Partner TA to implement conservation contracts and agreements with participants. NRCS TA may not be used for partners' administrative costs or for outreach.
 - b. TA being contributed by the partners (in-kind or cash, this may include partner funding for administrative costs) to implement the project.
- C. Maps: Upload clear project maps to the data entry tool. A one-page map is sufficient unless the project area is complex. Include an overall location map showing where the project is located within the state or CCA. Submit using the JPEG format. Illustrate pertinent project boundaries, such as areas targeted for conservation.

A listing of the data elements required by the tool is found in Appendix E. Applicants can access the FY 2017 Data Entry Tool on the RCPP Web site under "How to Apply".

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/farmbill/rcpp/>

2. Descriptive Narratives (pre-proposal sections only):

Narratives will be entered into the provided PDF file and uploaded to the data entry tool when completed. Applicants must provide project narratives, which are similar to an executive summary. Narratives will describe the partners; project geographic focus; project objectives and goals; preliminary financial statement; monitoring and evaluation plans; types and sequence of project activities; and expectation of requests for adjustment of program rules, AGI waivers, or alternative funding arrangements.

Applicants can access the fillable PDF form for narratives on the RCPP Web site under "How to Apply."

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/farmbill/rcpp/>.

All narratives will be restricted to certain character lengths to ensure uniformity of applications.

V. FULL-PROPOSAL APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS FOR PARTNERSHIP PROJECTS

A. Overview of the Requirements

Full proposals will be accepted only from applicants who are notified at the end of the pre-proposal review process that NRCS has selected their application for the full-proposal phase. In the full-proposal phase, applicants will continue to work with the lead State Conservationist to develop and submit a full and finalized version of their project proposal. NRCS may request additional information from individual applicants as part of the review process.

Instructions can also be found on the Web site:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/farmbill/rcpp/>

B. Detailed Application Requirements

The full-proposal application must include the following:

1. **Data Entry Tool (Appendix E)**: Include any needed updates within the pre-proposal section and complete the full-proposal sections. Pre-proposal budget figures are preliminary; therefore, if the application is approved for full submission, it is understood that there may be differences when the budget is finalized. Final budgets of selected projects will be negotiated during the Partnership Agreement development phase.
2. **Updated Maps**: Submit clear detailed project map(s) as an attachment, accompanied by a narrative description of the geographic area covered by the application. Format: JPEG, 400-500 DPI resolution. A one-page map is sufficient unless the project area is complex. Include an overall location map showing where the project is located within the State or CCA. Illustrate pertinent project boundaries, such as hydrologic unit code boundaries, species ranges, and areas targeted for conservation. Outline on the map or describe in the application the areas that need conservation treatment, and identify the number of acres involved.
3. **Geographic Information System Shapefile**: Provide applicable shapefiles (Shapefile coordinate system, request decimal degrees in WGS 84). Only one shapefile should be provided that delineates the proposal area. The proposal ID should be contained in the shapefile name and a polygon shapefile should be provided.
4. **PDF Fillable Form for Descriptive Narratives**: All narratives will be restricted to certain character lengths to ensure uniformity of applications.
5. **Additional Items**: Additional items identified below must be obtained prior to submitting a full proposal. NRCS cannot enter into an agreement without a Lead Partner DUNS number and confirmation that they are registered in SAM. Applicants are therefore encouraged to apply early for their DUNS number and SAM registration.
 - a. **DUNS Number**: A Dun and Bradstreet DUNS number is a unique nine-digit sequence recognized as the universal standard for identifying and keeping track of over 70 million businesses worldwide. Applicants must obtain a DUNS number. 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 the registration may take up to 14 business days to complete.
 - b. **SAM**: 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/>. Please allow a minimum of 5 days to complete the SAM registration. SAM registration must be renewed annually.
6. **Letters of Financial Contribution**: Provide letters from all partners identifying all contributions, including cash and in-kind services. Amounts must match figures provided in the Data Entry Tool, and if there is a difference, the financial contribution will be taken from the letter.
7. **Letter of Intent from the NRCS Lead State Conservationist**: The purpose of this letter is to show the project meets the goals, objectives, and resource concerns of RCPP, and that communication between the Lead Partner and NRCS has taken place. This letter is not an endorsement of the project.

State Fund Pool: The Lead Partner must obtain a letter from the applicable State Conservationist demonstrating that the proposal meets the intent of RCPP.

National or CCA Fund Pools: The Lead Partner must consult all applicable NRCS State Conservationists; however, only one letter is required to demonstrate the proposal meets the intent of RCPP. The State Conservationist providing the letter will indicate collaboration with the other States.

8. **Submittal of Copy to State Conservationist**: Applicants for all fund pools must also include a copy of the full-proposal application to the appropriate NRCS State Conservationist by email (preferred) or mail. (See list of NRCS State Conservationists and their addresses in Appendix B).

VI. APPLICATION SUBMISSION AND REVIEW

A. Definition of Success and Reviewing Criteria

RCPP is a program that encourages the alignment of NRCS' mission with those of other organizations and businesses throughout the country. The partnership program is meant to engage public/private partnerships in innovative ways by combining and complimenting resources at the local, State, and even corporate levels. This unique program allows the opportunity for communities across the country to double the impact of Federal funds and have more comprehensive conservation projects that solve their complex resource challenges.

Pre- and full-proposal applications will be evaluated using the four pillars described below. Key questions under each pillar will be used to develop the ranking criteria for the FY 2017 review process.

Participation: The key to successful participation is partnerships that will bring a diverse array of stakeholders into a project, greatly accelerate adoption of conservation systems in the project area, and engage participants including historically underserved audiences. The project will demonstrate recruitment and marketing strategies leading to program participation. It will also include building new partnerships at the local, State, or corporate level, and engage partners that have not worked with NRCS in the past. Key questions include:

1. Does the project include all potential collaborating partners that would be appropriate, necessary, and sufficient to achieve the stated natural resource management project goals and objectives;
2. Do the partners have a strong history of collaboration and engagement with agricultural producers and forest landowners to ensure high levels of participation;
3. Does the project identify comprehensive strategies for encouraging participation of historically underserved producers, including socially disadvantaged, beginning, and limited resource farmers and ranchers;
4. Does participation in the project help to resolve pressing natural resource and social issues, such as environmental justice or persistent poverty?;
5. Through recruitment and marketing efforts, what percentage of landowners within the project area is expected to participate; and
6. Will recruitment and marketing efforts be targeted at those landowners who will have the greatest effect on stated project outcomes?

Innovation: RCPP is a landmark program, different from traditional NRCS programs in how projects are developed, lead, and implemented to address natural resource concerns. Applicants are challenged to draw from partners' technical expertise and financial resources to design creative and lasting solutions to conservation issues. This will only occur if well-developed proposals have science-based solutions that are developed and submitted. Partnerships will be innovative in their approach, and successful proposals will utilize one or more program authorities (EQIP, CSP, HFRP, or ACEP) to address natural resource management concerns. Key questions include:

1. Will the project establish or demonstrate feasibility of new or emerging environmental markets or

- conservation investment strategies with considerable benefits for agriculture and natural resources;
2. Does the project propose innovative methods of conservation delivery or promising new technologies that are documented as feasible and supported by partners and participants;
3. Will the project provide potential benefits for improving or expanding existing conservation practice standards or enhancements beyond the capacity of current practice standards;
4. Does the project use conservation systems that collectively address the primary resource concern and are based on recent scientific findings and lessons learned;
5. Have previous limitations to adoption been identified and innovative methods developed to overcome them; and
6. Does the project partnership include partners with demonstrated capabilities to drive innovation, reduce risk potential, and expand conservation participation?

Contribution: Successful partnerships will bring an array of financial and technical interests and capabilities to projects, such as cash contributions and technical professionals to work one-on-one with farmers and ranchers to provide planning, management, and engineering activities. It may also bring experts to conduct assessments of agronomic and environmental conditions, and best management practice implementation success or performance. NRCS' goal is to leverage funds to double the Federal conservation investment with partner contributions. Key questions include:

1. What percentage of the overall project cost will come from non-Federal partner resources, either their own or leveraged from other external sources;
2. What percentage of FA will the partner(s) commit or leverage to achieve project objectives;
3. What percentage of TA will the partner(s) commit or leverage to accomplish project objectives;
4. What unique expertise will partner(s) bring to the project to accelerate progress or enhance project success? Describe resources that partners will be contributing to the project's development, implementation, and management;
5. Does the partnership contribute activities and services that supplement or accelerate NRCS project accomplishments and documented outcomes? For example, marketing, outreach and education, monitoring project outcomes, and tracking the installation and maintenance of conservation systems;
6. Are the intended uses of partner cash and in-kind resources clearly stated and tied to overall project objectives? (All contribution commitments must be clearly documented in contribution letters);
7. Does the project include partners that are new to or only recently engaged in agricultural conservation activities? Describe the expertise that *new partners* will provide specifically to the project's development, implementation, and management; and
8. Does the project demonstrate a commitment from partners to perform specific activities as part of the project that are not typically performed by NRCS, but that are necessary for success?

Solutions: Successful partnerships will engage local organizations and communities, including historically underserved and tribal communities, to identify project objectives and design lasting solutions that are technically sound and locally supported so that benefits will extend beyond the Federal investment. The solutions identified should also increase the knowledge of conservation implementation utilizing private organizations to increase Conservation Planners, Technical Service Providers (TSP), or Niche Market Planners (Forestry, Environmental Markets, etc.) to name just some examples.

Partners are encouraged to use the latest science, identify areas that natural resources are being challenged by agricultural land use, and engage experts to find the solutions that will allow for focusing of funds. Partners will also need to build public outreach and engagement plans to identify and help eligible producers to sign up for NRCS' voluntary Federal conservation programs that make up RCPP. Key questions include:

1. Have the sources of the resource concern(s) been identified through recent scientific findings;
2. Does the project use NRCS or other evaluation assessment tools to prioritize conservation investments, plan appropriate mitigation, and measure conservation benefits;

3. Is the project area the appropriate scale for the resource concern(s) and goals identified;
4. Does the project utilize a conservation system approach to adequately address the resource concern(s);
5. Does the project define measurable, achievable, and results-oriented goals that address the resource concern(s) in a comprehensive and cost-effective manner;
6. Will the project implement a system of conservation practices appropriate to address the natural resource concern(s), including but not limited to water quality, soil quality degradation, and inadequate habitat for fish and wildlife;
7. Will the project extend or advance an existing project, either a national conservation initiative, State initiative, or an agreement? Examples include the regional pollinator efforts, Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative, or the National Water Quality Initiative;
8. Is there a history of past success within the agricultural community on projects or initiatives that focus on addressing natural resource concerns;
9. What activities will be implemented to ensure that the solutions will persist beyond initial establishment;
10. Are the methods, approaches, and results transferrable to other locations within the CCA, nation, or State;
11. Is the approach of the project based on relevant scientific research;
12. Does the planned evaluation of project success include measures to detect changes in the resource concern(s) resulting from the implementation of the proposed natural resource conservation actions; and
13. Is there a clear plan to monitor the progress of the proposal, provide a feedback mechanism, and evaluate whether the final product has met the needs of the stakeholders and the resource?

B. Review Process

All pre- and full-proposal applications will be reviewed for conformance with the requirements as established in this notice to determine qualified applications. Technical review boards of subject matter and program experts will review qualified applications based on the criteria outlined in VI.A of this notice. Once pre-proposals are selected, NRCS will notify applicants who then may submit final proposals in accordance with the requirements outlined in this announcement.

An agency leadership review board will evaluate the results from the technical review boards and make recommendations to the Chief for pre-proposals and final proposals for the national and CCA fund pools. For applications to the State fund pool, NRCS State Conservationists will establish a review process for pre-proposals and final proposals.

NRCS **will not** consider incomplete application or those that do not meet the requirements set forth in this notice. Applicants will be notified when NRCS is not considering their application.

C. Environmental Review Requirements

All applicable national, State and local permits must be acquired for project activities. Applicants should consider permit related activities when outlining the timeline for a project. NRCS requires applicants to provide appropriate documentation as part of the application packet. NRCS cannot approve funding until the environmental review requirements demonstrating compliance with NEPA are met. NRCS may choose not to approve funding for projects that may result in unacceptable adverse environmental impacts.

VII. AWARD INFORMATION AND ADMINISTRATION

A. Partnership Agreements

Upon selection and approval of full-proposal applications, NRCS will enter into negotiations with the Lead Partner to develop a Partnership Agreement for the project. Potential partners should be aware that, depending

upon available funding and agency priorities, NRCS may offer a reduced amount of program assistance from that requested in the application.

1. The Lead State Conservationist will initiate negotiation with the Lead Partner to define the final scope and responsibilities to be reflected in the Partnership Agreement. This process will include detailed discussion and agreement on the roles of the partner and NRCS in implementing the project, including the provision of TA.
2. The Partnership Agreement will address, at a minimum, the following responsibilities:
 - a. The eligible Lead Partner shall:
 - i. Define the scope of a project, including:
 - Eligible activities to be implemented;
 - Potential agricultural or nonindustrial private forest land operations affected;
 - Local, State, multi-State, or other geographic area covered; and
 - Planning, outreach, implementation, and assessment to be conducted.
 - ii. Conduct outreach and education to producers for potential participation in the project, including specifics on outreach to historically underserved populations;
 - iii. Act on behalf of a producer, at their request, to apply for assistance in order to participate in the project;
 - iv. Describe all TA activities (e.g., design, layout, and oversee implementation of conservation practices by the partner(s));
 - v. Leverage FA or TA provided by the Secretary with additional funds to help achieve the project objectives;
 - vi. Conduct an assessment of the project's effects;
 - vii. Submit annual progress reports to NRCS; and
 - viii. At the conclusion of the project, report to the Secretary on its results and funds leveraged.
 - b. The partner shall be aware of and assist producers and landowners in complying with applicable program requirements as follows (see also Appendix C):
 - i. EQIP – 7 CFR Part 1466;
 - ii. CSP – 7 CFR Part 1470;
 - iii. ACEP – 7 CFR Part 1468;
 - iv. HFRP – 7 CFR Part 625; and
 - v. Watershed Authorities – 7 CFR Part 622 (in CCAs only).
 - c. An eligible partner shall provide a significant portion of the overall costs of the scope of the project, which will be reflected in the Partnership Agreement. The overall cost includes all direct and indirect costs associated with implementation, from NRCS and partners. Partners may include funds they have received from other Federal sources as part of their contribution to the project, provided they submit a written commitment from the Federal agency confirming such funds can be used in conjunction with NRCS funds. Examples of significant contributions may include, but are not limited to, the following:
 - i. Direct financial support to producers or landowners for implementing conservation activities or to purchase conservation easements;
 - ii. Technical services for conservation planning and implementation activities that benefit participants;
 - iii. Other services, such as:
 - Outreach and education to potential participants, especially historically underserved producers, regarding conservation activities;
 - Monitoring and data analysis related to the outcomes of conservation activities and effects on the targeted resource concerns; and
 - Administrative costs that are directly associated with the project, such as:
 - Equipment;
 - Office supplies;
 - Travel; and

- o Indirect or direct costs relating to submitting or implementing the project application.
- d. Additional requirements:
- i. The role(s) of the partner(s), including the Lead Partner's responsibilities to ensure the cooperation of other identified partners;
 - ii. The role(s) of NRCS, including TA requested for partner, NRCS, or both;
 - iii. The responsibilities of the Lead Partner as they relate to conservation activities and evaluation;
 - iv. The frequency and duration of conservation activities and evaluation to be completed by the Lead Partner;
 - v. The tracking and reporting of performance deliverables;
 - vi. The format and frequency of reports (annual and final) required as a condition of the Partnership Agreement;
 - vii. The overall budget, including non-NRCS funding sources of FA and TA, including:
 - FA amount requested from NRCS by program;
 - FA amount contributed by partners;
 - NRCS-specific TA funding amount being requested by program; and
 - Partner TA amount being contributed.
 - viii. How NRCS will conduct spot-checking of conservation activities;
 - ix. The specified project schedule; and
 - x. Other requirements deemed necessary by NRCS to further the purposes of the selected RCPP project.

B. Reporting Requirements

For each project, NRCS is required to report to the Secretary and Congress the following:

- The number and types of eligible partners, landowners, and producers participating in the selected project(s);
- The number of producers and landowners receiving assistance;
- The number of new producers and landowners reached (i.e., those who have not previously participated in NRCS programs), and if any beginning farmers or ranchers, limited resource farmers or ranchers, socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers, eligible veteran farmers or ranchers, or Indian Tribes received assistance;
- Total funding committed to projects, including from Federal and non-Federal resources;
- A description of how the funds are being administered under an alternative funding arrangement;
- Means for tracking adherence to any applicable provisions for payment eligibility;
- Any oversight mechanisms implemented; and
- The process through which program appeals by program participants are resolved.

Lead Partners will be required to provide annual and final reports on the items listed below and in **Appendix F**. Lead Partners will submit reports to NRCS, as established in the Partnership Agreement, no later than November 30, 2017, and every year thereafter for the duration of the Agreement. Designated NRCS staff will collect reports from Lead Partners, complete and submit progress to the RCPP staff. For multi-state projects, the Lead Partner(s) will coordinate with participating partners and states to submit a single, consolidated report to the NRCS Lead State. On an annual basis, Lead Partners will be required to provide updates a number of items including the following:

- Activities conducted to date;
- Accomplishment of goals established in the project application, including whether and why goals have been adjusted;
- Proposed adjustments to funding requested from NRCS; and,
- Other items as required in the Partnership Agreement.

Additional reporting items are outlined in Appendix F of this document.

Requirements for the final report will be established in the Partnership Agreement and will include a description of the goals and outcomes accomplished.

Failure to meet goals and reporting requirements may result in termination of a Partnership Agreement.

C. Notifications

All applicants will receive notification on selection or non-selection of projects. For selected CCA and national applications, the Lead Partner should contact the Lead State Conservationist to develop the required Partnership Agreement and other implementation requirements. Lead State Conservationists will be identified as projects are received and can be requested through an applicant's home State Conservationist. Upon notification of selection for a State application, the Lead Partner must contact the NRCS State Conservationist, listed in the letter, to develop the required Partnership Agreement and other project implementation requirements.

D. Withdrawal of Applications

Lead Partner applications may be withdrawn by written notice to the Director, Financial Assistance Programs Division, at any time prior to selection.

VIII. AGENCY CONTACTS

RCPP Program Contact:

Mark A. Rose, Director
Financial Assistance Programs Division
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
RCPP Application
Post Office Box 2890
Washington, DC 20013-2890
Telephone: (202) 720-1844
Email: mark.rose@wdc.usda.gov

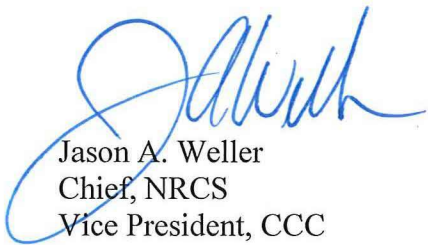
Administrative Contact:

Frankie Comfort
Grants Specialist
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Post Office Box 2690
Washington, D.C. 20013-2890
Telephone: (202) 690-0164
Email: frankie.comfort@wdc.usda.gov

Additional information about RCPP, including fact sheets, is available at:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/farmbill/rcpp/>.

Signed this 14 day of March, 2016, in Washington, D.C.



Jason A. Weller
Chief, NRCS
Vice President, CCC

APPENDIX A—DEFINITIONS

Terms used for the Regional Conservation Partnership Programs (RCPP) are defined in either Subtitle I of the Food Security Act of 1985 (the 1985 Act), the covered program authorities, or as set forth below. To the extent any definition set forth below is inconsistent with a statutory or regulatory definition, the statutory or regulatory definition will control.

Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) Waiver: To assist in the implementation of RCPP, the Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), may waive the AGI limitation eligibility requirement on a case-by-case basis, in accordance with Section 1271C(c)(3) of the RCPP statute, and the policy and processes at 7 CFR Part 1400. A person or legal entity that exceeds the AGI limitation of Section 1001D of the 1985 Act, as amended, is not eligible to receive payments under RCPP unless waived by the Chief.

Adjustment of Terms: The rules of a covered program that may be adjusted, which include no statutory regulatory rules or provisions. Partners may request that program adjustments be allowed, provided they are within the scope of the statutory program authorities.

Administrative Costs: Costs beyond the costs of direct services (direct costs). These are also known as “indirect costs/overhead.” Examples include rent and utilities, space used by staff, copies, phones, information technology support, etc., that are used by all staff and not directly related to the project. The term “indirect costs” is defined below.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP): The program administered by NRCS in accordance with 7 CFR part 1468 (16 U.S.C. 3865–3865d).

Beginning Farmer or Rancher: Unless otherwise defined in covered program regulation, the term means a participant or applicant who:

- Has not operated a farm or ranch, or who has operated a farm or ranch for not more than 10 consecutive years. This requirement applies to all members of a legal entity; and
- Will materially and substantially participate in the operation of the farm or ranch.

In the case of a contract with an individual, individually or with the immediate family, material and substantial participation requires that the individual provide substantial day-to-day labor and management of the farm or ranch consistent with the practices in the county or State where the farm is located.

In the case of a contract made with a legal entity, all members must materially and substantially participate in the operation of the farm or ranch. Material and substantial participation requires that the members provide some amount of the management, or labor and management necessary for day-to-day activities, such that if the members did not provide these inputs, operation of the farm or ranch would be seriously impaired.

Chief: The Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, or designee.

Commodity Credit Corporation: A Government-owned and operated organization created to stabilize, support, and protect farm income and prices to help maintain balanced and adequate supplies of agricultural commodities, including food products, feeds, and fibers; and to help in their orderly distribution of these commodities (440-CPM-Part 503).

Conservation Activity: As defined in 400 CPM Part 502:

- As applies to the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP): The actions necessary, using acceptable tools and protocols, to identify, inventory, assess, evaluate, or otherwise measure the

presence and extent of a natural resource concern and how to address the natural resource concern through one or more conservation practices. Information gathered as a result of these actions must be essential to the development of a plan that furthers the purposes of the program, including a plan that addresses the adoption or adaptation of conservation practices in order to achieve a conservation benefit.

- As applies to the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP): Conservation systems, practices, or management measures needed to address a resource concern or improve environmental quality through the treatment of natural resources, and includes structural, vegetative, and management activities, as determined by NRCS.

Conservation Enhancements: A type of conservation activity, in CSP, used to treat natural resources and improve conservation performance. Enhancements are equal to or greater than the performance level for the quality criteria identified for a given resource concern. Quality criteria are defined for each resource concern in Section III—Conservation Management Systems, Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG).

Conservation Practice: One or more conservation improvement and activity, including structural practices, land management practices, vegetative practices, forest management practices, and other improvements, that achieve the program purposes, including such items as Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans (CNMPs), agricultural energy management plans, dryland transition plans, forest management plans, integrated pest management, and other plans or activities determined acceptable by NRCS. Approved conservation practices are listed in the NRCS FOTG.

Conservation Benefit: The improved condition of a natural resource concern resulting from the implementation of a conservation practice.

Conservation Planning: Using the NRCS planning process outlined in the NRCS National Planning Procedures Handbook (NPPH) (Title 180, Part 600). The NPPH is available at: <http://directives.sc.egov.usda.gov/>.

Conservation Practice Standard: Define the practice and where it applies. Practice specifications are detailed requirements for installing the practice in the State. It contains information on why and where the practice is applied, and it sets forth the minimum quality criteria that must be met during the application of that practice in order for it to achieve its intended purpose(s).

Conservation Stewardship Program: The program administered by NRCS in accordance with 7 CFR part 1470 (16 U.S.C. 3838d-3838g).

Covered Programs: The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), EQIP, CSP, Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP), and in CCAs only, the Watershed Authorities defined below.

Critical Conservation Area: A geographic area designated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) based on the degree to which an area addresses RCPP priorities.

Eligible Activity: Any of the following conservation activities:

- Water quality restoration or enhancement projects, including nutrient management and sediment reduction;
- Water quantity conservation, restoration, or enhancement projects relating to surface water and ground water resources including:
 - The conversion of irrigated cropland to the production of less water-intensive agricultural commodities or dryland farming, and
 - Irrigation system improvement and irrigation efficiency enhancement;
- Drought mitigation;

- Flood prevention;
- Water retention;
- Air quality improvement;
- Habitat conservation, restoration, and enhancement;
- Erosion control and sediment reduction;
- Forest restoration; and
- Other related activities that NRCS determines will help achieve conservation benefits.

Eligible Partner: An entity that enters into a Partnership Agreement with NRCS to carry out the approved RCPP project including any of the following:

- 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, rural water district or association, or other organization with specific water delivery authority to producers on agricultural land;
- A municipal water or wastewater treatment entity;
- An institution of higher education; and
- An organization or entity with an established history of working cooperatively with producers on agricultural land, as determined by the Secretary, 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.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program: The program administered by NRCS in accordance with 7 CFR part 1466 (16 U.S.C. 3839aa-3839aa-8).

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Clean Water Act Section 319 Funds: A provision of the Clean Water Act (CWA), Section 319 provides funding to reduce nonpoint source efforts. States, territories and Tribes may receive grant money that supports a wide variety of activities including technical assistance, financial assistance, education, training, and monitoring to assess the success of specific nonpoint source implementation projects. EPA Clean Water Act Section 319 funds are considered Federal funds for the purpose of RCPP, but the 40 percent State and other non-Federal match is considered a non-Federal contribution for the purposes of determining whether a partner is providing a significant contribution to the project.

Field Office Technical Guide: The official, local NRCS source of resource information and interpretations of guidelines, criteria, and requirements for planning and implementing conservation practices. It contains detailed information on the quality standards to achieve conservation of soil, water, air, plant, energy, and animal resources applicable to the local area for which it is prepared. The FOTG can be accessed online at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/efotg/>.

Fiscal Year: The Federal Government year beginning October 1 of each calendar year and ending September 30 of the following calendar year.

Financial Assistance: A payment made to a program participant to implement an NRCS-approved conservation practice. Financial assistance does not include activities outside approved standards such as road spraying, salaries, etc.

Fund Pool: The three fund pools by which RCPP funding is allocated. These are the Critical Conservation

Areas (CCA), national, and State. Eligible partners submitting a project application must select one fund pool for their application. Each application must identify a single fund pool under which the application will be evaluated. Applicants may only submit one application for a single project proposal.

Healthy Forests Reserve Program: The program administered by NRCS in accordance with 7 CFR part 625 (16 U.S.C. 6571-6578).

High Priority Outcomes: Project results that meet the purposes identified in Section 1271B(d)(4) of the 1985 Act and can include:

- Assisting producers in meeting or avoiding the need for a natural resource regulatory requirement;
- Covering a high percentage of producers in the area by the agreement;
- Significantly leveraging non-Federal financial and technical resources, and coordinate with other local, State, or national efforts;
- Delivering high percentages of applied conservation to address conservation priorities or regional, State, or national conservation initiatives;
- Providing innovation in conservation methods and delivery, including outcome-based performance measures and methods; or
- Meeting other factors that are important for achieving the purposes of the program, as determined by NRCS.

Historically Underserved Producer: An eligible person, legal entity, joint operation, or Indian Tribe who is a beginning farmer or rancher, socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher, or limited resource farmer or rancher.

Indirect Costs: Indirect costs, as defined by 2 CFR Part 200, mean those costs incurred for a common or joint purpose benefitting more than one cost objective, and not readily assignable to the cost objectives specifically benefitted, without effort disproportionate to the results achieved.

Indian Tribe: Any Indian Tribe, band, nation, or other organized group or community, including any Alaska Native village, or regional or village corporation as defined in or established pursuant to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (43 U.S.C. 1601 et seq.), which is recognized as eligible for the special programs and services provided by the United States to Indians because of their status as Indians.

Lead Partner: The partner who will serve as the primary contact with NRCS for all discussions regarding the RCPP project, final authority for negotiations and signing of the Partnership Agreement, and lead for coordinating all partner(s) activities for the overall project.

Legal Entity: An entity, as defined in 7 CFR Part 1400, created under Federal or State law and that:

- 1) Owns land or an agricultural commodity, product, or livestock; or
- 2) Produces an agricultural commodity, product, or livestock.

Letter of Financial Contribution: A written letter from the partner stating the total dollar amount of cash and/or in-kind service they intend to contribute to the project should it be selected for funding. Amounts listed in the Letters of Financial Contribution must match the amounts input into the Data Entry Tool. This is not a Letter of Support.

Letters for all partners offering cash and/or in-kind contributions are required for full-proposal submissions.

Letter of Intent from NRCS State Conservationist: A written letter stating that the project meets the goals, objectives, and resource concerns of RCPP and that communication between the Lead Partner and NRCS has taken place. This letter is not an endorsement of the project. This is a requirement of the full proposal.

Letter of Support: A written letter stating general support for the project proposal. This is not a requirement for full-proposal applications, and these letters will not be considered during the review process.

Limited Resource Farmer or Rancher: Defined in 7 C.F.R § 1469.3 (CSP) and 7 C.F.R. § 1466.3 (EQIP), is a participant:

- With direct or indirect gross farm sales not more than the current indexed value in each of the previous 2 years; and
- Has a total household income at or below the national poverty level for a family of four, or less than 50 percent of county median household income in each of the previous 2 years.

A legal entity or joint operation can be a limited resource farmer or rancher only if all individual members independently qualify. A Self-Determination Tool is available to the public and may be completed online or printed hardcopy at: <http://www.lrftool.sc.egov.usda.gov/>.

Multistate Water Resource Agency or Authority: A governmental agency or quasi-governmental entity granted certain powers and authorities by statute to conduct activities related to water or waters that are multi-State or regionally shared resources and which management by more than one State or on a regional basis is needed to achieve shared objectives for the resource.

Natural Resources Conservation Service: An agency of USDA which has responsibility for administering the covered programs either directly, or on behalf of CC and the Watershed Authorities, which are made available through RCPP.

Outreach and Education: Informing existing and potential customers about NRCS programs and services to better serve a diverse clientele with an emphasis on historically underserved producers. Examples include:

- Conducting webinars targeted to producers describing the Conservation Stewardship Program and application process;
- Organizing field tours to demonstrate the effectiveness of practices implemented using EQIP funds; and
- Providing staff at a farm show to talk about ACEP.

Participant: A person, legal entity, joint operation, or Indian Tribe who has been determined eligible, has been accepted into a covered program, and is receiving payment or is responsible for implementing the terms and conditions of a conservation program contract or easement agreement under a program covered by RCPP.

Partnership Agreement: An agreement between NRCS and the Lead Partner that outlines the scope of the RCPP project, and roles and responsibilities of NRCS and partner(s) for planning, implementing, evaluating, and reporting.

Payment: Financial assistance provided to a program participant under the terms of the conservation program contract, long-term contract, cooperative agreement, or easement agreement. Payments and payment rates are established by program rule.

Payment Limitations: Payments received by persons and legal entities through NRCS programs are subject to limitations established by programmatic statutory authority.

Person: A natural person, not a legal entity.

Private Land: Land that is not owned by a governmental entity, including acreage owned by Indian Tribes.

Producer: A person, legal entity, Indian Tribe, Tribal corporation, or joint operation who NRCS determines is either engaged in agricultural production or forestry management on the agricultural operation.

Program: RCPP authorized by Subtitle I of Title XII of the 1985 Act, as amended by section 2401 of the Agriculture Act of 2014.

Review Process: The multistep process by which pre- and full proposals in the CCA and national funding pools are evaluated and reviewed using the following criteria: Solutions, Contributions, Innovation, and Participation.

Significant Partner Contribution: A significant contribution can include financial or technical assistance, monitoring, and administrative services. Contributions can be cash or in-kind. It is a statute requirement that an eligible partner make a “significant contribution” to the overall cost of the project.

Socially Disadvantaged Farmer or Rancher: Defined under section 355(e) of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act (7 U.S.C 2003(e)), as added in 1990, is a producer belonging to a group whose members have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudices without regard to its members’ individual qualities. For an entity, at least 50 percent ownership in the farm business must be held by socially disadvantaged individuals. These groups consist of the following:

- American Indians or Alaskan Natives;
- Asians;
- Blacks or African Americans;
- Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders; and
- Hispanics

Notes: Gender alone is not a covered group under NRCS conservation programs, and the term “entities” reflects a broad interpretation to include partnerships, couples, legal entities, etc.

Sponsoring Local Organizations: Associated with the use of Watershed Authorities. Sponsoring local organizations have the legal authority and resources to carry out, operate, and maintain works of improvement. Responsibilities of the sponsoring local organizations include:

- Power of eminent domain;
- Ability to obtain permits and licenses;
- Have and exercise the authority to levy taxes;
- Ability to obtain agreements from landowners to implement conservation plans on not less than 50% of the lands situated in the drainage area above each retention reservoir to be installed;
- Coordinate or leading public participation;
- Evidence of commitment of funding, installing, operating and maintaining the project for the design lifespan;
- Ability to implement needed watershed management features such as permitting, zoning, land use regulation, easements, or upstream watershed protection;
- Evidence that any proposed municipal and industrial water supply use will be acceptable in quantity and quality to meet the anticipated needs; and
- Ensure operation and maintenance of the project.

State Conservationist: The NRCS employee who is authorized to implement conservation programs administered by NRCS, and who directs and supervises NRCS activities in a State, the Caribbean Area, or the Pacific Island Areas. Partners must be in contact with the lead State’s State Conservationist through the planning process.

State Technical Committee: A committee established pursuant to 16 U.S.C. 3861 and described in 7 CFR part

610. Information regarding these committees can be found at:
<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/technical/stc/>.

Technical Assistance: Technical expertise, information, training, education, and tools necessary for a producer to be able to successfully implement, operate, and maintain the conservation of natural resources on land active in agricultural, forestry, or related uses. The term includes:

- Technical services provided directly to farmers, ranchers, and other eligible entities, such as conservation planning, technical consultation, and assistance with design and implementation of conservation practices; and
- Technical infrastructure, including activities, processes, tools, and agency functions needed to support delivery of technical services, such as technical standards, resource inventories, training, data, technology, monitoring, and effects analyses.

Information regarding technical assistance can be found at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/cta/>. Technical assistance does **not** include administrative (food, travel, clothing), research, or outreach and education.

Technical Service Provider: Means an individual, private-sector entity, Indian Tribe, or public agency either:

- 1) Certified by NRCS pursuant to 7 CFR part 652 and placed on the approved list to provide technical services to participants; or
- 2) Selected by USDA to assist in the implementation of conservation programs covered by this part through a procurement contract, contributions agreement, or cooperative agreement with USDA.

Tribal Conservation Advisory Council: In lieu of forming a Tribal Conservation District, an Indian Tribe may elect to designate an advisory council to provide input on NRCS programs and the conservation needs of the Tribe and Tribal producers. The advisory council may be an existing tribal committee or department and may also constitute an association of member Tribes organized to provide direct consultation to NRCS at the State, regional, and national levels to provide input on NRCS rules, policies, and programs and their impacts on Tribes.

Watershed Authorities: The provisions of the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (Public Law 83-566) administered by NRCS in accordance with 7 CFR part 622, except such authorities do not include the Watershed Rehabilitation Program authorized by Section 14 of the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (16 U.S.C. 1012).

Veteran Farmer or Rancher: A producer who meets the definition in section 2501(e) of the Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990, as amended (7 U.S.C. 2279(e)).

APPENDIX B—NRCS STATE CONSERVATIONISTS (STC)

Lead Partners must contact STCs as early in the process as possible. If a particular STC position becomes vacant, an Acting STC will be assigned and can be contacted through the address and phone number provided below.

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APPENDIX C—SUMMARY OF PROGRAM OBJECTIVES AND TERMS

Program	Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)	Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)	Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)	Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)	Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program (PL-566)
Purpose or Goal	Provides funds for the purchase of conservation easements to restore, protect, and enhance wetlands on eligible land; protect the agricultural viability and related conservation values of eligible land by limiting agricultural uses of that land; and protect grazing uses and related conservation values. ACEP has two components, an Agricultural Land Easement component (ACEP-ALE) and a Wetland Reserve Easement component (ACEP-WRE).	Encourages producers to address resource concerns in a comprehensive manner by improving, maintaining, and managing existing conservation activities; and undertaking additional conservation activities.	Provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers to help plan and implement conservation practices that address natural resource concerns and for opportunities to improve soil, water, plant, animal, air and related resources on Tribal land, agricultural land, and non-industrial private forestland.	Assists landowners, on a voluntary basis, in restoring, enhancing and protecting forestland resources on private lands to increase the likelihood of recovery of threatened or endangered species, improve biological diversity, and increase carbon sequestration.	Provides technical and financial assistance to entities of State and local governments and Tribes (project sponsors) for planning and installing watershed projects. The Watershed Operations is available nationwide to protect and improve watersheds up to 250,000 acres in size. Currently there are approximately 300 active small watershed projects throughout the country. Eligible purposes include preventing damage from erosion, floodwater, and sediment; furthering the conservation, development, utilization, and disposal of water; and furthering the conservation and proper utilization of land.

Program	Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)	Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)	Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)	Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)	Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program (PL-566)
Length of Contract	ACEP-ALE: Eligible entities enter into cooperative agreements to place permanent easements and easements of maximum duration allowed by State Law on private lands. ACEP-WRE: Permanent easements, 30-Year easements, 30-Year Contracts with Indian Tribes, and easements of maximum duration allowed by State Law.	5 years with an opportunity to renew for one additional 5-year period.	Up to 10 years.	Permanent easements, 30-year easements, 30-year contracts with Indian Tribes, and 10-year restoration cost-share agreements. Easements are also available for the maximum duration authorized under State law.	Agreements are multi-year, depending upon the nature and scope of the watershed project plan.
Eligible Land	ACEP-ALE: Land eligible for agricultural land easements includes cropland, rangeland, grassland, pastureland, and nonindustrial private forest land which contributes to the economic viability of an offered parcel or serves as a buffer to protect such land from development. ACEP-WRE: Land eligible for wetland reserve easements includes farmed or	All private or Tribal agricultural land and non-industrial private forestland is eligible, unless it is enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), ACEP-WRE, or the Conservation Security Program. Land enrolled in CRP may be eligible if-- (i) the CRP contract will expire at the end of the fiscal year in which the land is to be enrolled in CSP; and (ii) CRP payments for land enrolled in CSP cease before the first CSP	Private and Tribal agricultural land, including cropland, grassland, and non-industrial private forestland but does not include land enrolled in CRP or ACEP-WRE. Public lands are eligible in EQIP under limited circumstances where an eligible producer has authority to operate on the public land for the length of the program contract.	All private or Tribal forestland.	Projects are limited by the size of the watershed (not to exceed 250,000 acres) and the size of any single structure (12,500 acre-feet of floodwater detention capacity, and no more than 25,000 acre feet of total capacity. Each project must contain benefits directly related to agriculture, including rural communities, which account for at least 20 percent of the

Program	Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)	Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)	Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)	Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)	Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program (PL-566)
	converted wetland that can be successfully and cost-effectively restored.	payment is made to the applicant.			total benefits of the project.
Eligible Program Applicants	ACEP-ALE: (1) To be eligible to receive ALE funding, an eligible entity must be an Indian Tribe, State government, local government, or a nongovernmental organization which has a farmland or grassland protection program that purchases agricultural land easements for the purpose of protecting agriculture use and related conservation values, including grazing uses and related conservation values, by limiting conversion to nonagricultural uses of the land. In addition, eligible entities Interested in receiving ALE funds must provide NRCS sufficient evidence of: (i) A commitment to long-term conservation of agricultural lands, (ii) A capability to acquire, manage, and	To be eligible to participate in CSP, an applicant must: (1) Be the operator of an agricultural operation in the Farm Service Agency (FSA) farm records management system, unless an exception applies as determined by NRCS; (2) Have effective control of the land unless an exception is made by the Chief in the case of land administered by the BIA, Indian lands, or other instances in which the Chief determines that there is sufficient assurance of control; (3) Be in compliance with the highly erodible land and wetland conservation provisions found at 7 CFR part 12; (4) Be in compliance with Adjusted Gross Income provisions found at 7 CFR part 1400; (5) Supply information, as required by NRCS, to determine eligibility for the program; (6) Comply with applicable	To be eligible to participate in EQIP, an applicant must: (1) Be in compliance with the highly erodible land and wetland conservation provisions found at 7 CFR part 12; (2) Must be a producer as determined by NRCS; (3) Have control of the land for the term of the proposed contract unless an exception is made by the Chief in the case of land administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Indian lands, or other instances in which the Chief determines that there is sufficient assurance of control; (4) Agree to implement the EQIP plan of operations according to the provisions and conditions established in the EQIP contract, including the EQIP contract appendix; (5) Submit an EQIP plan of operations or plan developed for the purposes of acquiring an air or water quality permit;	To be eligible to enroll an easement in the HFRP, an individual or entity must: (1) Be the landowner of eligible land for which enrollment is sought; and (2) Agree to provide such information to NRCS, as the agency deems necessary or desirable, to assist in its determination of eligibility for program benefits and for other program implementation purposes.	To be eligible to receive PL-566 funds, a qualifying sponsor(s) must have the authority to carry out, operate and maintain works of improvement, including organizations that, individually or collectively, have: (1) The power of eminent domain, (2) The authority to levy taxes or use other adequate funding sources, including state, regional, or local appropriations, to finance their share of the project cost and all operation and maintenance costs. Sponsors must commit themselves to use their powers and authority to carry out and maintain the project as planned.

Program	Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)	Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)	Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)	Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)	Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program (PL-566)
	enforce easements, (iii) Sufficient number of staff dedicated to monitoring and easement stewardship, and (iv) The availability of funds at the time of application sufficient to meet the eligible entity's contribution requirements for each parcel proposed for funding. ACEP-WRE: To be eligible to enroll in WRE, all landowners must: (1) be in compliance with the highly erodible land and wetland conservation provisions in 7 CFR part 12; (2) be in compliance with the Adjusted Gross Income Limitation provisions at 7 CFR part 1400; (3) Be the owner of the eligible land for which enrollment is sought; (4) Provide any documentation required by NRCS as	registration and reporting requirements of the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006 (7) Provide a list of all members of the legal entity or joint operation, as applicable, and associated information.	(6) Supply information, as required by NRCS, to determine eligibility for the program, including but not limited to, information to verify the applicant's status as a limited resource, beginning farmer or rancher, and payment eligibility as established by 7 CFR part 1400; (7) Comply with applicable registration and reporting requirements of the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006; and (8) Provide a list of all members of the legal entity and associated information.		

Program	Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)	Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)	Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)	Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)	Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program (PL-566)
	necessary to determine eligibility; (5) Comply with applicable registration and reporting requirements of the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006; and (6) For easement applications, have been the landowner of such land for the 24-month period prior to the time of application unless an exception applies.				
Program Activities	Under the ACEP-ALE component, NRCS enters into agreements with eligible entities to provide cost-share assistance to the eligible entities to purchase agricultural land easements from eligible landowners. The agricultural land easement, including implementation of the agricultural land easement plan, protects agricultural lands from conversion to non-agricultural uses. Grasslands are protected from conversion to non-	CSP provides financial and technical assistance to producers adopt and maintain conservation activities to address priority resource concerns, including air, animals, energy, plants, soil erosion, soil health, water quality, and water quantity. Conservation activities include conservation enhancements and conservation practices. Conservation enhancements treat natural resources and improve conservation performance through adding:	EQIP provides financial and technical assistance to producers to obtain conservation planning; implement vegetative practices like conservation buffers, conservation cover, windbreaks, shelterbelts, grass waterways, wildlife habitat development; install structural practices like terraces, waste management structures, anaerobic digesters; and adopt management practices like nutrient management, grazing land management, residue and tillage management, forest stand	HFRP provides financial and technical assistance to restore, protect, and enhance forest resources by providing funds directly to eligible landowners for the purchase of HFRP easements. Additionally, NRCS pays for the implementation of forestry restoration, enhancement, and habitat management practices. The practices adopted under the HFRP restoration plan may be the basis for the landowner to obtain safe harbor assurances under the Endangered Species Act.	Watershed Operations provides financial and technical assistance is provided for activities associated with planning and implementing authorized watershed project plans for the purpose of: 1. watershed protection 2. flood mitigation 3. water quality improvements 4. soil erosion reduction 5. rural, municipal and industrial water supply 6. irrigation water management

Program	Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)	Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)	Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)	Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)	Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program (PL-566)
	grassland uses management Under the ACEP-WRE component, NRCS restores, protects, and enhances wetlands by providing funds directly to eligible landowners for the purchase of wetland reserve easements. Additionally, NRCS pays for the implementation of wetland restoration, enhancement, and habitat management practices.	• cover crop mixes, using deep rooted cover crops to breakup compaction, • testing and analyzing tissue to improve farm nitrogen management, • maintaining residue through continuous no-till, • adopting or improving resource conserving crop rotations to reduce soil erosion and fertility, • rotating feeding and supplement areas to reduced localized disturbance and impacts on water bodies, • designing water facilities to promote wildlife scape and access for birds and bats, • monitoring key grazing areas to improve management, • utilizing prescribed burning, forest stand improvement for habitat and soils quality, pollinator and/or beneficial insect habitat.	improvement, wildlife habitat management.		7. sediment control 8. fish and wildlife enhancement 9. hydropower

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		Enhancement bundles are available to implement enhancements to addresses resource concerns synergistically. Conservation practices are available to meet additional stewardship thresholds and include land management practices, vegetative practices, and forest management.			
Payments	ACEP-ALE: Up to 50 percent of fair market value (FMV) of the ALE easement or up to 75 percent of the FMV of the ALE for Grasslands of Special Environmental Significance. ACEP-WRE: 100 percent of the easement value and restoration costs for permanent easements. 75% of the easement value and restoration costs for 30-year easements and 30-year contracts (30-year contracts are only available for acreage owned by Indian tribes).	Annual payment based on level of conservation stewardship; supplemental payment for participants that adopt a resource conserving crop rotation. National average cost not to exceed \$18/ac.	Financial assistance payments to participants for the estimated costs incurred for implementing conservation practices. Not to exceed 75% for standard applications and up to 90% for historically underserved participants. Advance payments are available to historically underserved producers for up to 50% of the program payment.	For permanent easements and easements for the maximum duration available under State law, easement compensation provides up to 100 percent of the fair market value of the enrolled land less the fair market value of the land encumbered by the easement. Restoration payments provide up to 100 percent of the restoration costs. For 30-year easements and 30-year contracts, easement (contract) payments provide up to 75 percent of the value that would be paid for a permanent easement. Restoration payments	Payments provide 50-100 percent of the cost associated with works of improvement for a watershed project.

Program	Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)	Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)	Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)	Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)	Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program (PL-566)
				provide up to 75 percent of the restoration costs. For 10-year restoration cost-share agreements – restoration payments provide up to 50 percent of the restoration costs.	
Payment Limits	Not Applicable.	A person or legal entity may not receive, directly or indirectly, payments that, in the aggregate, exceed \$200,000 for all contracts entered into between FY 2014 and FY 2018. The regulation include an annual payment limit of \$40,000 during any fiscal year to a person or legal entity. Contract limitations also apply.	A person or legal entity may not receive, directly or indirectly, payments that, in aggregate, exceed \$450,000 for all contracts entered into between FY2014 and FY 2018. Payments made under the Organic Initiative to a person or legal entity, directly or indirectly, may not exceed in aggregate \$20,000 per fiscal year or \$80,000 during any 6-year period. Tribes and Alaskan Native Corporations are exempt from payment limitations and contract limits. Contract limitations also apply.	Not Applicable.	Not Applicable.
Producer/Landowner Responsibilities	Under ACEP-ALE, the landowner must convey to an eligible entity an agricultural land easement and comply with the terms of the	Enter into a CSP contract that requires the implementation of a conservation stewardship plan. The conservation stewardship plan addresses	Enter into an EQIP contract that requires the implementation of a plan of operations. The plan of operations describes the conservation and	The landowner must convey an HFRP easement to the United States and comply with the terms of the easement. The	Sponsors must have a legal interest in or responsibility for project areas, be capable of obtaining land rights and

Program	Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)	Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)	Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)	Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)	Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program (PL-566)
	easement. Among the terms of the easements is the requirement for the land to be subject to an agricultural land easement plan. Under ACEP-WRE, the landowner must convey a wetland reserve easement to the United States and comply with the terms of the easement. The landowner must also agree to the NRCS implementation of a wetland reserve plan of operations.	resource concerns in a comprehensive manner by installing and adopting additional conservation activities and improving, maintaining, and managing existing activities.	environmental objectives to be achieved. The producer contributes to installation costs and performs operation and maintenance during the lifetime of the installed practices.	landowner must also implement a HFRP restoration plan.	required permits, and carry out operation and maintenance activities. Sponsors must also pay a percent of the cost of the project which varies dependent on project purpose.
Participants Are Subject To	Adjusted Gross Income limitations Registration and reporting requirements of the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006 Highly erodible land and wetland conservation compliance	Adjusted Gross Income limitations Registration and reporting requirements of the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006 Highly erodible land and wetland conservation compliance	Adjusted Gross Income limitations Registration and reporting requirements of the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006 Highly erodible land and wetland conservation compliance	Registration and reporting requirements of the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006 RCPP-funded Projects are also subject to-- - Adjusted Gross Income limitations - Highly erodible land and wetland conservation compliance	Registration and reporting requirements of the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006 RCPP-funded Projects are also subject to-- - Adjusted Gross Income limitations - Highly erodible land and wetland conservation compliance

Program	Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)	Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)	Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)	Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)	Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program (PL-566)
Appeals Process	Title XII	Title XII	Title XII	Non-Title XII	Non-Title XII
Program Web site	http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/easements/acep/	http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/farmbill/?cid=stelprdb1242683	http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/farmbill/?cid=stelprdb1242633	http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/easements/forests/	http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/landscape/wfpo/?cid=nrcs143_008271

APPENDIX D—NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (NEPA) ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (EA) OR ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT (EIS)

Authorities under the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (P.L. 83-566) except the Watershed Rehabilitation Program, hereafter referred to as "Watershed Authorities," are available to applicants in the Critical Conservation Areas (CCA) fund pool. Applicants requesting use of Watershed Authorities must follow all statutory and programmatic rules as outlined in 7 CFR Part 622 and the National Watershed Program Manual (Title 390, Parts 500-506), including the development of a watershed plan and NEPA EA or EIS.

The combined watershed plan–EA/EIS document must include:

- Purpose and need for action;
- Watershed agreement between NRCS and sponsoring local organization(s);
- List of alternatives including a no-action alternative, the agency-preferred alternative, other reasonable alternatives, the most cost-effective alternative, a summary and comparison of alternative plans, and any relevant issues and concerns identified through scoping, including direct, indirect, and cumulative actions and impacts;
- EA or EIS to evaluate and assess all reasonable alternatives. The EA or EIS is developed following NEPA procedures. The EA or EIS lays out the assessment of the environmental benefits and consequences for each alternative, how benefits may be enhanced, and how consequences will be mitigated;
- A thorough economic evaluation according to the Principles and Requirements for Federal Investments in Water Resources (March 2013) to address benefits and costs of each alternative in order to document the selected alternative;
- A complete and thorough description of the preferred alternative including the rationale for alternative preference, measures to be installed, mitigation, permits and compliance, costs and cost-sharing, installation and financing, operation, maintenance and replacement, economic tables, structural tables; and
- Performance outcome measures that are quantifiable and can be evaluated at completion of the project that will be used to assess the success of each performance measure.

APPENDIX E—DATA ENTRY TOOL ELEMENTS FOR PRE- AND FULL PROPOSALS

Applicants can access the fiscal year (FY) 2017 Data Entry Tool on the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Web site under “How to Apply.”

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/farmbill/rcpp/>

The tool consists of the following sections (* indicates required data):

1. Overview: Provides a summary of the tool and important steps to complete before submitting the application.
2. Basic Project Information:
 - Project Name*
 - Funding pool*
 - Lead State*
 - Lead Partner *
 - Lead Partner Contact*
 - Address 1* and 2 (street, city, State, zip)
 - Email (primary* and secondary)
 - Phone Number*
 - Lead Partner DUNS
3. Project Details:
 - Start Year*
 - End Year*
 - Request for Adjustment of Terms*
 - Alternative Funding Request*
 - Total Producers in Project Area*
 - Estimated Percentage of Eligible Producers Who May Participate*
 - Primary Resource Concern*
 - Secondary and Tertiary Resource Concerns Available
 - Additional Resource Concern List (box to “add Additional Resource Concerns”)
 - Partner State List (box to “add Partner States”)
4. Executive Summary: Enter the executive summary of the project. There is a 300-word limit.
5. Project Partners:
 - Partner Name*
 - Partner Type*
 - Project Coordination*
 - Producer Technical Assistance*
 - Lead for Outreach and Education*
 - Conduct Monitoring*
 - Funding for Conservation*
 - Funding for Administrative Costs*
 - Other*
 - Partner Contact:
 - A. First and Last Name*
 - B. Email*
 - C. Phone*
 - D. Address* (street, city, State, zip*)
 - Financial Assistance Contributed*

- Technical Assistance Contributed*
 - Administration Cost*
 - Total Contributed (automatically populates)
6. Project Financials – table form that asks for data entry by row and:
- State*
 - Program*
 - Fiscal Year*
 - Financial Assistance Requested*
 - Partner Technical Assistance Requested*
 - NRCS Technical Assistance Requested*
 - Acres* (required for CSP)
 - Total Requested (automatically populates)
 - Financial Assistance Contributed (automatically populates)
 - Technical Assistance Contributed (automatically populates)
 - Total Contributed (automatically populates)

Users add data row by row. As they input data, the totals for each program are summed in the bottom portion of the window

7. Map (the next step is to upload the project map in .jpeg format)
8. Narrative (the final step is to upload the narrative .pdf format)
9. Save the information for official submission to RCPP FY 2017.
10. If selected to submit a full proposal this information may be updated to provide additional information based on further development of the partnership proposal.

The full-proposal Data Entry Tool will include the following and may have initial questions:

- Letters (letters of combined financial contribution in .pdf format)
- Geographical Information System (for additional proposal files needed, in .zip format)

APPENDIX F—ANNUAL REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

Education and Outreach

1. Number of events: farm days, workshops, fairs or shows, and presentations;
2. Outreach materials created: brochures or pamphlets, fliers, handbooks, and Web site development;
3. Number of media outlets reached: radio, social media, blogs, Web sites, and television;
4. The success of those selected media outlets;
5. Number of people reached by demographic: beginning farmers and ranchers, historically underserved farmers and ranchers, veteran farmers and ranchers, and new clients that have not worked with NRCS in the past;
6. Success stories; and
7. Lessons learned: How can education and outreach be improved? What could be done differently to engage participants?

Partnerships

1. Overall success of partner relationship during the planning process;
2. Overall success of partner relations during the implementation process; and
3. Engagement of new partners.

Implementation

1. If Adjustment of Terms were granted, provide explanation of those adjustments;
2. The effects of the Adjustment of Terms;
3. Number of Contracts and Easements, reported in ProTracts and NEST, respectively;
4. Easements: Number of long-term agreements and conservation restoration being completed;
5. Number of conservation practices implemented;
6. List of the conservation practices by resource concern;
7. Acres impacted; and
8. If new practice standards resulted from the project.

Financial and Technical Assistance

1. Was the project successful in expenditure;
2. What was accomplished with the financial and technical assistance, broken down; and
3. How technical assistance was used in relation to:
 - Conservation Planning;
 - Engineering; and
 - Other uses.

Details about the following:

1. How funds are being administered under Alternative Funding Arrangement, if applicable;
2. Oversight mechanisms implemented;
3. Monitoring results;
4. Description of the overall environmental impact of RCPP to the immediate and surrounding project area;
5. Partners' suggestions to NRCS, and if and how the suggestions were utilized; and
6. Lessons learned from the Innovation criteria.