Conservation Innovation Grants
Vermont State Program



Fiscal Year (FY) 2024
Conservation Innovation Grants State Program - Vermont
Notice of Funding Opportunity (NFO)
No. USDA-NRCS-VT-CIG-24-NOFO0001406

Notice of Funding Opportunity (NFO)

SUMMARY INFORMATION

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

Notice of Funding Opportunity Title: Announcement for Program Funding for NRCS' Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) for Federal fiscal year (FY) 2024 – Vermont

Notice of Funding Opportunity Number: USDA-NRCS-VT-CIG-24-NOFO0001406

Assistance Listing: This program is listed in the Assistance Listing numbers (previously referred to as the Catalog of Federal Financial Assistance (CFDA)) on Sam.gov under **10.912, Environmental Quality Incentives Program**, which can be found at*: https://sam.gov/content/home*.

The System for Award Management (SAM) is a web-based, government-wide application that collects, validates, stores, and disseminates business information about the federal government's trading partners in support of the contract awards, grants, and electronic payment processes.

Notice of Funding Opportunity Summary

This Notice of Funding Opportunity (NFO) is being released prior to appropriation and/or apportionment of funds for fiscal year 2025. Enactment of additional continuing resolutions or an appropriations act may affect the availability or level of funding for this program.

NRCS is announcing the availability of Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) State Program funding to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies. Applications are accepted from eligible entities (Section C) for projects carried out in the state of Vermont. A total of up to $1,000,000 is available for the Vermont CIG competition in FY 2025. All non-Foreign, non-federal entities (NFE) and individuals are invited to apply, with the sole exception of federal agencies. Projects may be between one and five years in duration. The maximum award amount for a single award in FY 2025 is $200,000.

For new users of Grants.gov, see Section D. of the full Notice of Funding Opportunity for information about steps required before submitting an application via Grants.gov. **Completing all steps required to start an application can take a significant amount of time, plan accordingly.**

Key Dates

Applicants must submit their applications via Grants.gov by 11:59 pm Eastern Time on *September 30, 2024*. For technical issues with Grants.gov, contact Grants.gov Applicant Support at 1-800-518-4726 or support@grants.gov. Awarding agency staff cannot support applicants regarding Grants.gov accounts.

For inquiries specific to the content of the NFO requirements, contact the federal awarding agency contact (section G of this NFO). Please limit questions to those regarding specific information contained

in this NFO (such as dates, page numbers, clarification of discrepancies, etc.). Questions related to eligibility, or the merits of a specific proposal will not be addressed.

The agency anticipates making selections by December 31, 2024, and expects to execute awards by *April 30, 2025.* These dates are estimates and are subject to change.

Federal Funding Floor and Ceiling Amounts

The estimated funding floor for this opportunity is $10,000, and the estimated funding ceiling is $200,000. The funding floor means the minimum agreement funding amount for the Federal share per agreement awarded. The ceiling is the maximum agreement funding amount for the Federal share per agreement awarded. These numbers refer to the total agreement amount, not any specific budget period.

Federal Financial Assistance Training

The funding available through this NFO is Federal financial assistance. Grants 101 Training is highly recommended for those seeking knowledge about Federal financial assistance. The training is free and available to the public via https://www.cfo.gov/resources/federal-financial-assistance-training/. It consists of five modules covering each of the following topics: 1) laws, regulations, and guidance; 2) financial assistance mechanisms; 3) uniform guidance administrative requirements; 4) cost principles; and 5) risk management and single audit. FPAC agencies also apply Federal financial assistance regulations to certain non-assistance awards (e.g., non-assistance cooperative agreements).

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A. PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

1) Legislative Authority

The Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) program is authorized as part of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) (16 U.S.C. 3839aa-8). The Secretary of Agriculture delegated the authority for the administration of EQIP, including CIG, to the Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). EQIP is funded and administered by NRCS under the authorities of Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC). Projects will be funded from the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (2018 Farm Bill).

2) Overview

The purpose of CIG is to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies in conjunction with agricultural production in the United States and its territories. CIG projects are expected to lead to the transfer of conservation technologies, management systems, and innovative approaches (such as market-based systems) to agricultural producers, into government technical manuals and guides, or to the private sector. CIG generally funds pilot projects, field demonstrations, and on-farm conservation research. On-farm conservation research is defined as an investigation conducted to answer a specific applied conservation question using a statistically valid design while employing farm-scale equipment on farms, ranches or private forest lands.

The CIG program is not a NRCS producer financial assistance program. Project outcomes should benefit a region of a state or the entire state and not just benefit one farm.

This is a program covered by the Justice40 Initiative, which set the goal that 40 percent of the overall benefits of certain Federal climate, clean energy, water and wastewater infrastructure, and other covered investments flow to disadvantaged communities that are marginalized by underinvestment and overburdened by pollution.

3) Innovative Conservation Projects or Activities

CIG funds the development and field testing, on-farm research and demonstration, evaluation, or implementation of:

- Innovative approaches to incentivizing conservation adoption, including market-based and conservation finance approaches; and
- Innovative conservation technologies, practices, and systems.

Projects or activities under CIG must comply with all applicable federal, tribal, state, and local laws and regulations throughout the duration of the project; and

- Use a technology or approach that was studied sufficiently to indicate a high probability for success.
- Demonstrate, evaluate, and verify the effectiveness, utility, affordability, and usability of natural resource conservation technologies and approaches in the field;
- Adapt and transfer conservation technologies, management, practices, systems, approaches, and incentive systems to improve performance and encourage adoption;

- Introduce proven conservation technologies and approaches to a geographic area or agricultural sector where that technology or approach is not currently in use.

Technologies and approaches that are eligible for funding in a project's geographic area using an EQIP contract for an established conservation practice standard are ineligible for CIG funding, except where the use of those technologies and approaches demonstrates clear innovation.

4) State Component

The goals and objectives of this program are:

- *Use climate-smart management and sound science to enhance the health and productivity of agricultural lands.*
- *Lead efforts to adapt to the consequences of climate change in agriculture and forestry.*
- *Restore, protect, and conserve watersheds to ensure clean, abundant, and continuous provision of water resources.*
- *Increase carbon sequestration, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and economic opportunities (and develop low-carbon energy solutions).*
- *Protect agricultural health by minimizing major diseases, pests, and wildlife conflicts.*
- *Foster agricultural innovation.*
- *Increase capacity, sustainability, and economic vitality in rural and tribal communities.*

For FY 2025, NRCS accepts proposals that address one or more of the State priorities listed below.

Proposed projects must be performed in Vermont.

CIG Priorities for FY 2025:

a) Urban Agriculture and Climate Smart Agriculture
The objective of this priority is to identify and implement new technologies, methods or market-based approaches for urban agriculture and climate smart agriculture while sustaining environmentally sound conservation practices.

Possible subtopics include:

- Innovative conservation approaches and technologies to build and encourage climate adaptation and resilience of Vermont communities and natural systems.
- Develop and implement a new approach for healthy soils and carbon sequestration.
- Leverage, expand, and adapt innovation approaches to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Vermont.
- Quantify the impact of increased agronomic and grazing practice adoption to increase soil carbon sequestration.
- Develop, demonstrate, inform, and promote urban agriculture and small farm technologies to achieve identified conservation outcomes.

b) Water Quality Priority
The Object of this priority is to implement new technologies, methods, or market- based

approaches to maintain, restore, or enhance water quality resources associated with agricultural and/or forest land uses while sustaining productivity.

Possible subtopics include:

- Innovative approaches to management, application and/or treatment of manure on farms.
- Demonstrate and evaluate innovative organic pest and nutrient management technologies for single and/or integrated vegetable, row crop, orchard, and/or livestock systems.
- Demonstrations of organic and non-organic farms or ranches using edge-of-field monitoring. Voluntary edge-of-field water quality monitoring enables agricultural producers and scientists to quantify conservation work on water quality. Through edge of-field monitoring, NRCS works with producers and conservation partners to measure nutrients and sediment levels in water runoff from a field and compare the improvements gained under different conservation systems.
- Demonstrate and quantify the effectiveness of methods to capture dissolved phosphorus from field runoff and subsurface drainage.
- Assess and demonstrate the correlation between soil health parameters and water quality on cropland, particularly as it relates to phosphorus attenuation.

e) Soil Health (biochar)

The objective of this priority is to implement new technologies, methods, or market-based approaches to maintain, restore, or enhance soil resources associated with agricultural and/or forest land uses while sustaining productivity.

Possible subtopics include:

- Economic/Financial case studies on successful Soil Health Management Systems (SHMS) across varied production systems that include quantifying on-site net profit and offsite impacts (e.g., soil erosion, nutrient losses, water, and air quality).
- Develop, demonstrate, inform, and promote design and implementation of SHMSs that are location- and production system-appropriate, economically viable, and improve soil health/soil functioning (e.g., optimize nutrient availability, optimize productivity, control soil-borne diseases, increase plant available water, increase resilience to extreme weather), including:

    - Implementation strategies for feasible transition from degraded soils in varied production systems.
    - Transitions to more diverse cropping rotations and grazing systems.
    - Optimal species mixes, seeding rates and seeding methods (e.g., inter-seeding, inter-cropping, frost-seeding) to enhance cover crop establishment/survival, as well as management and termination. Innovative approaches to incorporating cover crops in high intensity/high value cropping systems that address concerns such as delayed planting, pest issues, residue challenges and nitrogen availability challenges.
- Demonstrate and quantify the impacts of Soil Health Management Systems on pest prevention, avoidance, and suppression.
- Demonstrate innovative ways to control pests that facilitate the implementation of Soil

Health Management Systems.
- Quantify the impact and value of soil health by different types of agricultural operations across a range of soils, including use of standard methods for physical, biological, and chemical soil properties/soil health indicators.

B. FEDERAL AWARD INFORMATION

1. Available Funding

a. Estimated Funding

NRCS Vermont expects to award approximately up to $1,000,000 through this opportunity. However, the agency retains the discretion to award a larger or lesser amount.

This NFO is being released prior to appropriation and/or apportionment of funds for fiscal year 2025. Enactment of additional continuing resolutions or an appropriations act may affect the availability or level of funding for this program.

b. Start Dates and Performance Periods

Projects may be between one and five years in duration. Applicants should plan their projects based on an estimated project start date of May 1, 2025.

c. Number of Awards

The agency expects to make up to 5 award(s).

2. Type of Award

a. Type of Federal Award

The agency plans to award grant agreement(s) pursuant to this opportunity.

b. Procurement Contracts

The agency does not expect to award procurement contracts associated with this NFO.

c. Eligibility of Renewal or Supplemental Project Applications

Applications for renewal or supplementation of existing projects are not eligible to compete with applications for new Federal awards. An application for renewal means an application submitted to continue an existing agreement that meets the objectives and requirements of this NFO. An application for supplementation of an existing project means an application to add components to an existing agreement so that it would meet the objectives and requirements in this NFO.

C. ELIGIBILITY INFORMATION

1. Eligible Applicants

Applicants and applications must meet eligibility criteria by the application deadline to be considered for award. Eligible applicant type is determined by the implementing program statute. Applicant entities identified in the SAM.gov exclusions database as ineligible,

prohibited/restricted, or excluded from receiving Federal contracts and certain Federal assistance and benefits will not be considered for Federal funding, as applicable to the funding being requested under this Federal program (2 CFR 200.206(d)).

All U.S. non-Foreign, non-Federal entities and individuals are eligible to apply for projects carried out in Vermont. US Federal agencies are not eligible to apply to this opportunity or impart their work to non-federal portion of the budget.

Individuals that are business owner/operators cannot apply as individuals.

2. Other

Any award made pursuant to this NFO will be made to a single entity. Applicants that apply as "partnerships" or other similar groupings must clearly describe the relationship between the applicant and the "partner" parties. In all but exceptional cases, it must be reflected in the award as an awardee/sub awardee relationship.

An applicant organization may submit more than one application for different projects or proposing different approaches. In the case of applications submitted as revisions or corrections to a previously submitted application under this NFO, the agency will consider the last application submitted prior to the established deadline.

Awards made pursuant to this NFO are not Farm Bill incentive contracts; therefore, the awards in and of themselves are not limited by the payment limitation in 16 USC Chapter 58. However, any agricultural producers receiving a payment through participation in a project awarded under this NFO must meet the eligibility requirements of 7 CFR Part 12 and 7 CFR Part 1400 and have control of the land involved for the term of the proposed award period.

a. CIG Specific Eligibility

All CIG projects must involve EQIP-eligible producers that meet EQIP's eligibility requirements listed in 7 CFR § 1466.6(b)(1) through (3):

- Be in compliance with the highly erodible land and wetland conservation provisions (7 CFR Part 12).
- Be a person, legal entity, joint operation, Indian tribe, or native corporation who is engaged in agricultural production or forestry management or has an interest in the agricultural or forestry operation as defined in 7 CFR Part 1400.
- Have control of the land involved for the term of the proposed contract period.

b. EQIP Payment Limitation and Duplicate Payments

The following provisions apply to CIG funding:

- CIG funds are awarded through grant agreements. These grant agreements are not EQIP contracts; thus, CIG awards in and of themselves are not limited by the payment limitation found at section 1240G of the Food Security Act of 1985, 16 U.S.C. 3839aa-7, which imposes a $450,000 payment limitation for all payments made to persons or legal entities under an EQIP contract entered into between FY 2019 and FY 2024.

- All agricultural producers receiving a payment through participation in a CIG project must meet the eligibility requirements of 7 CFR § 1466.6(b)(1) through (3) noted above. In addition, all CIG payments are subject to the Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) limitation. All agricultural producers receiving a payment through participation in a CIG project must have an AGI that does not exceed $900,000. If awarded a grant, grantees must self-certify and maintain records showing that participating producers receiving payments using CIG funding meet the EQIP eligibility and AGI requirements. Section 1704 (a)(3) of the 2018 Farm Bill states the Secretary may waive the AGI limit on a case by case basis, if the Secretary determines that environmentally sensitive land of special significance would be protected as a result of such waiver. CIG grantees may request waivers once their project commences.
- Section 1240B of the Food Security Act of 1985, 16 U.S.C. 3839aa-2, prohibits duplicative payments. Accordingly, direct or indirect payments cannot be made for a practice for which an individual or legal entity has already received funds, or is contracted to receive funds through any USDA conservation program (e.g., Conservation Reserve Program, EQIP, Agricultural Management Assistance, Conservation Stewardship Program). If awarded a grant, grantees must self-certify that payments to producers using CIG funding are not duplicative.

c. Historically Underserved (HU) Producers

Historically Underserved producer is defined for this opportunity at https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/underserved-farmers-ranchers.

For the FY 2024 State CIG Classic component, at least 10 percent of the total funds available may be set aside for proposals that benefit HU producers. To be eligible for the set aside, applicants must be:

i. A historically underserved producer;
ii. A community-based organization comprised of, representing, or exclusively working with historically underserved producers on a CIG project;
iii. An entity developing an innovative conservation approach or technology specifically targeting historically underserved producers' unique needs and limitations; or
iv. An 1890 or 1994 land grant institution (7 U.S.C. 3222 *et seq.*), Hispanic-serving institution (20 U.S.C. 1101a), or other minority-serving institution, such as an historically Black college or university (20 U.S.C. 1061), a tribally controlled college or university (25 U.S.C. 1801), or Asian American and Pacific Islander-serving institution (20 U.S.C. 1059g).

To compete for set-aside funds, the applicant must signal their intent by following the instructions in Section D. 4 (g). These applicants must meet all other requirements of this announcement, including addressing at least one CIG priority listed in this notice. Funds not awarded through this set aside will revert to the pool of non-set aside funds.

d. NRCS Involvement in CIG Projects

The Conservation Innovation Grants program is a competitive program run by the NRCS, therefore NRCS staff should not be involved in the development of proposals in any way and NRCS should not appear in the application. Therefore, any letters of support from NRCS and any involvement of NRCS in a proposal will be viewed as a conflict of interest and these proposals will be removed from the competition. NRCS staff should not be actively included in the development of any proposal such as asking their direct opinion, advice or feedback directly of the proposal or acquiring a support letter. NRCS staff are allowed to give applicants information on other NRCS programs or basic administrative information regarding the CIG program.

All technical assistance required to carry out a CIG project is the responsibility of the grantee.

NRCS designates an NRCS employee as a technical contact for each grant award. Technical contacts provide oversight activities during the project such as site visits, reviewing performance reports, financial reports, and audits to ensure that standards, objectives, terms, and conditions for the projects are accomplished. Technical Contacts also evaluate project results and work with grantees on any relevant end-of-project efforts to disseminate project results. NRCS employees, however, are not involved in project development or should be substantially involved in carrying out grant activities.

3. Match

This NFO requires applicants to match at least 50 percent of total project costs (includes Federal and non-Federal). For example, if an applicant requests $50,000 in CIG funding, at least $50,000 in non-federal cost-share or matching funds must be committed by the applicant.

Applicants applying and qualifying for the HU set aside (including Indian Tribes and Native American tribal organizations other than federally recognized Tribes), may be eligible for a reduced project match of one-third of the total project budget, or 50 percent of the Federal request. For example, an HU-qualifying entity requesting $250,000 in Federal CIG funding would need to provide at least $125,000 in matching funds. In this example, the total project costs would equal $375,000, the federal portion would equal $250,000 and the matching funds would equal $125,000. Further waivers may be available, depending on state requests.

Applications that do not include the required level of matching will be ineligible for award. Matching funds may be committed by the applicant, project partners, or both. Match may be achieved with contributions of cash, services, materials, equipment, or third-party in-kind contributions. Recipients with unrecovered indirect costs may also use those to meet matching obligations. Funds from another Federal award cannot be used as match except where the Federal statute authorizing a program specifically provides that Federal funds made available for such program can be applied to match. Additional details about matching funds can be found at 2 CFR 200.306. Refer to Section D of this NFO for information about any required submittals related to match requirements. While the pace of match may vary throughout the award period, the agency will actively monitor match levels as it receives payment requests to ensure the total match requirement is met by the award periods of performance end date. Additional details about matching funds are located at 2 CFR 200.306.

D. APPLICATION AND SUBMISSION INFORMATION

1. How to submit an application

Applications must be submitted electronically through Grants.gov (see Section D.2.). Submissions must be received by 11:59 PM EST on September 30, 2024. Late submissions will not be reviewed or considered. The agency will rely on system generated date and time receipt documentation for submission made.

2. Information for New Users of Grants.gov

a. Overview

While a Grants.gov account is not required to download an NFO and related documents, it is required to submit an application. If your organization has never submitted an application via Grants.gov, please be aware that there are several steps you must take to register your organization before you can submit an application. **Completing those steps can take a significant amount of time, plan accordingly.**

b. Register to Apply through Grants.gov

Applicants should read the registration instructions carefully and prepare the information requested before beginning the registration process. Reviewing and assembling the required information before beginning the registration process will alleviate last-minute searches for required information.
For assistance with the registration process, contact Grants.gov Applicant Support, available 24/7, at 1-800-518-4726 or support@grants.gov.

Organizations must complete all steps to register (**steps i. through v. below**). Complete organization instructions are included on Grants.gov here:
https://www.grants.gov/applicants/applicant-registration/

Although creating a Grants.gov account online can be completed online in minutes, SAM registrations may take several weeks. Therefore, organizations should begin the process early to ensure they have sufficient time to complete registration and meet required application submission deadlines.

Individuals (those submitting on their own behalf) are not subject to the Unique Entity Identifier (UEI) or SAM requirement and may begin with step iii., Create a Grants.gov Account, listed below.

c. Steps to Register

i. *Obtain a UEI:* All entities applying for funding must have a UEI issued by SAM.gov. Applicants must enter the UEI in the data entry field labeled "UEI" on the SF-424 form.

ii. *Register with SAM:* All organizations (entities) must register with System for Award Management (SAM) to apply online through Grants.gov. Failure to register with SAM will prevent your organization from applying through Grants.gov. SAM

registration must be renewed annually. Part of the SAM registration process includes designating an Electronic Business Point of Contact (EBiz POC). **The EBiz POC plays an integral part in the organization's Grants.gov registration and application process.** The individual in that role must authorize all other roles in Grants.gov. For more detailed instructions for registering with SAM, refer to https://www.grants.gov/applicants/applicant-registration/

iii. *Create a Grants.gov Account:* From the Grants.gov webpage (https://www.grants.gov/), click "Register" in the top right-hand corner and follow the on-screen instructions.

iv. *Add a Profile to a Grants.gov Account:* A profile in Grants.gov corresponds to a single applicant organization the user represents (i.e., an applicant) or an individual applicant submitting on their own behalf. If you work for or consult with multiple organizations, you can have a profile for each organization under one Grants.gov account. In such cases you can log in to one Grants.gov account to access all your grant profiles. To add an organizational profile to your Grants.gov account, enter the UEI for the organization in the UEI field. If you are an individual applicant submitting on your own behalf, you do not need a UEI to add the profile. For more detailed instructions about creating a profile on Grants.gov, refer to https://www.grants.gov/applicants/applicant-registration/add-profile

v. *EBiz POC Authorized Profile Roles:* After you register with Grants.gov and create an Organization Applicant Profile, you must establish roles for individuals in the organization. The Authorized Organizational Representative (AOR) role is critical; it gives an individual permission to complete and submit applications on behalf of the organization. Without this role, the organization cannot submit any applications. The request for role assignment will be routed to the organization's EBiz POC for approval. Once approved, the AOR can submit an application online. For more detailed instructions about creating a EBiz POC authorized profile on Grants.gov, refer to https://www.grants.gov/applicants/applicant-registration/ebiz-poc-authorizes-profile-roles

Track Role Status: To track your role request, refer to https://www.grants.gov/applicants/applicant-registration/track-profile-role-status

d. Electronic Signature

When applications are submitted through Grants.gov, the name of the organization applicant with the AOR role that submitted the application is inserted into the signature line of the application, serving as the electronic signature. The EBiz POC **must** authorize people who are able to make legally binding commitments on behalf of the organization as a user with the AOR role. **This step (step c.v. above) is often missed, and it is crucial for valid and timely submissions.**

e. Workspace

Workspace is a shared, online environment where members of a grant team may simultaneously access and edit different webforms within an application. For each NFO,

you can create individual instances of a workspace. An applicant can start an application in Workspace and return to work on it later within Workspace.

Applicants using unreliable internet connections should be aware that the process of completing the Workspace can take some time. Therefore, applicants should allow enough time to prepare and submit the application before the package closing date.

f. Apply for an Opportunity

Below is an overview of applying on Grants.gov. For complete instructions on how to apply for opportunities, refer to https://www.grants.gov/applicants/workspace-overview/

If the Apply button in the opportunity is not active (greyed out), the user does not have the appropriate permissions or has an incomplete applicant registration. For additional information, refer to https://grantsgovprod.wordpress.com/2023/06/08/unlock-the-mystery-of-the-gray-apply-button-four-scenarios/#:~:text=The%20Apply%20button%20will%20be,to%20view%20the%20close%20date.

i. Create a Workspace: Creating a workspace allows you to complete an application online and route it through your organization for review before submitting.

ii. Complete a Workspace: Add participants to the workspace to work on the application together, complete all the required forms online or by downloading PDF versions, and check for errors before submission. The Workspace progress bar will display the status of your application process as you apply. As you apply using Workspace, you may click the blue question mark icon near the upper-right corner of each page to access context-sensitive help.

- Adobe Reader: If you decide not to apply by filling out webforms you can download individual PDF forms in Workspace. The individual PDF forms can be downloaded and saved to your local device storage, network drive(s), or external drives, then accessed through Adobe Reader.

  NOTE: Visit the Adobe Software Compatibility page on Grants.gov to download the appropriate version of the software at https://www.grants.gov/applicants/adobe-software-compatibility

- Mandatory Fields in Forms: In the forms, you will note fields marked with an asterisk and a different background color. These fields are mandatory fields that must be completed to successfully submit your application.

- Complete SF-424 Fields First: The forms are designed to fill in common required fields across other forms, such as the applicant name, address, and UEI. Once it is completed, the information will transfer (i.e., prepopulate) to the other forms.

iii. Submit a Workspace: An application may be submitted through workspace by clicking the Sign and Submit button on the Manage Workspace page, under the Forms tab. Grants.gov recommends submitting your application package at least

24-48 hours prior to the close date to provide you with time to correct any potential technical issues that may disrupt the application submission.

iv. Track a Workspace Submission: After successfully submitting a workspace application, a Grants.gov Tracking Number (GRANTXXXXXXXX) is automatically assigned to the application. The number will be listed on the Confirmation page that is generated after submission. Using the tracking number, access the Track My Application page under the Applicants tab or the Details tab in the submitted workspace.

For additional training resources, including video tutorials, refer to https://www.grants.gov/applicants/applicant-training

3. Electronic Application Package

Applicants interested in submitting an application in response to this NFO must submit it via Grants.gov; the agency will not accept applications submitted via email or any other method. No exceptions will be made for applicants experiencing issues with Grants.gov unless a known system wide Grants.gov issue is identified, in which case the deadline will be extended for all applicants, as appropriate. Applicants are urged to submit early to the Grants.gov system.

For technical issues with Grants.gov, contact Grants.gov Applicant Support, available 24/7, at 1-800-518-4726 or support@grants.gov. Awarding agency staff cannot support applicants regarding Grants.gov accounts.

Address to Request Application Package
All information necessary to apply for this opportunity is included in the Grants.gov opportunity announcement.

4. Content and Form of Application Submission

The agency may choose not to consider applications that fail to comply with the required content, format, and page limits, or those that are incomplete. Do not submit video files or files larger than 10MB. File names of attachments must be limited to 50 characters, may not include special characters (e.g., &,–,*,%,/,#), periods (.), blank spaces or accent marks, and must be unique (i.e., no other attachment may have the same file name). An underscore (example: my_Attached_File.pdf) may be used to separate a file name. Attachments must **NOT** be password protected.

To be considered for funding under this opportunity, an application must contain the documents below.

a. Application Form

(Standard Form 424 Application for Federal Assistance) See Instructions for Completing SF-424 located in the attachments section.

b. Project Narrative

Each page must be numbered and have one-inch margins. The text of the project narrative must be single spaced and typed in a standard typeface (e.g., Times New

Roman, Arial, Courier) with no smaller than 12-point font. The project narrative must not exceed 17 pages, including a mandatory 1-page Cover Page, described below. This page limitation applies to the project narrative only.

The project narrative must cover all activities proposed to be carried out with both the Federal and non-Federal matching funds. Activities related but beyond the scope of the CIG project budget should be described in the background section only.

The project narrative must include the following information, in this order:

i. Cover Page (1 page maximum)

Applications that fail to provide a cover page will be rejected in the first stage of screening.

On a single page, provide the following information in order outlined (See Attachment B for a template):

- The applicant entity name.
- The project title.
- The project duration in years.
- The amount of Federal funding requested.
- The amount of non-Federal cost-share committed (match).
- The name, phone number, and email address for the applicant's technical contact (usually the project director), this person is considered the primary contact for the project by NRCS.
- The name, phone number, and email address for the applicant's administrative contact (usually an individual in a grants office or project manager working under a project director).
- The geographic location of the project.
- The state priority that is addressed by the project. List only one priority from Section A. 4. If the proposal addresses more than one priority, **you must select a primary priority** for your application to be considered under.
- An estimated number of participating producers expected to be involved with the project.
- Include a declaration if the project is competing for the historically underserved set aside (see Section D. 4 (g) for further instructions and qualifications).
- A brief description (1–3 sentences) of the innovation that is the focus of the project—please be concise.
- If relevant, list any NRCS practice standards that this project could potentially inform (if multiple exist, select the top five).

ii. Project Abstract (1 page maximum): Provide a concise project summary (in nontechnical language) that captures the issue or problem the project will address, the project goal, the innovative approach to be employed (including the role of participating partners), the anticipated project results and key deliverables, and the predicted impact to conservation more broadly.

iii. Project goal/objectives: State the main goal of the project and then outline the supporting objectives to reach this goal. Objectives should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound (SMART). Provide supporting information that describes the innovative nature of the project and how this innovation could advance the field of conservation. If the project is addressing innovation of an NRCS conservation practice standard, or proposing a new standard, state this explicitly and identify the standard.

iv. Project background: Describe the issue or problem driving the need for the proposed innovation. Provide evidence that the proposed innovation has been studied sufficiently to indicate a high probability for success. Be sure to give enough details to demonstrate to the reviewers why this innovation is compelling.

v. Project design and methods: . Describe clearly the design and methodology of the project. Describe details of the processes that will be used, scientific tests that will be conducted, tools that will be developed, any sampling that will be performed, and background on why these choices were made, especially if different from convention. We encourage new grant writers to consider using a logic model approach to improve clarity of this section. For more on the logic model, see the University of Wisconsin's publication "Developing a logic model: Teaching and training guide" (Ellen Taylor-Powell and Ellen Henert, February 2008).

vi. Project evaluation: Describe the methodology used to evaluate the project and describe how results will be quantified. It should be clear to the reviewers how project objectives relate to the evaluation.

vii. Project deliverables/products: Provide a list of specific deliverables and products that directly relate to the project objectives, outcomes, and benefits that will allow NRCS to monitor project progress and approve payments. The proposal must include a set of technical deliverables that reflect the performance and broader applicability of the project.

In addition to project-specific deliverables, CIG grantees are responsible for:

a) Participating in at least one event (e.g., conference or workshop) during the grant period where the grantee presents on the activities of the project.
b) A final factsheet.
c) Closing event—this could be a webinar, field day, training event, etc., used to disseminate project results.

viii. Project outcomes and benefits: Identify the expected results and outcomes of the project and the anticipated impact on conservation and society and any other benefits derived from the project. Forecast the lasting impact of project results. Identify project beneficiaries, (i.e., agricultural producers) by type, region, or sector; historically underserved producers and communities; rural communities; and/or municipalities.

ix. Geographic location and size of project or project area: Identify the geographic location and the estimated size and scope (e.g., acres, farm types, demographics) of the project area. Maps are recommended.

x. EQIP-eligible producer participation: Estimate the number of EQIP eligible producers involved in the project and describe the extent of their involvement. Describe whether these producers have been identified, and if not yet identified clearly articulate the process that will be carried out to identify and attract producer participation. If competing in the set aside for historically underserved projects, include an estimate on the number of historically underserved producers scheduled to participate in the project.

xi. Project action plan and timeline: Provide a bulleted list of project actions and deliverables relative to timeframes and associated project milestones through to project completion. Applicants should develop their timelines based on a project start date of May 1, 2025.

xii. Project management: Give a description of how the project will be organized and managed, including a list/description of project partners. Include a description of how communication will be structured within the project team to ensure effective project management.

xiii. Technology transfer: Describe how the results will be transferred to producers and stakeholders through communications and outreach activities.

xiv. Graphics, including pictures, charts, graphs, and similar items count towards the 17-page maximum.

The following documents do not count toward the above stated page limit but are required unless otherwise noted.

c. References, Bibliographies, and Citations, if applicable.
Upload the references, bibliographies, and citations under Other Attachments (listed as an Optional Form) in the Grants.gov Opportunity Application Package.

d. Team Qualifications

Provide brief descriptions of key technical and administrative personnel qualifications, their experience managing Federal awards, and their anticipated contributions to the project. *Do not include resumes or curriculum vitae* (CVs). Each individual's description should be no more than a ½ of page. Upload the team qualifications under Other Attachments (listed as an Optional Form) in the Grants.gov Opportunity Application Package.

e. Assessment of Environmental Impacts.

If implementation of the proposal is anticipated to have physical, chemical, or biological impacts on the environment, please describe the impacts and their extent. Upload the Assessment of Environmental Impacts under Other Attachments (listed as

an Optional Form) in the Grants.gov Opportunity Application Package. The description of the potential environmental impacts must address both beneficial and adverse impacts of the proposed action. The length of the description should be commensurate with the complexity of the project proposed and the natural environmental resources impacted directly, indirectly, or cumulatively. Where possible, information on environmental impacts should be quantified, such as number of acres of wetlands impacted, amount of carbon sequestration estimated, etc. Natural environmental resources include soil, water, air, plants, and animals, as well as other resources protected by law, regulation, executive order, and agency policy. NRCS may choose not to approve funding for projects that may result in unacceptable adverse environmental impacts.

See Section F. 2 Administrative and National Policy Requirements for specific details as it relates to environmental impacts.

f. Declaration of previous CIG projects involvement and past performance.

If the applicant has previously received a CIG award (either at the National or State levels), list the following for each award and give a short summary of the completed project's results and impact. If the project is ongoing, provide the anticipated results. Each description should be no more than a half page:

- Project title
- CIG agreement number
- Award funding amount
- Year of award expiration

Upload the declaration under Other Attachments (listed as an Optional Form) in the Grants.gov Opportunity Application Package.

g. Historically Underserved Producers (2 page maximum), if applying for the HU set aside.

An applicant seeking to apply to the HU set aside must identify as such on the cover page of their application as well as identify which HU category (Section C. 2 (c) i - iv) applies to their proposal. These proposals will be assessed by an additional set of criteria (Section E. 3) and therefore require additional information to assess their proposals. These criteria should be addressed in this section of the project application. Please see sections on eligibility (Section C. 2 c) and match (Section C. 3) as well if you are applying to the HU set aside.

Upload the historically underserved producers set aside under Other Attachments (listed as an Optional Form) in the Grants.gov Opportunity Application Package.

h. Standard Form (SF)-424A, Budget Information - Non-Construction Programs

Fill in all spaces as appropriate. Section B, Item 6, Column 1 should reflect the agency funds, and Column 2 should reflect the applicant's matching funds. This form

is the summary budget for the project and should include the full project totals on pages one and two. See Instructions for Completing SF-424A located in the attachments section. Refer to Section D of this opportunity for information regarding indirect costs. Errors in the SF-424A regarding classifying costs may be negotiated after selection.

i. Budget Narrative and Table

In a separate document titled "Budget Narrative," explain and justify all requested budget items and costs. The budget narrative must be in text format as well as contain a detailed table (further guidance and an example can be found in Attachment C and Attachment G). It should be readable and on letter-size (8.5 x 11 inch), printable pages. The information needs to be presented in such a way that the reviewers can readily understand what expenses are incurred to support the project each year. Detail how the totals on the SF-424A were determined and demonstrate a clear connection between costs and the proposed project activities. For personnel salary costs, include the base-line salary figures and the estimates of time (as percentages) to be directly charged to the project. Describe any item that under the applicable Federal cost principles requires the agency's approval and estimate its cost. The pages included as the budget narrative to not count toward the page limit. Errors in the budget narrative regarding classifying costs may be negotiated after selection. Refer to the Budget Narrative Guidance located at the end of this document regarding procurement standards when including contracts for goods or services. **Sole-source contracting is prohibited without proper justification.** See Procurement Standards located at 2 CFR 200.317-327.

i. Build America, Buy America. "Buy America" preference applies to Federal financial assistance programs for infrastructure. A Buy America preference applies to an entire infrastructure project, even if it is funded by both Federal and non-Federal funds under one or more awards. Subawards should conform to the terms and conditions of the Federal award from which they flow. A Buy America preference only applies to the iron and steel, manufactured products, and construction materials incorporated into an infrastructure project receiving a Federal award. Refer to the Federal Awarding Agency's General Terms and Conditions for additional information: https://www.fpacbc.usda.gov/about/grants-and-agreements/award-terms-and-conditions/index.html.

ii. Indirect Costs Recovery. If requesting indirect costs, provide the calculation specifying the amounts used in applying the base (the base specified in the applicable rate agreement) by the applicable rate. The calculation can be displayed in different formats but must capture the components (i.e., amounts used in determining the base and the rate applied to the base).

A. To be eligible to recover any indirect costs under a Federal award, recipients must either 1) have a current negotiated indirect cost rate agreement (NICRA) with a Federal agency that has not expired; or 2) qualify for use of the de minimis rate authorized by 2 CFR 200.414(f) and described below. For-profit entities (if eligible to apply) must obtain a NICRA from their

cognizant agency. USDA will not accept an indirect cost agreement that is not a NICRA, for example, those negotiated or approved by the Defense Contract Audit Agency or the Defense Contract Management Agency.

A copy of the applicant's current NICRA must be provided with the application (see section D(3)(n)). Indirect costs may not be recovered under an expired NICRA. For applicants negotiating a NICRA, provide a copy of the indirect cost rate proposal submitted to the cognizant agency. See section D(3)(n) below for how to submit a NICRA as part of the application.

B. Any non-Federal entity (except State and local governments that receive more than $35 million per year in Federal funding) that does not have a current negotiated (including provisional) rate may elect to charge a de minimis rate of 10 percent of modified total direct costs (MTDC) which may be used indefinitely. No documentation is required to justify the 10 percent de minimis indirect cost rate, simply indicate in your budget narrative that the recipient elects to use the de minimis rate. Modified Total Direct Cost (MTDC) means all direct salaries and wages, applicable fringe benefits, materials and supplies, services, travel, and up to the first $25,000 of each subaward (regardless of the period of performance of the subawards under the award). MTDC excludes equipment, capital expenditures, charges for patient care, rental costs, tuition remission, scholarships and fellowships, participant support costs and the portion of each subaward in excess of $25,000. Other items may only be excluded when necessary to avoid a serious inequity in the distribution of indirect costs, and with the approval of the cognizant agency for indirect costs.

C. As described in 2 CFR 200.403, costs must be consistently charged as either indirect or direct costs but may not be double charged or inconsistently charged as both. If chosen, this methodology once elected must be used consistently for all Federal awards until such time as a non-Federal entity chooses to negotiate for a rate, which the non-Federal entity may apply to do at any time.

D. A recipient may voluntarily reduce or waive recovery of indirect costs at its sole discretion and must not be encouraged or coerced in any way to do so by the agency.

iii. Indirect Costs Limitations.

A. Applicants not subject to a statutory limitation, which have a current NICRA must calculate indirect costs using the rate and base specified in their NICRA.

B. Recipients are prohibited from shifting unallowable indirect costs to another Federal award unless specifically authorized to do so by legislation.

C. Applicants who are individuals applying for funds separate from a business or non-profit organization they may operate are not eligible to charge indirect costs to their award. If you are an individual applying for funding, do not include any indirect costs in your proposed budget.

iv. Match.

Matching must be committed at the time of application submission. The budget narrative must show the amounts and sources of match (including both cash and in-kind contributions). All matching funds must be identified in the SF-424A of the application.

For third-party contributions, a letter of commitment is required for each contribution, signed by the authorized organizational representative of the contributing organization and the applicant organization, which must include: (1) the name, address, and telephone number of the contributor, (2) the name of the applicant organization, (3) the title of the project for which the contribution is made, (4) the dollar amount of the contribution, (5) a description of the work that will be done that clearly lines up to the budget narrative, and (6) a statement that the contributor will pay the contribution no later than the end of the award period. The agency may conduct reference checks to ensure that organizations identified are supportive and involved with the project. Letters should be addressed to the Federal Awarding Agency Contact in Section G of this NFO and uploaded under Other Attachments (listed separately under Optional Forms) in Grants.gov. An example commitment letter can be found in Attachment D.

Applications without signed written commitments covering the full value of the matching contribution are deemed incomplete.

Refer to the Budget Narrative Guidance located in the attachments section for information about making contract vs. subaward determinations.

j. Grants.gov Lobbying Form

Under Title 31 of the United States Code, Section 1352, an applicant or recipient must not use any federally appropriated funds (both annually appropriated and continuing appropriations) or matching funds under a grant or cooperative agreement award to pay any person for lobbying in connection with the award. Lobbying is defined as influencing or attempting to influence an officer or employee of any agency, a Member of Congress, an officer or employee of Congress, or an employee of a Member of Congress connection with the award. Submission of an application also represents the applicant's certification of the statements in 2 CFR Part 418, Appendix A-Certification Regarding Lobbying.

k. Applicant Contact Information

Provide contact information for the roles identified in the Applicant Contact Information template, located in the Related Documents tab of the opportunity. Upload the contact information under Other Attachments (listed as an Optional Form) in the Grants.gov Opportunity Application Package.

l. Statement of Current and Pending Support

Submit a Statement of Current and Pending Support for each key personnel who will participate in the project. For your convenience, a template is available for your use

in in the Related Documents tab of the opportunity. Upload the statement under Other Attachments (listed as an Optional Form) in the Grants.gov Opportunity Application Package.

m. SF-LLL, Disclosure of Lobbying Activities

SF-LLL, Disclosure of Lobbying Activities, must be submitted **only** if you/your organization have/has made or agrees to make any payment using non-appropriated funds for lobbying. See 2 CFR 418.110 for more information on when additional submission of this form is required.

n. Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement (NICRA), if applicable

If charging indirect costs using a NICRA (including for match), upload the NICRA under Other Attachments (listed as an Optional Form) in the Grants.gov Opportunity Application Package.

o. Letters of Support

Letters of support are not required but are welcomed. Letters of support are provided by individuals or entities who want to express their enthusiasm for the project. Letters of support can also be written by partners or subawardees to confirm their intent to participate in the project. NRCS staff cannot be written into the proposal nor should NRCS letters of support be included.

Letters of support must be signed by the authorized organizational representative of the organization and must include the project name and name, address, and telephone number of the organization. The agency may conduct reference checks to ensure that organizations identified are supportive of the project. Upload letters of support under Other Attachments (listed as an Optional Form) in the Grants.gov Opportunity Application Package.

p. Letters of Intent

Letters of intent are not required and should not be submitted.

q. Disclosure of Potential Conflict of Interest

In accordance with 2 CFR 400.2, applicants must maintain written standards of conduct covering conflicts of interest and governing the performance of its employees in the selection, award, and administration of Federal awards. No employee, officer, or agent may participate in the selection, award, or administration of a Federal award if he or she has a real or apparent conflict of interest. Such a conflict of interest would arise when the employee, officer or agent, any member of his or her immediate family, his or her partner, or an organization which employs or is about to employ any of the parties referenced, has a financial or other interest in, or a tangible personal benefit from, an applicant considered for a Federal award. The standards of conduct must provide for disciplinary actions to be applied for violations of such standards by officers, employees, or agents of the applicant.

If the applicant has a parent, affiliate, or subsidiary organization that is not a state, local government, or Indian tribe, the applicant must also maintain written standards of conduct covering organizational conflicts of interest. Organizational conflict of

interest means that because of the relationships with a parent company, affiliate, or subsidiary organization, the applicant is unable or appears to be unable to be impartial in conducting a Federal award action involving a related organization.

Applicants must disclose in writing any potential conflicts of interest to the USDA awarding agency or pass-through entity. Include the name of the individual, the name of the entity with which the individual has a conflict, the nature of the financial or other interest, the value of the interest, a description of how the interest relates to your application. Upload disclosures under Other Attachments (listed separately under Optional Forms) in Grants.gov. **If no conflict exists, no submission is required.**

r. Post Award Documentation: N/A

s. Unique entity identifier (UEI) and System for Award Management (SAM)

Each applicant (unless the applicant is an individual excepted from those requirements under 2 CFR 25.110(b) or (c), or has an exception approved by the Federal awarding agency under 2 CFR 25.110(d)) is required to: (i) Be registered in SAM before submitting its application; (ii) provide a valid unique entity identifier in its application; and (iii) continue to maintain an active SAM registration with current information at all times during which it has an active Federal award or an application or plan under consideration by a Federal awarding agency. The agency may not make a Federal award to an applicant until the applicant has complied with all applicable unique entity identifier and SAM requirements and, if an applicant has not fully complied with the requirements by the time the agency is ready to make an award, it may determine that the applicant is not qualified to receive a Federal award and use that determination as a basis for making a Federal award to another applicant.

Entities must obtain a UEI and register in SAM prior to registering with Grants.gov. A description of each is below. Entities are strongly encouraged to apply early for their SAM registration.

System for Award Management (SAM) Registration: To register, go to: https://www.sam.gov. The Federal Service Desk is available for registration assistance and can be contacted via the Help tab at the website listed above.

Awarding agency staff cannot support applicants regarding UEI or SAM issues.

5. Submission Dates and Times and Correspondence

All applications must be received by Grants.gov by 11:59 pm Eastern Time (ET) by the established September 30th due date in the Key Dates section of the Summary Information of this NFO. Proof of timely submission is automatically recorded by Grants.gov. An electronic date/time stamp is generated within the system when the application is successfully received by Grants.gov.

Applications received by Grants.gov after the established due date will be considered late and will not be considered for funding. An application is considered on time at 11:59.59 pm ET, but it is late at 12:00 am ET.

Grants.gov will provide either an error or a successfully received transmission in the form of an email sent to the applicant with the Authorized Organizational Representative (AOR) role

attempting to submit the application. The Grants.gov Support Center reports that some applicants end the transmission because they think that nothing is occurring during the transmission process; be patient and give the system time to process the application.

The applicant with the AOR role who submitted the application will receive:

- an acknowledgement of receipt and a tracking number (GRANTXXXXXXXX) from Grants.gov with the successful transmission of their application.
- an email with the official date/time stamp and Grants.gov tracking number serving as proof of timely submission.

When the agency successfully retrieves the application from Grants.gov, and acknowledges the download of submissions, Grants.gov will also provide an electronic acknowledgment of receipt of the application to the applicant with the AOR role who submitted the application. Proof of timely submission shall be the official date and time that Grants.gov receives your application.

If you have trouble submitting an application to Grants.gov, contact the Grants.gov Help Desk to resolve any issues. See Section D. 2. for Grants.gov contact information.

Applicants using unreliable internet connections should be aware that the process of completing the Workspace can take some time. Therefore, applicants should allow enough time to prepare and submit the application before the package closing date.

6. Intergovernmental Review

This funding opportunity is not subject to Executive Order 12372, "Intergovernmental Review of Federal Programs." When completing the SF-424, check block c, "Program is not covered by E.O. 12372."

7. Funding Restrictions

Funds may not be used to pay any of the following costs unless otherwise permitted by law and approved in writing by the agency in advance of incurring such costs:

a. Profit and management fees. Any funds awarded to for-profit entities must be used for reimbursement of award related direct and indirect costs only.
b. Costs above the amount of funds authorized for the project.
c. Costs incurred prior to the effective date of the award, including time spent applying for this opportunity.
d. Costs which lie outside the scope of the approved project and amendments thereto.
e. Entertainment costs, regardless of their apparent relationship to project objectives.
f. Compensation for injuries to persons, or damage to property arising out of project activities.
g. Consulting services performed by a Federal employee during official duty hours when such consulting services result in the payment of additional compensation to the employee.
h. Capital expenditures for general purpose equipment, buildings, and land and for improvements to land, buildings, or equipment which materially increase their value or useful life. See 2 CFR 200.439 for additional information.
i. Meals may be charged to an award only if they are necessary for the performance of

the project. For instance, meals (normally only lunch) that are a necessary part of the costs of meetings and conferences (i.e., required attendance and continuity of a meeting), the primary purpose of which is the dissemination of information, are allowable, as are costs of transportation, rental of facilities, speakers' fees, and other items incidental to such meetings or conferences. Note: Meals consumed while in official travel status do not fall in this category. They are considered to be per diem expenses and should be reimbursed in accordance with the organization's established travel policies subject to statutory limitations or in accordance with Federal travel policies.

j. Costs normally charged as indirect costs may not be charged as direct costs without proper justification and agency approval. Proper justification includes documentation that the costs meet the criteria for allowability (see 2 CFR 200.403). Examples of such costs include rent, utilities, depreciation on buildings and equipment, the costs of operating and maintaining facilities, and general administration and general expenses, such as the salaries and expenses of executive officers, personnel administration, and accounting.
k. Salaries that are not commensurate with level of work. All costs must be reasonable to be allowable (2 CFR 200.403), and 2 CFR 200.404 defines a reasonable cost as one if, in its nature and amount, it does not exceed that which would be incurred by a prudent person under the circumstances prevailing at the time the decision was made to incur the cost. Salaries determined not to be reasonable compared to the level of work will be unallowable.
l. Software produced by non-domestic entities. Project budgets must not include costs (both Federal costs and match) for software development by non-domestic entities if it will be utilized by the Federal government or hosted on Federal systems.
m. Refer to Section D for applicable indirect cost restrictions, if any.

This list is not exhaustive. For additional information please refer to 2 CFR Part 200, subpart E, Cost Principals.

E. APPLICATION REVIEW INFORMATION

1. Review and Selection Process

Applications will be screened for completeness and compliance with the provisions of this notice. Incomplete, noncompliant, and/or applications not meeting the formatting criteria may be eliminated from competition. In that event, the agency will send notification of elimination to the applicant. The agency intends to select and award without conducting any discussions or allowing applicants to correct deficiencies or omissions in their applications. Consequently, applicants must ensure their applications are complete and accurate. However, while the agency intends to select without contacting applicants, it reserves the right to request applicants to revise their applications to correct deficiencies or omissions it identifies. If this occurs, the agency will conduct discussions with all applicants, identify deficiencies and omissions for all, and give applicants an opportunity to submit a revised application by a common cut-off date. The agency may also contact individual applicants to clarify certain components of their applications.

Proposals that pass the initial screening are then evaluated using a two-part process:

- Technical peer review panels composed of subject matter experts evaluate the proposals. Proposals are evaluated against the CIG Proposal Merit Criteria. The technical peer review panels forward their recommendations to the State Conservationist.
- The State Conservationist makes the final award selections based on the recommendations of the peer review panels.

Technical peer review panels will be nominated by the approving official. The approving official will make the final award decisions. The approving official for this opportunity is the State Conservationist. Risk reviews will be conducted by the FPAC Business Center, Grants and Agreements Division.

2. Merit/Technical Criteria

The technical peer review panels use the following criteria, using a 100-point scale, to evaluate applications. These criteria will be applied to the whole project, including federal and non-federally funded parts:

a. Purpose, Approach, and Goals (25 points)
i. The purpose of the project is clearly explained, the goals and objectives are clearly stated, and the rationale is explicit for why the innovative approach or technology is needed.
ii. The design and implementation of the project is based on sound methodology and demonstrated technology;
iii. The project outcomes are stated, measurable, and likely to be achieved; and
iv. Both beneficial and adverse impacts are considered, and a significant level of improvement will be achieved.

b. Innovative Technology or Approach (25 points)
i. The project is regionally or locally innovative to the criteria for innovation (see section A. 3; and
ii. The application describes the compelling need for the innovative technology or approach.

c. Project Management (25 points)
i. Timeline and milestones are clear and reasonable;
ii. Project staff has necessary technical and administrative expertise;
iii. The budget is adequately explained and justified, and expenses are allowable, allocable, and reasonable; and
iv. Proposal includes robust partnership with entities that can substantially assist with delivery of project outcomes with clear project management structure and team communication laid out.

d. Benefits and Transferability (25 points)
i. An evaluation plan is documented that clearly lays out how project work will be assessed, and the results transferred:
ii. There is potential for producers and landowners to use or participate in the innovative technology(s) or approach(s);
iii. There is potential for organizations to benefit from the innovative approach or methods, including (if appropriate) the development of materials such as technical standards, technical notes, handbooks, technology tools, etc.;

iv. There is potential to transfer the approach or technology to a broader audience or to other geographic areas or agricultural sectors; and
v. There is potential for successful transfer, through planned project activities, to historically underserved producers and communities; rural communities; and/or municipalities.

Partner matching contributions are considered an eligibility criterion as described in Section C 3 of this notice and therefore are not listed in the merit criteria.

3. Historically Underserved Criteria

To confirm eligibility for the HU set aside and understand the project impact to HU communities, proposals competing for the HU set aside are evaluated against additional criteria to assess the extent to which such proposals will successfully engage and benefit HU producers. The HU criteria are:

a. Description. The HU community served by the project is identified and the proposal includes a clear explanation of how the project will address any existing or historical barrier(s) that has/have impacted the participation or success of the identified HU community.
b. Commitment. The applicant and partner organizations demonstrate a strong commitment to serving HU producers. The organization or its members or partners have a history of working with HU producers or have explained why the team is well suited to working with HU producers.
c. Capacity Building. The proposal includes a clear description of how the project is designed to impart lasting benefits on the HU community.
d. Community Involvement. The designated HU community is involved in project processes or decision making.
e. Measurement. Indicators and metrics of success are included that specifically measure the project's benefits to HU producers.

4. Administrative and Risk Criteria

Notice of selection after merit/technical evaluation does not guarantee that an applicant will receive an award. Following notification of selection for funding (see Section F), the FPAC Business Center, Grants and Agreements Division's staff conducts a final administrative and risk review of those applications. The administrative review includes, but is not limited to, a check to ensure that NFO requirements were met (e.g., applicant meets eligibility criteria, application was submitted via Grants.gov by the established deadline), and proposed costs are allowable, allocable, and necessary. During this process, it may be necessary to request further documentation from the applicant (e.g., organizational information as part of the risk assessment, more detail regarding proposed costs).

In addition, to comply with the requirements at 2 CFR 200.206, the agency will follow, at a minimum, the risk review process described below (additional steps may be taken).

The awarding agency will check SAM to ensure the applicant is not suspended or debarred, which would preclude receiving an award. In addition, prior to making a Federal award with

a total Federal share greater than the simplified acquisition threshold ($250,000), the agency must review and consider any information about the applicant that is in the designated integrity and performance system accessible through SAM (the Federal Awardee Performance Integrity Information System, FAPIIS) (see 41 USC 2313 and 2 CFR 200.206(a)).

An applicant must meet the following standards to be considered for award:

a. **Financial Stability**

   The applicant maintains an adequate financial resources or cash flow to meet its financial obligations on a routine basis in order to successfully complete any agreement it may be awarded.

b. **Quality of Management Systems and Ability to meet Management Standards prescribed in 2 CFR Part 200**

   The applicant has a financial management system adequate to segregate and track federal funds. It has adequate systems in place for proper agreement administration; compliance with the standards outlined in 2 CFR Part 200 Section D for procurement, property, and records management; and required financial and performance reporting.

c. **History of Performance**

   If the applicant has previously obtained Federal financial assistance award, it has never failed to materially comply with the Federal award terms and conditions and further has never had an award terminated on that basis.

Submission of an application constitutes certification that an applicant meets these standards (items a. through c. above). The agency may request documentation to substantiate the certification. Based on risk assessment, the agency may impose specific award conditions in accordance with 2 CFR 200.208.

5. Awards Over the Simplified Acquisition Threshold (if applicable)

a. Prior to making a Federal award with a total Federal share greater than the simplified acquisition threshold ($250,000), the agency must review and consider any information about the applicant that is in the designated integrity and performance system accessible through SAM, the Federal Awardee Performance Integrity Information System, FAPIIS. FAPIIS is a federal database intended to serve as a government-wide source of information about the prior performance and compliance of federal procurement contractors, grantees, and cooperative agreement holders (see 41 U.S.C. 2313 and 2 CFR 200.206(a)).

b. An applicant may review information in FAPIIS accessible through SAM and comment on any information about it that a Federal awarding agency previously entered.

c. The agency will consider any comments by the applicant, in addition to the other information in FAPIIS, in making a judgment about the applicant's integrity, business ethics, and record of performance under Federal awards when completing the review of risk posed by applicants as described in 2 CFR 200.206, Federal awarding agency review of risk posed by applicants.

F. FEDERAL AWARD ADMINISTRATION INFORMATION

1. Federal Award Notices

The agency will provide notice that an application has been selected before it actually makes the Federal award. As such, the selection notification is not an authorization to begin performance. Reimbursement of pre-award costs require written agency prior approval. The Notice of Grant and Agreement Award (ADS-093) signed by the authorized agency official is the only authorizing document and will be provided electronically to the entity's authorized official for signature.

Both successful and unsuccessful applicants will be notified of the award decision via letter.

2. Administrative and National Policy Requirements

All project funds will be used in accordance with 2 CFR Part 200 and the General Terms and Conditions, which are available at the following website: https://www.fpacbc.usda.gov/about/grants-and-agreements/award-terms-and-conditions/index.html.

Projects performed pursuant to this opportunity may be subject to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). If applicable, NRCS must work with awardees to complete an environmental review of each awarded project before project commencement. In addition, prior to any ground-disturbing activities related to NRCS funding, the awardee must work with NRCS staff to complete an environmental evaluation (EE) related to those activities. Awardees may be required to prepare or pay for preparation of an environmental assessment (EA) or environmental impact statement (EIS), should any environmental review find that an EA or EIS is required.

In addition, a National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), Section 106 review and consultation by an NRCS State or area office with consulting parties (such as the pertinent State Historic Preservation Officer and federally recognized Indian Tribes) may be required prior to the implementation of project activities that have the potential to impact cultural resources. NHPA Section 106, its implementing regulations (36 CFR Part 800), and other related authorities, require Federal agencies to determine if a project has the potential to cause an effect to historic properties and, if so, if they are adverse and how the effects may be addressed. The NHPA review and compliance in accordance with Section 106 of NHPA and implementing regulations at 36 CFR Part 800 must be completed by NRCS and applicants may be required to pay for any cultural resource surveys needed for NRCS to assess project effects. More information on the applicant's role in the NHPA Section 106 process can be found on the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation website at https://www.achp.gov/digital-library-section-106-landing/section-106-applicant-toolkit.

Consultation with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and/or the National Marine Fisheries Service under the Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is also required for projects that may affect listed or proposed species or destroy or modify critical habitat. The ESA consultation in accordance with Section 7 of the ESA and implementing regulations at 50 CFR Part 402 must be completed by NRCS prior to the implementation of project activities that have the potential to impact species or habitat protected under the ESA. More

information on the Section 7 consultation process can be found at https://www.fws.gov/service/esa-section-7-consultation.

This NFO is amended to notify applicants that resulting awards will be governed by revisions to Title 2 of the CFR (2024 Revisions), including 2 CFR part 200, published on April 22, 2024, which become effective October 01, 2024. Link for more information: Federal Register :: Guidance for Grants and Agreements.

3. Patents, Inventions, and Copyrights

Allocation of rights to patents, inventions, and copyrights shall be in accordance with 2 CFR Part 200. This regulation provides that small businesses normally may retain the principal worldwide patent rights to any invention developed with USDA support. In accordance with 2 CFR Part 200, this provision will also apply to commercial organizations for the purposes of CIG. USDA receives a royalty-free license for federal use, reserves the right to require the patentee to license others in certain circumstances, and requires that anyone exclusively licensed to sell the invention in the United States must normally manufacture it domestically. With regard to copyright, the grant recipient may copyright any work that is subject to copyright and was developed, or for which ownership was acquired, under an award. USDA reserves a royalty-free, nonexclusive, and irrevocable right to reproduce, publish, or otherwise use the work for federal purposes and to authorize others to do so.

All tools produced must meet the accessibility of Electronic and Information Technology (EIT) requirements as specified in Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 794d) as amended by the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (P.L. 105-220). Specifically, subsection 508(a)(1) requires that when the federal government procures EIT, it must allow federal employees and individuals of the public with disabilities comparable access to and use of information and data that is provided to federal employees and individuals of the public without disabilities. All EIT that is subject to the 36 CFR 1194 standards will have a Section 508 acceptance test and will be validated upon acceptance. All maintenance for EIT that requires upgrades, modifications, installations, and purchases will adhere to the Section 508 standards and 36 CFR 1194. Get in touch with the administrative contact of this NFO with specific questions with regard to the applicability of this section.

4. Reporting

Reporting will follow the guidelines included in the agency's General Terms and Conditions, which are available at the following website: https://www.fpacbc.usda.gov/about/grants-and-agreements/award-terms-and-conditions/index.html

If the Federal share of any agreement awarded under this opportunity notice may include more than $500,000 over the period of performance, recipients must also comply with the

post award reporting requirements reflected in Appendix XII of 2 CFR Part 200 —Award Term and Condition for Recipient Integrity and Performance Matters.

Applicants that receive awards pursuant to this opportunity and any sub awardees must comply with the reporting requirements described at 2 CFR Part 170 unless an exception applies. Applicants must ensure they have the necessary processes and systems in place to comply with those requirements. A list of exceptions can be found at 2 CFR 170.110(b).

Reporting details are included in the fully executed grant agreement. Reporting will generally include electronic submission of semiannual progress reports, annual financial status reports, and final reports.

5. Audit Requirements

As required in 2 CFR Part 200, Subpart F Audit Requirements, all U.S. states, local governments, Federally recognized Indian tribal governments, and non-profit organizations expending $750,000 or more in Federal award funds in a fiscal year must submit a Single Audit report for that year through the Federal Audit Clearinghouse's Internet Data Entry System. FPAC agencies also require for-profit organizations that meet the expenditure threshold to comply with the single audit requirements and submit their audit reports directly to the funding agency.

G. FEDERAL AWARDING AGENCY CONTACT

For questions regarding this opportunity, contact the following individual with the opportunity number in the subject line:

Name: Neosha Jones
Grants Management Specialist
FPAC Business Center

Email: Neosha.Jones@usda.gov with a copy to NFO.FPAC@USDA.GOV

To protect the integrity of the competitive process, applicants must not contact agency program staff with questions.

H. OTHER INFORMATION

1. Questions regarding this opportunity must be submitted to the Federal Awarding Agency Contact identified above via email with the opportunity number in the subject line.
2. For technical issues with Grants.gov, please contact Grants.gov Applicant Support at 1-800-518-4726 or support@grants.gov. Awarding agency staff cannot support applicants regarding Grants.gov accounts.
3. **Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)**

   Applications are considered confidential information. Applications are not shared with individuals or entities seeking public disclosure through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) without the consent of the applicant. More specifically, Executive Order 12600 and USDA FOIA regulation 7 CFR Part 1, Subpart A requires the awarding agency to provide notice to applicants that a third party has requested copies of their business information and requires the awarding agency to consult with applicants regarding the releasing their records.

4. **Government Obligation**

   The Federal Government is not obligated to make any Federal award as a result of this opportunity. Only authorized federal officials can bind the Federal Government to the expenditure of funds.

5. **National Component**

   The USDA NRCS CIG program has two components – the "National Competition" and the "State Competition." This announcement is for the "State Competition" component. More information about the National Competition is available here.

6. Any award made pursuant to this NFO may be executed in any number of counterparts, each of which shall be deemed an original, but all of which together shall constitute one and the same instrument.

U.S. Department of Agriculture Non-Discrimination Statement

In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity (including gender expression), sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA (not all bases apply to all programs). Remedies and complaint filing deadlines vary by program or incident.

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact the responsible Agency or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027, found online at https://www.usda.gov/oascr/filing-program-discrimination-complaint-usda-customer and at any USDA office or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by:

(1) Mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture
Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250-9410

(2) Fax: (202) 690-7442; or

(3) Email: program.intake@usda.gov

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