USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Regional Conservation Partnership Program



Fiscal Year (FY) 2020
Regional Conservation Partnership Program
Alternative Funding Arrangement (AFA)
National Funding Opportunity (NFO)

No. USDA-NRCS-NHQ-RCPP-20-GEN0010751
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Natural Resources Conservation Service

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Programs Deputy Area
Financial Assistance Program Division
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Summary Information

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

Funding Opportunity Title: Notice of Funding Opportunity for NRCS's Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) – RCPP Alternative Funding Arrangement for Federal fiscal year (FY) 2020.

Funding Opportunity Number: USDA-NRCS-NHQ-RCPP-20-GEN0010751

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

DUE DATE: Applications must be received by NRCS by 11:59pm Eastern Time on May 29th.

*NOTE: This announcement is for the **RCPP Alternative Funding Arrangement (AFA) competition**, through which NRCS can make up to 15 awards per fiscal year, providing RCPP funding directly to eligible partners using a grant-like approach.*

The fiscal year 2020 RCPP Classic funding announcement is scheduled for release in summer 2020. For RCPP Classic, a majority of RCPP funding is provided by NRCS to producers and landowners through contracts and conservation easements. Through AFAs, RCPP funding is provided to partners, which in turn are responsible for working with and providing funding to producers and landowners for eligible conservation activities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

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

Through RCPP, partners propose projects—using guidance contained in this notice—that generate conservation benefits by addressing specific natural resource objectives in a state/multistate area, or address one or more primary resource concerns within a Critical Conservation Area (CCA). NRCS and partners design, implement and evaluate RCPP projects on agricultural and non-industrial private forest land.

The 2018 Farm Bill reauthorized RCPP and made several substantive changes to the program. RCPP is now a standalone program driven by three key objectives—incentivizing innovation and flexibility, leveraging partner contributions and measuring environmental outcomes. NRCS will co-invest in projects selected through a competitive application process that evaluates applications based on four criteria: impact, partner contributions, innovation, and partnerships and management.

Another change to the RCPP statute modified a provision authorizing NRCS to provide funding to entities through AFAs, leading to the development of this RCPP AFA funding announcement. RCPP AFA is intended to support project structures and approaches that cannot be carried out as effectively through RCPP Classic.

RCPP AFA applicants must describe the innovative nature of the conservation approach they are proposing to

justify potential funding through the AFA funding announcement, versus RCPP Classic. Additionally, applicants should consider the additional administrative and technical assistance responsibilities that accompany receipt of an AFA award.

The 2018 Farm Bill statute provides examples of project types that might be implemented through RCPP AFA:

- Projects that use innovative approaches to leverage the Federal investment in conservation;
- Projects that deploy a pay-for-performance conservation approach;
- Projects that seek large-scale infrastructure investments that generate conservation benefits for agricultural producers and nonindustrial private forest owners.

Although RCPP AFA provides flexibilities to partners, these projects share the overarching focus of RCPP — engaging with producers and landowners to implement conservation practices, systems and approaches on or for the benefit of agricultural and forest lands.

This notice announces the availability of funding for up to 15 RCPP AFA projects in fiscal year 2020. Applications are accepted from all 50 States, the Caribbean Area (Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands), and U.S. territories in the Pacific Island Areas (Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands).

SUBMISSIONS: Applications must be submitted through the RCPP Portal.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: A webinar for interested RCPP applicants is scheduled for 3 p.m. Eastern Time on April 2nd. Information on how to tune into the webinar, along with all other RCPP application information, is housed on the national RCPP webpage. Partners may email the RCPP inbox -- rcpp@usda.gov -- questions about this announcement.

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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 Sections 2701 through 2707 of the Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018 (the 2018 Act). The Secretary of Agriculture has delegated the authority to administer RCPP to the Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). NRCS is an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Delivering Assistance through Alternative Funding Arrangements

Through AFAs, NRCS provides funding to partners to support conservation activities with eligible producers and landowners on (or benefitting) eligible land. RCPP AFA funding flows directly to a lead partner - not from NRCS to producers or other entities as in RCPP Classic.

Grant agreements are the financial instrument used to award funding by Federal agencies when the awarding agency does not have "substantial involvement" in the grant activity. For AFA projects, NRCS will be substantially involved through the provision of prescribed technical assistance activities to producers so grant agreements will not be used. NRCS intends to implement AFAs through programmatic supplemental agreements.

Through this announcement, NRCS gives substantial preference to lead partners that can provide to producers the technical assistance necessary to implement the conservation activities that are part of an RCPP AFA project. NRCS intends to provide limited technical assistance for each project--completing National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) and National Historic Preservation Act requirements and ensuring that participating producers comply with the Farm Bill's Adjusted Gross Income (AGI), Highly Erodible Lands (HEL) and Wetlands Conservation provisions.

RCPP AFA applicants are encouraged to work with appropriate NRCS State RCPP Coordinators during the application process to determine if proposed projects align with RCPP goals and policies. Awardees must collaborate with designated NRCS staff during project implementation to ensure project goals are met and successful results are considered for incorporation into NRCS technical and programmatic operations.

B. Vision and Goals of the Program

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

1. Impact: RCPP applications must propose effective solutions that address one or more natural resource priorities to help solve natural resource challenges that are limited in geographic scope. Partners are responsible for evaluating a project's impact and results.
2. Partner Contributions: Partners are responsible for identifying any combination of direct and in-kind value-added contributions to leverage NRCS's RCPP investments. Partners must provide substantial contributions and the magnitude of contributions is considered in the RCPP application evaluation criteria.
3. Innovation: NRCS seeks projects that integrate multiple conservation approaches, implement innovative conservation approaches or technologies, build new partnerships, or effectively take advantage of program flexibilities to deliver conservation solutions.

4. Partnerships and Management: Partners must have experience, expertise, and capacity to manage the partnership and project, provide outreach and technical assistance to producers, and quantify the environmental (and when possible, economic and social) outcomes of an RCPP AFA project. NRCS gives preference to partnerships that engage Historically Underserved farmers and ranchers.

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

RCPP AFA supports partners in carrying out the goals and vision of RCPP through innovative project frameworks and payment mechanisms. RCPP AFA applications must include conservation approaches or payment mechanisms that are not as effectively implementable through RCPP Classic. RCPP AFA applications must propose one of the following project types:

1. Projects making infrastructure investments relating to agricultural or nonindustrial private forest production that benefit multiple producers and address natural resource concerns such as drought, wildfire, or water quality impairment on the land covered by the project.
2. Projects addressing natural resources concerns through targeted coordination with producers, including the development and implementation of watershed, habitat, or other area restoration plans (note that a proposal focused solely or largely on planning is unlikely to be competitive). Projects may use sophisticated targeting tools to identify priority areas for conservation or use innovative mechanisms to aggregate and streamline contracts for producers, all in service of maximizing conservation impacts at a watershed or regional scale.
3. Projects that use innovative approaches to leverage the Federal investment in conservation with private financial mechanisms, in conjunction with agricultural production or forest resource management. These projects may include pay-for-performance, pay-for-success and environmental market approaches.
4. Any other project consistent with program goals and objectives that cannot be effectively carried out through RCPP Classic.

C. **Overview of the RCPP Application and Selection Process**

Applicants submit a full application in response to this funding announcement, following the guidance in Part IV and Part V of this notice. NRCS conducts application evaluations following the guidance in Part VI of this notice.

D. **Interim Final Rule**

The RCPP interim final rule was published in the Federal Register on February 13, 2020. This RCPP AFA funding announcement is consistent with the interim final rule. NRCS is accepting comments on the interim final rule until April 13, 2020.

II. FUNDING AVAILABILITY

NRCS may select up to 15 projects through this RCPP AFA funding announcement. NRCS intends to spend up to $50 million on AFA projects in 2020.

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

RCPP AFA awards will be executed through agreements with lead partners, to be negotiated and signed following the announcement of awards. Project management and producer outreach expenditures carried out by RCPP project partners between the time of award announcement and agreement execution can be counted as partner contributions if identified as such in the proposed project budget.

RCPP funds, at the time of agreement execution, remain available for the duration of the project, generally not to exceed five years from the date of partnership agreement execution. Partners may request an agreement term of longer than five years in exceptional circumstances (see section VI). For all RCPP awards, a single one-year no-cost extension is available at the discretion of NRCS.

A. Fund Pools and Funding Priorities

RCPP AFA applicants must identify whether they are applying to the CCA or State/Multistate fund pool. Proposals may only be submitted for competition in one fund pool.

CCA Pool

There are eight CCAs that represent landscapes with common resource concerns. For each CCA, NRCS has identified priority resource concerns. CCA applications must address at least one of the relevant CCA's priority resource concerns. CCAs and associated priority resource concerns for the FY 2020 RCPP AFA competition are:

RCPP Critical Conservation Areas	Priority Resource Concerns
Great Lakes Region (IL, IN, MI, MN, NY, PA, OH, WI)	• Water quality degradation • Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates
Chesapeake Bay Watershed (DE, MD, NY, PA, VA, WV)	• Water quality degradation • Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates
Mississippi River Basin (AR, KY, IA, IL, IN, LA, MN, MO, MS, OH, SD, TN, WI)	• Water quality degradation • Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates • Excess/insufficient water/drought
Longleaf Pine Range (AL, FL, GA, LA, MS, NC, SC, TX, VA)	• Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates degraded plant condition • Water quality degradation
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

CCA projects must take place wholly within a CCA (counties traversed by a CCA border are considered within the CCA boundary). For more information about CCAs, including the maps of CCA boundaries, visit the RCPP website.

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

B. **Adjusted Gross Income Waivers**

The RCPP statute explicitly states that the 2018 Farm Bill's adjusted gross income (AGI) limitation does not apply to RCPP partners. AGI does apply, however, to producers and landowners participating in AFA projects. After initiation of a project, AGI waivers may be requested by AGI-ineligible individuals or entities seeking to participate as a producer in an AFA project. NRCS may grant a waiver if it determines a waiver is necessary to fulfill the objectives of the program or protect environmentally sensitive land of special significance.

III ELIGIBILITY INFORMATION

A. **Partner Eligibility**

RCPP 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.
- An entity, such as an Indian Tribe, State government, local government, or a nongovernmental organization that has a program that purchases agricultural land easements, as defined in 7 CFR Section 1468.3.
- A conservation district.

Individual producers and landowners are not eligible to submit project applications under this notice.

B. **Contributing Partners**

In addition to the lead partner, RCPP AFA projects may include direct or in-kind contributions from other entities, known as "contributing partners." Contributions may be provided by a non-lead eligible partner (from

the list above) and may also be provided by a third-party individual or organization (even a non-USDA Federal agency) that would not qualify as an eligible party under the statutory definition of a project partner.

C. Producers and Landowners

Agricultural producers or eligible private landowners receiving NRCS financial or technical assistance funding as part of RCPP AFA projects must be in compliance with the Farm Bill's highly erodible lands and wetlands conservation provisions, as well as the AGI limitation.

Given that RCPP AFA projects are designed to use alternative implementation approaches, it is anticipated that partners awarded RCPP AFA funding will have access to producer and landowner networks to find project participants. Proposals must describe how RCPP AFA partnerships plan to identify and engage with producers and landowners.

Lead partners are responsible for working with NRCS to ensure that any producer receiving RCPP funding through an AFA project is in compliance with HEL and WC provisions and the AGI limitation. These checks of producer eligibility must be completed prior to producers receiving funding and participating in the project. Lead partners must furnish the data required for NRCS to complete compliance checks.

D. Eligible Activities

The RCPP statute in the 2018 Agricultural Improvement Act includes several USDA programs for NRCS to use as a guide for determining eligible RCPP activities. The "covered programs" are:

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program
- Conservation Stewardship Program
- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program
- Healthy Forest Reserved Program
- PL 83-566 Watershed Program
- Conservation Reserve Program

While RCPP AFA is designed to provide partners with flexible implementation approaches, RCPP AFA (like RCPP Classic) projects must implement conservation practices, systems and activities like those authorized under the covered programs listed above. RCPP AFA projects, therefore, can carry out any combination of land improvement/management/restoration, land rental, conservation easement, or watershed/public works activities. RCPP AFA projects need not carry out these activities in the same way NRCS implements them under the covered programs, but the covered programs still inform authorized activities.

If partners intend to carry out land improvement activities using existing NRCS conservation practice standards or enhancements, the amount of financial assistance provided to producers on average must not exceed amounts NRCS would provide for those activities. If partners, however, intend to carry out land improvement activities but not use existing NRCS program approaches, applications must describe their alternative approach in enough detail to give NRCS confidence that the project will be successful. For example, if a lead partner intends to implement a pay-for-performance approach for land management activities, as opposed to paying for established conservation practices as NRCS traditionally does, the lead partner must describe in detail the pay-for-performance approach and how the partner intends to safeguard the financial and scientific integrity of the approach and project. RCPP AFA applicants must consult with State RCPP Coordinators to ensure that proposed project activities are authorized under the covered programs.

In addition, AFA partners must analyze the NEPA, NHPA and Endangered Species Act implications of their proposed projects for NRCS consideration. For easement or land rental activities, or any land management activities using existing NRCS conservation practice standards, an Environmental Evaluation (EE) will suffice (in most cases) as these activities are covered by categorical exclusions. For any ground disturbing activities that

do not follow NRCS's conservation planning process or use existing conservation practice standards, additional NEPA, NHPA and/or Endangered Species Act analysis (including potentially an Environmental Analysis or Environmental Impact Statement) may be required and should be factored into project timelines and budgets. See the Environmental Review Requirements in section V for additional information.

U.S.-held easements are not available under the RCPP AFA component. Any AFA-related easements must be held by a qualified entity. Partners are invited to propose innovative conservation easement approaches in agricultural settings, but RCPP eligibility requirements (outlined in this section above and below) will apply to entities, land and landowners. If a project includes a traditional RCPP entity-held easement approach as part of a larger, innovative project, easement valuations and compensation caps will not differ from those included in the 2019 RCPP Classic funding announcement (posted on the RCPP website).

E. **Land Eligibility**

RCPP projects must be carried out on private or Tribal:

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

RCPP is a program addressing resource concerns on private agricultural and forest lands. There are rare instances where public lands may be a part of a RCPP project. Examples include:

- When a producer has a lease to farm or ranch on public lands directly adjacent to his/her private lands, it may be reasonable (depending on the details of the proposal) for RCPP activities to take place on the adjacent public lands. The producer would need to have control of the public lands for the life of the RCPP contract.
- For watershed/public works projects, it may be reasonable for the public works structure(s) to be implemented on public lands (or a combination of public and private lands), if the project benefits private agricultural and/or forest lands.

F. **Historically Underserved Producers**

NRCS gives priority consideration to AFA projects that propose to meaningfully engage historically underserved farmers, ranchers, and landowners. The definition of historically underserved includes beginning, under resourced, socially disadvantaged, and veteran producers. The definitions for these terms are at https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/people/outreach/slbfr/. The narrative question section of the RCPP Portal application provides an opportunity for applicants to explain how their project will substantively engage Historically Underserved producers.

IV. RCPP AFA PROJECT FUNDING

RCPP funding provided by NRCS is divided into two categories--financial assistance (FA) and technical assistance (TA). Each RCPP partnership agreement will receive a commitment of funding as follows:

- At least 70 percent FA—these funds are provided directly to producers/eligible entities to implement eligible RCPP activities.

- Up to 30 percent TA—these funds are used to support implementation of the RCPP project.

All application budgets submitted by partners must be consistent with this funding breakdown.

A. NRCS Technical Assistance, Partner Contributions, and Partner Technical Assistance

RCPP AFA project funding is comprised of a combination of NRCS funding and partner contributions. It is NRCS's goal that partner contributions at least equal the NRCS investment in a RCPP project. Partner contributions consist of any combination of direct funding and in-kind support. NRCS strongly recommends that partners propose value-added contributions that elevate and enhance the overall impact and efficacy of an RCPP project. The magnitude and significance of partner contributions factors into the project evaluation criteria listed in section V.

IMPORTANT—*official approval of a project budget included in a RCPP application does not occur at the time of award announcement. Budget proposals are subject to negotiation and technical assistance provider qualification verification prior to execution of the RCPP AFA agreement.*

The following provisions apply to RCPP AFA funding:

- Section 1271C(c)(3) of the 2014 Farm Bill states the Secretary may waive the AGI limit for producers participating in RCPP projects if the Secretary determines that a waiver is necessary to fulfill program objectives. While AGI waivers are not requested and processed until after RCPP projects begin, applications should indicate whether approval of a waiver(s) is critical to the success of a project.
- Entities receiving RCPP awards are required to verify producer eligibility to participate in RCPP and submit producer information and amounts of RCPP funding provided to individual producers annually.
- Section 1240B of the Food Security Act of 1985, 16 U.S.C. 3839aa-2, prohibits duplicative payments. Entities receiving a RCPP award are responsible for ensuring that RCPP AFA payments are not provided to a producer for a conservation practice, system or approach for which the producer has already received, or is contracted to receive, funding through another NRCS or USDA source.

Financial Assistance (FA), Technical Assistance (TA) and Partner Contributions
RCPP AFA awards may be awarded for both FA and TA. See the table below for examples of reimbursable FA and TA activities. All of these example FA and TA activities could also be counted as partner contributions if partners are not reimbursed by NRCS. Project FA may take the form of conservation practice/system, easement, land rental, incentive, pay-for-performance, ecosystem services or other similar payments. RCPP AFA applications must describe the estimated amount and composition of FA payments destined for agricultural producers.

C=Partner contributions
I=Implementation TA
E=Enhancement TA

Sample Financial Assistance Activities	Sample Technical Assistance Activities
Incentive or other payments to producers to undertake conservation activities	Management of the RCPP partnership agreement (and any sub-agreements) (E, C)
Payments to producers to fund the implementation of land management or structural practices or systems	Inventories and data to support required NEPA activities (E, I, C)
Conservation easement payments to landowners	Outreach and education, including inventories, analyses and tools needed to inform outreach (E, C)

Sample Financial Assistance Activities	Sample Technical Assistance Activities
Watershed structure design and implementation	Technical assistance to producers for planning directly related to installation or management of eligible conservation activities (I, C)
Payments to producers for short-term land rental	Easement contract support services (e.g. securing and managing contracts for 3rd party services like engineering studies, surveys and appraisals) (I, C)
Pay-for-performance or ecosystem services credit payments	Communications activities (E, C)
	Environmental monitoring to support partner responsibility to track and report on project outcomes (E, C)
	Development and calculation of quantifiable project outcomes (E, C)
	Leveraging other funds related to the RCPP Project goals and objectives (E, C)
	Development of innovative conservation approaches (e.g., pay-for-success, market-based approaches) (E, C)
	Project management and partnership development to accomplish project goals (E, C)
	Staff Training/Capacity Building (C)
	Developing/maintaining connections to related conservation efforts (E, C)
	Watershed planning activities (I, C)

***Note that administrative (indirect) costs associated with the implementation of RCPP projects cannot be reimbursed by NRCS, by statute.*

The TA for each RCPP project is allocated as follows:

- Implementation TA: 23%, fixed
    - NRCS TA (5%, fixed)—retained by NRCS for RCPP project, contract and agreement management and required HEL/WC, AGI eligibility, and environmental compliance activities. This is non-negotiable.
    - Implementation TA (I) (18%, fixed)—allocated for TA associated with implementation of RCPP eligible activities, including watershed planning, field-level planning, practice design, installation and verification, and easement support activities (e.g., title reviews, due diligence, valuation and survey reviews, and closing and monitoring responsibilities).
- Enhancement TA (E) (7% maximum)—available for partner-led activities directly related to management and enhancement of the approved RCPP project. Eligible to be earned by partners for outreach to producers and landowners, project management, environmental monitoring, communications activities, development and calculation of quantifiable project outcomes, and development of innovative conservation approaches. Applicant requests for project management and enhancement TA are subject to negotiation and verification during development of the partnership agreement.

If applicants do not intend to request project enhancement TA, that TA funding will be folded back into program funding as determined by NRCS. Further, it is not anticipated that all enhancement items potentially eligible for RCPP funding will be funded for selected projects, due to the 7% cap on enhancement funding. Partners are expected to provide contributions for any enhancement TA activities that cannot be covered by RCPP funding.

The RCPP AFA criteria in section V of this notice make clear that NRCS gives preference to partner entities that can wholly supply the TA to implement the conservation activities proposed for RCPP AFA projects, either on their own or through working with certified Technical Service Providers (TSPs) or other qualified entities and individuals. NRCS encourages applicants to consider the use of third-party providers for TA services on RCPP projects.

Proposals must identify the individuals or entities providing TA services and furnish their qualifications. If these individuals or entities are not certified Technical Service Providers or NRCS-certified conservation planners, proposals must provide enough evidence that the individuals or entities are qualified to carry out implementation activities.

Partners who do not intend to provide all the TA to implement an RCPP AFA project must furnish a justification that describes why NRCS is better suited to provide implementation TA. In such cases, partners must describe in detail the TA activities that NRCS would carry out. This information will be used to negotiate a TA amount for NRCS.

Funding from non-USDA Federal agencies can be counted as partner contribution, provided it is expended in support of RCPP project purposes in the project area. Note, however, that non-USDA Federal contributions may be discounted in comparison to non-Federal contributions as part of the proposal evaluation process.

Consistent with the RCPP statute, expenditures for project development, including outreach activities in the project area carried out by RCPP project partners between the time of project selection announcement and partnership agreement execution can be counted as partner contributions if identified as such in the proposed project budget and approved by NRCS during execution of the partnership agreement.

There may be rare circumstances for which a higher TA percentage than 30 percent is justified for RCPP AFA projects. Similarly, there may be rare circumstances in which partners would prefer flexibility in TA percentages between enhancement and implementation TA. Partners requesting any deviations from the TA amounts or allocated percentages described in this section must provide justification as part of their proposal (in the RCPP Portal) for consideration by NRCS.

Note on Administrative Costs: The RCPP statute prohibits NRCS from reimbursing partners for any administrative costs. Sometimes referred to as overhead or indirect costs, administrative costs are expenses such as rent and utilities, durable equipment and software acquisitions, space used by staff, copiers, phones, information technology support, etc. While not reimbursable by NRCS, indirect costs may be counted as partner contributions (these are known as unrecovered indirect costs). Organizations that have an active Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement (NICRA) with the Federal Government must use the rate identified in that agreement in determining indirect costs to be included in a proposal as contributions. Entities without a NICRA may use a 10-percent indirect cost rate. To determine the amount of indirect costs that may be counted as partner contribution for RCPP, either the NICRA rate or the de minimis rate must be charged *against the lead partner's technical assistance contributions only*. If indirect costs are included as partner contributions in a proposal, the lead partner's current NICRA (if they have one) must be uploaded as part of the RCPP project application in the RCPP portal.

NRCS Project Oversight and TA Responsibilities
NRCS will participate in each AFA project. At a minimum, NRCS is required to verify that participating producers comply with the Farm Bill's Adjusted Gross Income, Highly Erodible Lands and Wetlands Conservation provisions, using information provided by the lead partner. NRCS is also responsible for making reimbursement payments to lead partners, tracking project reporting and ensuring that project outcomes and deliverables are being achieved and documented.

In addition, NRCS is responsible for ensuring that adequate information is collected to ensure that RCPP AFA projects and activities comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other Federal, State, and local laws and regulations. NRCS is not necessarily responsible for data collection, which can be negotiated, but the agency cannot delegate analytical and decision-making responsibility for these items.

Partner Contributions
While a specific amount of partner contributions is not required, it is NRCS's goal that partner contributions at least equal the NRCS investment in an RCPP project. Contributions can be any combination of direct funding and in-kind support. Magnitude and significance of partner contributions factor into the project evaluation criteria listed in section V. Examples of value-added contributions include additional partner-provided FA for conservation activities, environmental monitoring, evaluation of economic and social outcomes, and communications activities. A more extensive list of activities that could count as partner contributions is found in the table in section IV.A.

Partner contributions must meet all NRCS established criteria, including addressing project resource concerns for the benefit of eligible producers on eligible lands and an accurate representation of the value of contributions. Lead partners must maintain auditable records of partner contributions.

For RCPP Classic projects, producer provided "cost share" associated with the implementation of conservation practices cannot be considered partner contribution. As AFA projects are not implemented through traditional NRCS contracts and easements directly with agricultural producers, producer provided costs associated with implementation of conservation activities (including verifiable easement donations) may be counted as partner contribution where those costs are based on verifiable expenses. Conversely, contributions tied to producer-provided labor, or donations of materials, services or land or interests in land which are not tied to an approved appraisal or actual costs, may not be counted as partner contribution. For example, a producer's share of the contracted installation cost for a physical practice could count as partner contribution for an AFA project; conversely, the estimated "risk" or "forgone income" values tied to perceived or modelled costs borne by a producer could not be counted as contribution. Regardless of source, all partner or producer/landowner contributions and their valuation methods will be fully reviewed by NRCS during project negotiations.

Partner contributions are a critical component of every RCPP project. If contributions are not delivered according to the schedule included in the partnership agreement, NRCS may delay payments or take other actions up to an including cancelling a supplemental agreement or AFA project.

B. **Project Proposal Content**

The RCPP project application must adhere to the guidance below, which is consistent with the design of the application entry screens of the RCPP portal. Any materials not specifically required below will not be considered in the review process.

1. Basic Project and Contact Information—lead partners must list a primary and alternate contact to help ensure effective communication with RCPP staff. It is recommended that the primary contact is the project director (i.e., the individual coordinating project activities) and the alternate contact is the administrative contact (i.e., the individual managing the administrative components of the project, including program

payments, etc.).

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

Though RCPP partnership agreements for funded projects in general are 5 years in length, the portal allows applicants to request a partnership agreement length longer or shorter than 5 years and provide a justification for longer requests. Applicants must be aware that such requests will be granted only in exceptional circumstances.

2. List of Project Partners—identify the lead partner (the only party with which NRCS will execute a partnership agreement) and all non-lead partners that are providing partner contributions or are proposed to earn RCPP implementation or enhancement TA funding. Briefly describe the role of each partner.

3. Project Questionnaire—in the RCPP portal, applicants must provide answers to questions related to the evaluation criteria found in section V of this notice. These questions require the applicant to describe the compelling conservation need for the project, the goals and objectives, the geographic focus, estimated number of participating producers, and the project management capacity of the partnership, among other items. The RCPP portal restricts answers to a set amount of characters. Character limitations include spaces.

4. Project Outcomes—all RCPP lead partners are responsible for developing and reporting on conservation outcomes (and, to the extent possible, economic and social outcomes) of their projects. A guidance document for developing outcomes is posted on the RCPP website. Lead partners submitting RCPP proposals must review the guidance and understand their responsibilities for developing, measuring/estimating and reporting outcomes.

5. Deliverables and Contributions—the portal guides applicants to fill out two tables—one connects project deliverables with the funding requested, both FA and TA, and the other table collects partner contribution information.

   In the deliverables table, applicants must request RCPP funding by year and describe anticipated AFA activities. If an application is selected for funding, final budgets of selected projects will be negotiated during the partnership agreement development phase, with proportional changes required if either contributions or RCPP funding amounts change.

   In the partner contributions table, applicants must list the lead partner and any contributing partners providing a contribution and identify contributions as cash or in-kind. Contributions also must be listed by activity type.

6. Contribution Commitment Letters—provide a commitment letter from each non-lead partner or other third-party providing contributions, including cash and in-kind services. Dollar amounts must match figures provided in the RCPP portal. If any discrepancies are noted, NRCS will use the lower of the two amounts. Project support letters will not be considered and should not be submitted through the RCPP portal.

   While contributions from non-lead partners and other third parties are encouraged and should be included in a partner's proposal when integrally related to proposed project success, the lead partner (the only party with which NRCS will execute a partnership agreement) assumes full responsibility for ensuring that all contributions are delivered as included in the partnership agreement.

7. Project Map—lead partners must upload a jpg. or pdf. that clearly delineates the geographic scope of the

project. If a project is selected for an award, lead partners will work with the appropriate RCPP State coordinator to develop a more sophisticated project map using GIS.

8. 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. All RCPP applicants must have or 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 DUNS registration may take up to 14 business days to complete.

9. SAM Registration—all RCPP applicants must also have or obtain a current System for Award Management (SAM) registration. SAM is the official U.S. Government system that consolidated the capabilities of the Central Contractor Registration, Federal Register, Online Representations and Certification Application, and Excluded Parties List System. To register, go to https://www.sam.gov/portal/public/SAM/. SAM registration must be renewed annually. Applicants should allow ample time to obtain or renew a SAM registration.

V. APPLICATION REVIEW CRITERA

RCPP applications are evaluated against four criteria that applicants should use as a guide during application development. Each application is scored on a 100-point scale.

1. Impact (25 points)

- Does the application describe a compelling conservation need and clear project goals and objectives (for CCA projects—is the project addressing one or more priority resource concerns)?
- Does the application propose to generate substantial conservation benefits, and are those benefits likely to be achieved based on proposed project methods and approaches?
- Is the project area the appropriate scale for the resource concern(s) and goals identified?
- Does the application describe an approach to measure and report on achievable environmental project outcomes? What about economic and social outcomes?

2. Partner Contributions (25 points)

- What percentage of the overall project cost will come from partner contributions?
- What percentage of the partner contributions will come from non-Federal sources?
- To what extent are partner contributions value-added and bringing unique and qualified expertise to enhance the overall collective effort?
- Are the intended uses of partner cash and in-kind resources clearly stated and tied to overall project objectives?

3. Innovation (25 points):

- Does the project propose an innovative approach that is better suited for RCPP AFA than RCPP Classic? Does the project take advantage of the programmatic and implementation flexibilities afforded by RCPP AFA?
- Is the innovative approach likely to be successful and transferable to other partnerships or geographies?

4. Partnerships and Management (25 points):

1. Does the partnership propose to carry out all TA required to implement the RCPP AFA project, excluding TA items NRCS is exclusively responsible for?
2. Do the partners have a history of collaboration and engagement with agricultural producers and forest landowners to ensure high levels of participation. Does the application include a strategy for producer outreach and education to recruit project participants?
3. Does the application encourage or include the participation of historically underserved producers, including socially disadvantaged, beginning, limited resource and veteran farmers and ranchers, or include as a partner(s) organizations working with or representing those groups of producers?

A. **Review Process**

All AFA applications will be thoroughly evaluated using the criteria outlined above. Proposals are reviewed by a national review team and by NRCS States in which AFA project work is proposed. An NRCS leadership review board evaluates the results of the technical and programmatic review and make recommendations for funding to the Chief. The NRCS Chief makes the final AFA award decisions.

B. **Environmental Review Requirements**

Some RCPP conservation activities may require Federal, State, Tribal, or local permits or consultation with Federal, State, Tribal, or local agencies. All required permits must be acquired, and consultations completed prior to initiation of project activity. Applicants should consider required permit and consultation activities when establishing a project timeline. NRCS requires that applicants provide appropriate documentation of any relevant permitting and consultation requirements as part of the application packet. NRCS cannot provide RCPP funding until the environmental review requirements demonstrating how compliance with NEPA and other Federal, State, Tribal and local laws and regulations will be met are satisfied. NRCS may choose not to approve, or may withdraw, funding for projects that it determines do not realistically account for the time or expense of addressing environmental concerns, or where project may result in unacceptable adverse environmental impacts.

Once an RCPP partnership agreement is executed, NRCS is responsible for ensuring that site-specific environmental evaluations (EEs) are completed during the planning phase of all individual awards (e.g. producer contracts or easements) for land improvement/land management, rental, and easement activities to ensure compliance with NEPA, and other Federal, State, Tribal, and local laws and regulations and NRCS policy. In addition, where the NRCS conservation planning process or conservation practice standards are to be supplemented or replaced with innovative measures, or public works/watershed activities are included in a RCPP application, NEPA analysis is required at the RCPP project level, and an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement is likely to be required. Project-level consultations under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act may also be required for projects not using NRCS conservation practice standards.

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

Partner contributions to the RCPP project that would not occur *but for* RCPP funding received from NRCS (i.e., connected actions) must be analyzed in any relevant site-specific EEs conducted during the NRCS conservation planning process, and/or evaluated in a project-level NEPA analysis as deemed necessary by NRCS in collaboration with the lead partner or designee. Any costs and project delays associated with such analyses shall be the responsibility of the partner unless otherwise agreed to in project negotiations.

VI. AWARD INFORMATION AND ADMINISTRATION

A. Partnership and Supplemental Agreements

After a project proposal is selected to become a RCPP AFA project, the lead State Conservationist will initiate negotiations with the lead partner to define the final scope and responsibilities of the RCPP partnership agreement. This process will include detailed discussions on the roles of the lead partner, contributing partners, and NRCS in implementing the project, including the provision of FA and TA funding.

The RCPP partnership agreement serves as the agreement guiding the project. There is no funding obligated through the partnership agreement. Rather the partnership agreement includes lead partner deliverables, timelines, and expectations for future RCPP awards and partner contributions based on the negotiated terms of an approved project, available RCPP funding, and other program considerations. AFA applicants should anticipate a project start date of December 1, 2020.

Following execution of the RCPP partnership agreement, future AFA project obligations will be made via a supplemental agreement(s) to the lead partner. The lead partner, in turn, will carry out project TA and FA activities directly with landowners and producers, and make requests for reimbursement to NRCS.
As a condition of supplemental agreement execution, NRCS and a partner will negotiate documentation requirements for reimbursement, based on the agreement deliverables and activities. For example, if the lead partner requests reimbursement for an enhancement TA task like producer outreach activities, submission of meeting agendas and a list of participants may be required for reimbursement. For a FA activity such as paying a producer under a pay-for-performance conservation approach, the lead partner would need to submit sufficient documentation to justify the expenditure and show that the anticipated level of conservation performance has been attained. These are just two examples. Specific documentation requirements must be agreed to by NRCS and the relevant partner(s) prior to execution of any supplemental agreement. Advance payments may be allowed at NRCS's discretion. Guidance on advance payments will be provided in relevant supplemental agreements.

RCPP partners are also required to maintain documentation of both reimbursable expenses and partner contribution expenditures for 3 years beyond the expiration of a supplemental agreement. NRCS intends to audit a random sample of RCPP projects annually. If a partner fails to produce documentation of reimbursable and partner contribution expenditures, NRCS may require partners to take remedial action. If partners are unable to satisfy NRCS's requirements, the partnership agreement or supplemental agreements may be suspended or terminated.

B. Reporting Requirements

Reporting requirements are included in RCPP partnership agreements. Lead partners are required to submit annual progress reports through the RCPP portal. These reports include information on any subcontracts awarded, the use of AFA funding, progress on project deliverables and outcomes, partner contribution expenditures and deliverables, producer and landowner outreach and participation, and the names of producers receiving funding through the project. Lead partners also are responsible for submitting a final report and fact sheet that can be shared with the public. Failure of a RCPP lead partner to stay current with reporting requirements, project timelines, or contribution expenditures may result in NRCS requiring additional project oversight, adjustments to enhancement or implementation TA, or ultimately terminating a partnership agreement.

The RCPP statute requires NRCS to provide to RCPP partners an annual report describing how NRCS used TA associated with RCPP AFA projects.

C. Notifications

All applicants receive notification of selection or non-selection. Upon notification of selection, the lead NRCS State contacts the lead partner to initiate development of a partnership agreement. Partners not selected for an award will receive feedback from proposal reviewers.

D. Withdrawal of Applications

Lead partners looking to withdraw their RCPP application after the submission deadline may do so by emailing a letter signed by a duly authorized partner representative on official organization letterhead to the national RCPP inbox with a copy to the lead State's RCPP coordinator. The letter should include the reason for withdrawal.

VII. SUBMISSION INFORMATION

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

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

- Identify a single system user for your organization.
- Establish a USDA level-2 e-Auth account (designated user only) following the guidance accessed at the following web address https://www.eauth.usda.gov/mainPages/index.aspx.
- After an eAuth credential is secured, request RCPP portal system access (designated user only) (https://nrcs-sites.secure.force.com/) under "New Users" Click "Start Here."
- Develop full application in RCPP portal.

The RCPP portal automatically sends applicants an email to acknowledge receipt at the time of submission. Applicants are solely responsible for ensuring timely submission through the portal and are strongly advised to allow sufficient time to obtain eAuth and portal access, and to complete the application in the portal. Difficulties related to these or other application processes will not result in an extension of the application deadline.

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

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

VIII. AGENCY CONTACTS

Partners with questions are encouraged to contact the appropriate NRCS State RCPP coordinator with proposal-related questions. State coordinators are often the person best suited to answer partner questions about proposals and RCPP in general. The RCPP website maintains a current list of RCPP Coordinators.

Potential applicants may also contact national RCPP staff with questions.
Email: rcpp@usda.gov
USDA-NRCS
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Room 5242
Washington, D.C.