

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Notice of Funding Opportunity

F25AS00332 Highlands Conservation Act – Competitive Funding Round

Funding Opportunity Number

F25AS00332

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BASIC INFORMATION

Announcement Type: Initial

Funding Opportunity Number: F25AS00332

Assistance Listing Number(s): 15.667

Estimated Total Program Funding: \$3,850,000

Expected Number of Awards: 4

Award Ceiling: \$3,850,000

Award Floor: \$25,000

Cost Sharing Required?

Yes

Closing Date Explanation

Electronically submitted applications must be submitted no later than 11:59 PM, ET, on the listed application due date.

U.S. states and local governments may be required under [Executive Order 12372](#), [Intergovernmental Review of Federal Programs](#) to submit their application to their State Single Point of Contact (SPOC) for review. For more information, see the [Intergovernmental Review SPOC List](#).

OMB Control Number: [1018-0100](#)

Have Questions?

Shelley DiBona - Shelley_DiBona@ios.doi.gov -413-253-8509

Executive Summary

The Highlands Conservation Act Program (HCA) is administered by the US Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to assist Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania in the protection of land and natural resources in the Highlands Region. HCA grants support land conservation projects in which a State, County, or Municipal entity acquires land or an interest in land from a willing seller to conserve resources of high conservation value.

Governors of the four Highlands States may submit proposals for up to 50% of the total cost of land conservation projects in the Highlands Region.

Funding appropriated under the HCA is typically divided into two separate categories – Base and Competitive. Eligible applicants may submit requests for the Competitive Funding Round in response to this Notice of Funding Opportunity. A separate Notice of Funding Opportunity will be posted for Base Funds. A project may not be proposed for funding in both funding opportunities.

More information on the HCA program is available at www.fws.gov/program/highlands-conservation-act-grant

ELIGIBILITY

Eligible Applicants

State governments

Additional Information on Eligibility

Only the Lead State Agency (or Agencies) as determined by the Governor of each Highlands State may be the applicant for funding under the Highlands Conservation Act Grant Program. If the Governor assigns multiple Lead Agencies, those Agencies must coordinate on funding requests prior to submission and ensure no more than the maximum allowable amount is

requested through this funding opportunity. All or part of the funds received by the Lead State Agency may be subawarded to a County or Municipality within the Highlands Region, or to another State Conservation Agency.

The current Lead State Agencies are:

- Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. Contact Matt Starr: matthew.starr@ct.gov
- New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation. Contact Lynn Kovach: lynn.kovach@parks.ny.gov
- New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council. Contact Liz Ward: elizabeth.ward@highlands.nj.gov
- Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. Contact Dan Pierce: danipierce@pa.gov

Cost Sharing Requirement

Cost Sharing Required?

Yes

50 percent non-Federal cost share required.

GET READY TO APPLY

Required System Registrations

Unique Entity Identifier and SAM.gov Registration

Before applying, all **applicants** except individuals applying as a natural person **must be registered in SAM.gov**. During the SAM.gov registration the entity will obtain their Unique Entity Identifier (UEI).

The SAM.gov registration process can take several months. If your organization is not already registered in SAM.gov, begin the registration process as soon as possible.

To register in SAM.gov, go to the [SAM.gov website](#) and use the available resources to complete registration.

- **Financial assistance registrants** must review and certify compliance with the SAM.gov “Financial Assistance General Representations and Certifications”.
- **Already registered?** You already have a Unique Entity ID. Before applying, check that your “Financial Assistance General Representations and Certifications” on SAM.gov is complete. Remember to renew your registration every year to keep it active while you have an award or application in progress. You can update your registration whenever you need, including during renewal.
- **Need help?** For additional information and contact information on the [SAM.gov Help page](#).

GRANTS.GOV

This program accepts applications through [Grants.gov](https://www.Grants.gov) so once you receive your UEI return to Grants.gov to [register](#) with Grants.gov. Please allow 30 days to register and set up a Workspace in Grants.gov. See [Submission Instructions](#) section below for additional details.

GRANTSOLUTIONS

This program accepts applications through GrantSolutions.gov. You must register with GrantSolutions. See [Submission Instructions](#).

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Program Goals

- The Highlands Conservation Act authorizes a grant program to Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania to conserve land and protect natural resources in the Highlands Region, a nationally-important landscape distinguished by Appalachian ridges, hills, and plateaus that provides outdoor recreational opportunities for millions of people living in and visiting the Northeast. Land acquired under the program may only be held by a State Conservation Agency, a County, or a Municipality. The general purpose of the program is to support State and local government initiatives to identify and conserve land that implements State and local goals to increase outdoor recreation opportunities for the benefit of the public and the economy, to secure agricultural and forest resources, to protect drinking water supplies, and to conserve wildlife habitat. Performance will be measured by comparing the proposed amount of acres of land for conservation and the land's associated benefits to the public with the final results of the project.

Program Description

The general purpose of the program is to support States and local government initiatives to identify and conserve land that implements State and local goals to increase outdoor recreation opportunities for the benefit of the public and the economy, to secure agricultural and forest resources, to protect drinking water supplies, and to conserve wildlife habitat.

The Highlands Conservation Act Program advances the goals and objectives of the Department of Interior's (draft) 2026-2030 Strategic Plan, including 1) DOI Strategic Plan "Objective 3.1: Lands and waters provide opportunities for recreation" and implementing the associated strategies of expanding recreational opportunities, increasing trails, and increasing efficiency through public-private partnerships and volunteers; and 2) DOI Strategic Plan "Objective 4.2 Work Collaboratively with states, partners, and governments" and implementing the associated key strategies of supporting public-private partnerships, and empower states and local communities in decision-making.

Performance will be measured by comparing the proposed amount of acres of land for conservation and the land's associated benefits for the public with the final results of the project.

Eligible and non-eligible costs are described in the Project Narrative Section.

Legislative Authority

Highlands Conservation Act, Pub. L. 108-421, Nov. 30, 2004, 118 Stat. 2375 [As Amended Through P.L. 117-328, December 29, 2022]; and Emergency Wetlands Resources Act - National Wetlands Inventory, 16 U.S.C. §3901 and §§3931-3932

Type of Award

Projects will be funded through G (Grant).

PREPARE YOUR APPLICATION

Application Content and Format

Pre-Application Requirements

Prior to applying, applicants should review presidential actions found at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/> and DOI Secretary's Orders found at: <https://www.doi.gov/document-library/secretary-order>. By applying in response to this Notice of Funding Opportunity, the applicant certifies awareness and compliance with all currently effective and applicable executive orders and secretary's orders, including but not limited to the Executive Order titled Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing as well as the Executive Order and Secretary's order titled Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History. Applicants are responsible for ensuring their proposed activities are consistent with the intent and requirements of these directives.

Application Documents

Applicants must submit the following forms with their application as specified below. Instructions for accessing and submitting application forms are provided in the [Submission Instructions](#) section of this document below. For instructions on completing form fields, see the form instructions on the [Grants.gov Forms Repository](#).

| Forms/Assurances/Certifications | Submission Requirement |
|---|---|
| SF-424, Application for Federal Assistance Note: For applicants requesting more than \$100,000 in Federal funds, the Authorized Representative's signature (or electronic equivalent) on the Application for Federal Assistance form also represents their certification of the statements in Appendix A to 43 CFR 18-Certification Regarding Lobbying | Required from all applicants |
| SF-424A, Budget Information – Non-Construction Programs | Required for non-construction projects |
| SF-424C: Budget Information – Construction Programs | Required for construction projects |
| SF-429 (Cover Page & Attachment B), Request to Acquire, Improve, or Furnish Real Property Note: The SF-429 forms are only available in the Grants.gov Forms Repository . Applicants must download the form and include the completed form as an application attachment. | Required if requesting to acquire, improve, or furnish real property. Alternatively, you may wait to submit the SF-429 form until the event you receive notification of a grant award and are provided more instructions from the Service at that time. |

| Forms/Assurances/Certifications | Submission Requirement |
|--|---|
| SF-LLL, Disclosure of Lobbying Activities | Required if requesting more than \$100,000 in Federal funds <u>and</u> the applicant has used or plans to use funds other than Federal appropriated funds for lobbying related to the proposed project. |
| Project Abstract Summary (OMB 4040-0019). Must include, in plain language: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Award purpose, • Activities to be performed, • Expected deliverables or outcomes, • Intended beneficiaries, Subrecipient activities (if known or specified at time of award) | Required from all applicants |

Project Narrative

To be eligible for Highlands Conservation Act Grant funding, a parcel must be either 1) in the Highlands Region as defined in the NY-NJ Highlands Regional Study: 2002 Update or the Highlands Regional Study: Connecticut and Pennsylvania 2010 Update, or 2) in a Municipality within the Highlands Expansion Opportunity Area that has been submitted by the Lead State Agency - with Municipal concurrence - and approved by the Service. A map showing this information can be accessed here: <https://northeast-sa-fws.hub.arcgis.com/pages/c6fc33bde7d049728d47f67925c2ea5a>

The Applicants may request the GIS layer of the eligible area from the Service contact listed in this Notice.

The total Federal funding request cannot exceed 50% of the total project cost.

The HCA Grant Program funds only land acquisition projects and associated administrative costs. The Lead State Conservation Agency is the only entity eligible to apply for this grant. A State Conservation Agency, or a County or Municipality through a subaward agreement, may hold the interest in the land acquired. For conservation easements (CE), a State Agency may co-hold the CE with a County, Municipality, or a non-profit land conservation organization.

Use the following format for the Project Narrative:

Need: Describe why the proposed land acquisition is needed. Describe how the proposed land acquisition fulfills the purposes of the Highlands Conservation Act and meets the Department of the Interior priorities (see Program Description section).

Purpose: Explain what is to be accomplished during the period of the project pursuant to the stated need. The purpose should state the desired outcome of the proposed project in general terms.

Objective: Specify the type of interest and acres to be acquired. Specify the target acquisition date.

Expected Results or Benefits: Each parcel must show that at least one of the following resources (identified in the HCA program authorizing legislation) is of “high conservation value” and will be conserved, protected, or enhanced because of the land acquisition project: water, forest, agricultural, wildlife, recreational, or cultural resource. See Merit Review section for more details. Provide quantifiable or verifiable resource benefits when possible. If the property will be open to the public, list the allowed activities and describe how the property can be accessed.

Approach: Explain how the objective(s) will be attained. Include specific procedures, schedules, key cooperators, and respective roles. Describe any subaward relationships.

Location: Describe and show the parcel(s) proposed for acquisition. Proposals must include at minimum an aerial map of the proposed properties and a map showing the location of proposed properties in relation to the Highlands Region boundary. Include the name of the Municipality and County, and the name of the Congressional District in which the property is located. If data layers or assistance with mapping is needed, please reach out to the Service contact listed in this Notice.

Stakeholder Coordination/Involvement: As applicable, describe how your organization has coordinated with and involved other relevant organizations or individuals in planning the project, and detail if and how they will be involved in conducting project activities.

Description of Entities Undertaking the Project: Provide a brief description of the applicant organization and all participating entities and individuals. Provide complete contact information for the individual within the organization that will oversee and manage the project activities.

In addition, please submit project information as it relates to the Merit Review section of this Notice.

Budget Narrative

Applicants must describe and justify items and costs listed in their budget. The budget narrative must identify the following cost items: total estimated costs, non-Federal cost share, third-party contributions, and any pre-award costs. Total project cost is the sum of all allowable costs, including required and voluntary cost share and third-party contributions.

Budget items must be:

- Reasonable, allowable, allocable, and necessary
- Compliant with [2 CFR §200 Subpart E](#) cost principles

Indirect Costs: Applicants must indicate in their budget narrative how they will charge indirect costs, including the rate to be applied:

- **De Minimis Rate:** If eligible, state if your organization is opting to use the de minimis rate of up to 15% of total modified direct costs. Entities that do not have a current Federal negotiated indirect cost rate (including provisional rate) may propose to use the de minimis rate. For more information, refer to [2 CFR 200.414\(f\)](#).
- **Negotiated Rate:** State if you will negotiate with your cognizant agency. If your organization has previously negotiated a rate, attach a copy of the most recently negotiated rate agreement (active or expired).

Provide a breakdown of costs for acquiring each property. The breakdown must show the estimated costs of each acquisition, including itemized list of transaction costs and estimates, as well as the total Federal funding requested and the proposed match contribution.

Eligible costs include the acquisition cost of the fee or conservation easement, and certain typical land transaction costs, including: appraisal to Uniform Appraisal Standards for Federal Land Acquisition (UASFLA/Yellow Book), UASFLA review appraisal, survey, title work as well as title insurance or title certificate, baseline documentation report, staff time related to activities specific to the individual acquisition, environmental assessment, and closing costs. Appraisal and Appraisal Review must be completed to UASFLA standards.

A State may use up to five percent of a grant award to administer the HCA program.

Pre-award eligible land transaction costs – costs incurred before the start date of a grant award – are allowed but are incurred at the applicant’s own risk as there is no guarantee those costs will be approved. Applicants must specify in the Budget Narrative if they are seeking approval for pre-award costs.

Appraisals are not required to be submitted with grant proposals, but market value must be determined prior to the expenditure of funds if the project is funded. If a determination of market value that meets UASFLA is not provided with the grant application and the market value is different than estimated, the Federal contribution may be modified in keeping with Federal regulations and requirements.

Conflict of Interest and Unresolved Matters Disclosures:

If any actual or potential conflict of interest exists related to this project at the time of application, the applicant must provide sufficient information to support a program determination of significance per [2 CFR 1402.112](#). Refer to [2 CFR 200.112](#) Conflict of Interest and [2 CFR 200.113](#).

Overlap or Duplication of Effort Statement:

Applicants must state in their application if the activities, costs, or time commitment of key personnel proposed in this application overlap with those in any other Federal proposal or award or not. If no overlap exists, include a statement to that effect. If any overlap exists, provide:

- Activities: Description any overlapping activities.
- Costs: Description of any overlapping costs.
- Time: Description of any overlapping key personnel time.
- A copy of any overlapping or duplicative proposal submitted to any other potential funding entity.
- Details on when any overlapping proposal was submitted, to whom, and the expected date of the funding decision.

Other Required Information

SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS AND DEADLINES

Address to Request Application Package

This Notice of Funding Opportunity contains all the information necessary to complete the application requirements. For questions contact Shelley DiBona, Shelley_DiBona@ios.goi.gov 1-413-253-8509

Submission Dates and Times

Closing Date for Applications: 10/31/2026

Closing Date Explanation

Electronically submitted applications must be submitted no later than 11:59 PM, ET, on the listed application due date.

Submission Instructions

Apply Through Grants.gov

To apply through [Grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov), please follow the instructions in the [Quick Start Guide for Applicants](#). Before applying, ensure that at least one person at your organization is registered and has the Authorized Organization Representative (AOR). Only the AOR can submit the application. If you need more users, they must create their own Grants.gov account. Follow these steps below to apply:

- *Create a Workspace:* Creating a workspace allows you to complete it online and route it through your organization for review before submitting.
- *Complete a Workspace:* Invite participants to the workspace so you can collaborate on the application. Required applications forms are included in the Grants.gov Funding Opportunity Package and can be completed in the Workspace, unless noted otherwise in the Required Forms table above. Check for errors before submission.
- *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
- *Track a Workspace Submission:* After successfully submitting a workspace application, a Grants.gov Tracking Number (GRANTXXXXXXXX) is automatically assigned to the application.

The system generates a date and time stamp and sends it to the applicant's AOR via email as proof of submission. Make sure your application passes the Grants.gov validation checks. Do not encrypt, zip, or password-protect any files. Only registered individuals in SAM as both a user and an AOR can submit applications. Please allow 30 days to register in Grants.gov.

Application System Technical Support: For Grants.gov technical registration and submission, downloading forms, and application packages, contact Grants.gov Customer Support at 1-800-518-4726 or by email at Support@grants.gov.

Apply Through GrantSolutions

To apply through [GrantSolutions](https://www.grantsolutions.gov), follow these steps:

1. **Register your organization.** Send an e-mail to help@grantsolutions.gov with:
 - Subject: New Organization Request
 - Entity name (organization or individual applying as a natural person)

- Entity type
 - SAM.gov Unique Entity Identifier (not required for individuals)
 - Employer Identification Number (individuals, do not include your SSN)
 - Address
 - Contact details (First and last name, e-mail, phone)
- This information should be the same as entered on the entity’s SAM.gov profile.
2. **Assign system user roles.** Follow the [GrantSolutions “Recipient user” registration instructions](#). Submit a separate Recipient User Account Request form for each official to be assigned a system role. At minimum, the Authorizing Official (ADO) and Principal Investigator/Program Director (PI/PD) must be assigned.
 3. **Log in.** GrantSolutions requires users to log in through Login.gov. Each user must create a [Login.gov](#) account. For instructions, see the [GrantSolutions Training Resources web page](#).
 4. **Find and apply to this Funding Opportunity.** After logging in, click on either the “Begin an application” link (first time applicants) or the “Funding Opportunity” link to go to the “Competing Announcements-Application Kits” list screen. Search the list for this Funding Opportunity’s title and number. Click on the associated “Apply” link. Follow the prompts from there. Required applications forms are provided with the Funding Opportunity in GrantSolutions unless otherwise indicated on the Required Forms table above.
 5. For detailed instructions, see the [GrantSolutions Training Resources web page](#).
 6. **Need help?** Find help topics and contact information on the [GrantSolutions Contact Us page](#).

APPLICATION REVIEW INFORMATION

Eligibility Review

During the eligibility review, the application is checked for timely submission, completed packages (see [Application Documents](#) above) and alignment with the requirements of this announcement. The Federal agency may remove an application if it does not pass the eligibility review.

Only the Lead State Conservation Agency or Agencies from one of the four Highlands States – Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania – is eligible to apply. The HCA only funds land acquisition projects that meet eligibility criteria and are within the Highlands Region. See the Merit Review section for details.

If an applicant selected for funding hasn't finished their SAM.gov registration (see [2 CFR 25.200](#) and [2 CFR 25.110](#)) when the federal agency is ready to make an award, we may decide that the applicant is ineligible for the award and choose to grant it to someone else. Please refer [2 CFR 25.205](#) for more information.

Prior to making an award, the DOI checks the anticipated recipient and their key project personnel against the current list of prohibited or restricted persons or entities in the System for Award Management (SAM.gov) Exclusions database. We are prohibited from making an award if a recipient or any key personnel are found ineligible, prohibited, restricted, or otherwise

excluded from receiving or participating in an award, as their ineligibility condition applies to this program.

If removed from consideration for ineligibility, the Federal agency will notify the applicant in writing.

Merit Review

The following criteria will be used by the Merit Review Panel to determine eligibility of all proposed projects. Projects will be considered for an award only if these criteria are met.

Minimum Criteria for all projects:

1. The project is either 1) in the Highlands Region as defined in the NY-NJ Highlands Regional Study: 2002 Update and the Highlands Regional Study: Connecticut and Pennsylvania 2010 Update, or 2) in a Municipality within the Highlands Expansion Opportunity Area that has been submitted by the Lead State Agency - with Municipal concurrence - and approved by the Service. A map showing this information can be accessed here: <https://northeast-sa-fws.hub.arcgis.com/pages/c6fc33bde7d049728d47f67925c2ea5a>. If spatial data to determine parcel eligibility are needed, contact the Service representative provided in this Notice.
2. 1:1 cost share.

In addition, the Merit Review Panel will score Competitive Grant proposals based on the criteria listed below. A maximum of 115 points is available.

Resource maps for Forest, Water, Wildlife, Agriculture, and Recreation resource categories are incorporated into the scoring criteria. Those maps can be accessed here: <https://northeast-sa-fws.hub.arcgis.com/pages/c6fc33bde7d049728d47f67925c2ea5a>.

A narrative section for each of the resource categories also contributes points.

1. Wildlife Resource Category

Total 25 points. 15 points from the HCA Wildlife Resource Map and 10 points from Narrative.

Map Scoring component – maximum 15 points.

Map description: The Wildlife Resource Map prioritizes areas in the Highlands using Northeast Region Conservation Design Areas of Agreement layer, a combination of four existing wildlife prioritization tools: 1) Nature's Network Landscape Conservation Design 2) Map of Biodiversity Importance (developed by NatureServe) 3) The Nature Conservancy's (TNC's) Resilient and Connected Network, and 4) ESRI Green infrastructure.

Projects will receive points based on the maximum value in the parcel on the Wildlife Resource Map. If the parcel has a maximum Wildlife Resource value of:

- 4, then the parcel will receive 15 points
- 3, then the parcel will receive 12 points
- 2, then the parcel will receive 9 points
- 1, then the parcel will receive 6 points

- Projects that do not have any mapped areas for this value receive 0 points in the map scoring component of this category.

Narrative Scoring Component – maximum 10 points. Projects will receive points here if:

- The project will benefit Federally Threatened or Endangered Species or Species of Greatest Conservation Need (please list which species and how they will benefit) (up to 3 points).
- The habitat is considered a priority in the State Wildlife Action Plan (up to 3 points).
- Beyond the map, describe how this project conserves important wildlife resources and creates wildlife corridors or interconnected habitats (up to 4 points).

2. Water Resource Category

Total 15 points. 5 points from the HCA Water Resource Map and 10 points from Narrative.

Map Scoring component – maximum 5 points.

Map description: The Water Resource Map identifies areas that are important for drinking water protection. Areas of the landscape that overlay important drinking water aquifers or contain surface water wetlands, rivers, or streams, or 330 ft buffers around surface water are scored as higher priority.

Projects will receive points based on the maximum value in the parcel on the Water Resource Map. If the parcel has a maximum Water Resource value of:

- 6, then the parcel will receive 5 points
- 5, then the parcel will receive 4 points
- 4, then the parcel will receive 3 points
- 3, then the parcel will receive 3 points
- 2, then the parcel will receive 2 points
- 1, then the parcel will receive 1 point
- Projects that do not have any mapped areas for this value receive 0 points in the map scoring component of this category.

Narrative Scoring Component – maximum 10 points.

- Beyond the map, describe how this project conserves important water resources. Note if the water resources on the property designated as important by federal, state, or local authorities. (Up to 5 points).
- Describe if the likely future management of the land will include a buffer zone around the waterway(s) or other edge-of-field/in-field best practices as part of certain agricultural or forestry activities designed to protect water resources. (Up to 5 points).

3. Forest and Agriculture Resource Category

Total 15 points. 10 points from either the HCA Forest or Agricultural Resource Map and 5 points from Narrative.

Forest/Agriculture Map Scoring Component – maximum 10 points.

Forest Map description: This map prioritizes forested land that occurs in core forest blocks and is important for connectivity. Additionally, forest land in Municipalities that have <15% forest cover is also prioritized.

Agricultural Map description: This map prioritizes areas that were classified as farmland in 2016 or 2021, have prime farmland soils, and are in close proximity to other farmland.

Projects will receive the maximum value they could qualify for based on the maximum value in the parcel for either the Forest or Agricultural Resource map (not both).

If the parcel has a maximum Forest Resource value of:

- 13-14, then the parcel will receive 10 points
- 11-12, then the parcel will receive 8 points
- 9-10, then the parcel will receive 6 points
- 7-8, then the parcel will receive 4 points
- 4-6, then the parcel will receive 2 points
- 1-3, then the parcel will receive 1 point

OR, if the parcel has a maximum Agricultural Resource value of:

- 8, then the parcel will receive 10 points
- 6-7, then the parcel will receive 8 points
- 4-5, then the parcel will receive 6 points
- 2-3, then the parcel will receive 4 points
- 1, then the parcel will receive 2 points

Projects that do not have any mapped areas for forest or agricultural value receive 0 points for the map scoring component of this category.

Narrative Scoring Component – maximum 5 points.

- Beyond the map, describe how this project conserves either important forest or agricultural resources. Reference regional, state, local plans that this project is helping to implement, if applicable (Up to 3 points).
- Describe how wildlife values on the property will be protected from the impacts of land management practices. (Up to 2 points).

4. Recreation Resource Category

Total 20 points. 5 points from the HCA Resource Map and 15 points from Narrative.

Map Scoring component – maximum 5 points.

Map description: The Recreation Priority layer prioritizes areas around regional and state hiking trails, scenic viewsheds, and areas around access points to recreational waters.

Projects will receive points based on the maximum value in the parcel on the Recreational Resource map. If the parcel has a maximum Recreational Resource value of:

- 4, then the parcel will receive 5 points
- 3, then the parcel will receive 4 points
- 2, then the parcel will receive 3 points
- 1, then the parcel will receive 2 points
- Projects that do not have any mapped areas for Recreational Resource values receive 0 points for the map scoring component of this category.

Narrative Scoring Component – maximum 15 points.

- Does the project meet recreational objectives described in a Municipal, County, or State plan? More points are given for the level of contribution to recreational objectives. (Up to 8 points).
- Describe how the project improves access for hunting, fishing, hiking and other outdoor recreation activities. (Up to 7 points).

5. Cultural Resource Category

Total 15 points. All 15 points are from a Narrative – there is no associated Cultural Resource Map.

Describe how the project protects or enhances important cultural resources. This might include the historical importance of the project or the importance to Tribal Nations. Provide supporting information, such as documentation from the State Historic Preservation Office, Tribal Historic Preservation Office, historical or heritage area designations from the local, regional, state, or federal plans, etc.

6. Other Benefits Resource Category

Describe Other Benefits not captured in the scoring criteria. This could include the urgency of the project; collaboration between local, county, state, and federal entities; flood mitigation, clean water supply protection and other public safety benefits; and/or additional details on alignment with the Department of Interior Strategic Plan. (Up to 5 points).

7. Presidential and Department of Interior Priorities

Up to 20 points may be awarded based on the extent that the project demonstrably:

advances the Trump Administration’s priorities, including E.O. 14154: Unleashing American Energy, justifies alignment with priorities and requirements in E.O. 14332: Improving Oversight in Federal Grantmaking; includes primary project elements that develop, demonstrate, and or implement artificial intelligence (AI) technologies that advance the Trump Administration and Department of Interior’s priorities for AI, including OMB M-25-21 Accelerating the Use of AI through Innovation, Governance, and Public Trust; S.O. 3444: Leading Interior’s Path to Artificial Intelligence Transformation; aligns with Secretary Burgum’s strategic objectives, including those identified in S.O.s 3417: Addressing the National Energy Emergency, 3418 Unleashing American Energy, 3419 Delivering Emergency Price Relief for

American Families and Defeating the Cost-of-Living Crisis; aligns with goals and objectives in the U.S. Department of the Interior FY 2026-2030 Strategic Plan; and supports water management and enhanced operational flexibility in Reclamation States, with priority given to the Colorado River Basin, which is experiencing long-term drought conditions.

Please address only those priorities that are applicable to your project. **All priorities will be given equal consideration.** A project will not necessarily receive more points simply because multiple priorities are addressed. Points will be allocated based on the degree to which the project supports, advances, or otherwise demonstrates an enhancement of one or more of the priorities identified, and whether the connection to the stated priority (or priorities) is (are) well supported.

Review and Selection Process

This program reviews proposed budgets to ensure:

- figures are correct
- estimated costs are necessary and reasonable and clearly linked to project narratives
- avoid obviously unallowable costs
- identify costs requiring prior approval
- ensure indirect cost rates are applied correctly
- confirm cost sharing requirements are reflected in the budget.

This program reviews applications for potential overlap or duplication between the proposed project and any other funded or proposed project. Depending on the circumstances, DOI may choose to not make an award.

Prior to conducting the comprehensive merit review, an initial review will be performed to determine whether: (1) the applicant is eligible for an award; (2) the information required by the NOFO has been submitted; (3) all mandatory requirements of the NOFO are satisfied; (4) the proposed project is responsive to the program objectives of the NOFO (program determination); and (5) the proposed project is in compliance with all applicable executive and secretary orders, including the President's executive order on Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing as well as the executive order and Secretary order on Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History. If an applicant fails to meet the requirements or objectives of the NOFO, or does not provide sufficient information for review, the applicant will be considered nonresponsive and eliminated from further review.

The Merit Review Panel will include subject matter experts from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and the U.S. Forest Service. At least three reviewers will evaluate each proposal on the criteria listed above. Additional subject matter experts may be requested to provide reviews of projects if deemed necessary by the review panel. All elements of review will be maintained electronically by the Service's Highlands Conservation Act program administrator. The Service will evaluate recommendations from the review panel and seek consensus. The Service is responsible for all final decisions.

Risk Review

Prior to making an award, the applicant will be assessed for their level of risk per [2 CFR 200.206](#). This assessment includes the applicant's financial management capabilities, project delivery experience, staffing resources, past award performance, administration and reporting compliance records, and overall project complexity and potential for challenges. If an award will be made, special conditions may be applied to the award corresponding to the assessed risk. For awards over the simplified acquisition threshold (currently \$350,000), a review of the applicant's eligibility and financial integrity information in the applicant's SAM.gov records will also be performed per [2 CFR 200.206](#).

AWARD NOTICES

Notices of Federal Award are sent electronically via GrantSolutions or e-mail. These notices outline the terms, conditions, and payment instructions per [2 CFR 200.211](#). The Notice of Federal Award signed by an authorized Grants Officer is the legal instrument obligating financial assistance to a recipient. Any other prior notice is not an authorization to begin work. If the program allows pre-award costs per [2 CFR 200.458](#), beginning performance before receiving a Notice of Federal Award is at the applicant's own risk.

Anticipated Project Start Date: 01/01/2027

Anticipated Project End Date: 12/31/2032

An initial determination of eligibility of proposed acquisitions will be made based on the information provided in the proposal package. Prior to acquiring any interest in land, Federal award recipients must provide the Service's Office of Conservation Investment with the items listed on the "Land Acquisition Grant Document Checklist" which is included in the grant award letter. The documents on the list are required and must be completed in sufficient detail to enable Service staff to determine if acquisitions are consistent with the purpose of the Highlands Conservation Act and are compliant with the National Environmental Policy Act, Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, and other Federal regulations. Grants will be conditionally approved with these additional documentation requirements included in the grant award letter. Federal award recipients may not acquire an interest in land until they have received an additional written final approval from the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

A project begins and ends on the specified date noted on the grant award document between the Federal award recipient and an authorized representative of the U.S. Government. The Highlands Conservation Act-funded acquisition must occur within this period.

Lands purchased under the Highlands Conservation Act must be managed using best management practices that are consistent with the goals of Highlands Conservation Act "to protect nationally significant natural resources in the Highlands region".

Highlands Conservation Act funds must be used within four years from the date of a signed award document from the Service. Period of performance extensions may be requested under extenuating circumstances with a clear justification of the need for the extension, and must be made in advance of the grant end date.

Award notices are planned for January 2026.

POST AWARD REQUIREMENTS AND ADMINISTRATION

Administration and National Policy Requirements

For award administration and national policy requirements, see the [DOI General Terms and Conditions](#). Infrastructure projects require the use of American iron, steel, manufacture products, and construction materials per [2 CFR 184](#).

See the [FWS General Award Terms and Conditions](#) for national policy requirements for FWS awards. Special terms and conditions will be detailed in award notices.

Reporting

The recipient's Notice of Award will detail all reporting requirements, including frequency, due dates, and instructions for requesting extensions. In general, but not limited to, recipients must:

- Submit Federal Financial reports and Program Performance reports.
- Use the [Federal Financial Report \(SF-425\) form](#) for financial reporting,
- Monitor award activities and report on program performance per [2 CFR 200.329](#),
- Promptly notify the awarding program in writing of any issues, delays, or conditions impairing award objectives per [2 CFR 200.329\(e\)](#),
- Disclose any conflicts of interest related to their award that arise during the award period per [2 CFR 1402.112](#),
- Report on the status of real property acquired under the award in which the Federal government retains an interest per [2 CFR 200.330](#), and
- Report all violations of Federal criminal law involving fraud, bribery, or gratuity violations potentially affecting the Federal award per [2 CFR 200.113](#).
- Report any matters related to recipient integrity and performance to SAM.gov per [Appendix XII to 2 CFR 200](#).
- If the Federal share of the award is more than \$100,000 and the recipient makes or agrees to make any payment using non-appropriated funds for lobbying in connection to the award, disclose those activities using the Disclosure of Lobbying (SF-LLL) form per [43 CFR 18.100](#).
- Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006 (FFATA) and 2 CFR 170 requires certain recipients to report information on executive compensation, and information on all sub-awards, subcontracts and consortiums equal to or over \$30,000 to SAM.gov.

Other Information