



Regional Conservation Partnership Program

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

**Announcement: [USDA-NRCS-NHQ-RCPPAFA-22-
NOFO0001137](#)**

Date Issued: January 13, 2022



**United States
Department of
Agriculture**



**United States
Department of
Agriculture**

Natural Resources Conservation Service

Programs Deputy Area
Financial Assistance Program Division
Projects Branch

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Summary Information

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

Funding Opportunity Title: Notice of Funding Opportunity for NRCS's Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) – RCPP Alternative Funding Arrangements for Federal fiscal year (FY) 2022.

Funding Opportunity Number: USDA-NRCS-NHQ-RCPPAFA-22-NOFO0001137

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

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

NOTE: The FY 22 RCPP Classic provision is implemented through a separate funding announcement, USDA-NRCS-NHQ-RCPP-22-NOFO0001136.

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 coinvest 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) for the benefit of eligible agricultural producers and landowners. NRCS and partners design, implement and evaluate RCPP projects on agricultural and non-industrial private forest land. NRCS coinvests in RCPP projects selected through a competitive application process that evaluates applications based on four criteria: impact, partner contributions, innovation, and partnerships and management.

The RCPP AFA component 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 an RCPP AFA rather than RCPP Classic. Additionally, applicants should consider the additional administrative and technical assistance responsibilities that accompany receipt of an RCPP AFA award.

The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (2018 Farm Bill) amendments to RCPP 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 nonindustrial private forest lands.

This notice announces the availability of funding for up to 15 RCPP AFA projects in FY 2022. 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 [Programs Portal](#).

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

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

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

To join the conference, click: <https://ems8.intellor.com/login/842136>
Join the Zoom event and follow the prompts to connect audio by computer or telephone.

Need to join via phone only?

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

Access Code: 2626600# .

Zoom Support: 800-345-0857

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

B. Delivering Assistance through Alternative Funding Arrangements

Through RCPP Alternative Funding Arrangements (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 from NRCS to a lead partner and not directly from NRCS to producers, landowners, or other entities as in RCPP Classic.

NRCS implements RCPP AFAs through programmatic partnership agreements and associated supplemental agreements versus grant agreements. NRCS does not use grant agreements for RCPP AFA because the agency will be substantially involved through the provision of prescribed technical assistance activities to producers. Grant agreements are only used by federal agencies as the financial instrument to award funding when the awarding agency does not have substantial involvement in the grant activity.

Through this announcement, NRCS gives substantial preference to lead partners that can provide producers the technical assistance necessary to implement the conservation activities that are part of an RCPP AFA project. NRCS will provide non-delegable technical assistance for each project to fulfill National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), and Endangered Species Act (ESA) section 7 compliance requirements and ensure that participating producers receiving RCPP funding comply with the 1985 Farm Bill's (as amended) adjusted gross income (AGI), highly erodible lands (HEL) and wetlands conservation (WC) 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. See section IX for link to the list of State RCPP Coordinators. 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.

C. Vision and Goals of the Program

RCPP is an innovative program that has as its critical feature a co-investment approach through which NRCS and partners collaborate to implement natural resource conservation

activities. Following are four key principles of RCPP:

- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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 nonindustrial 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:

- Projects making infrastructure investments relating to agricultural or nonindustrial private forest production that benefit multiple producers or landowners and address natural resource concerns such as drought, wildfire, or water quality impairment on the land covered by the project.
- Projects addressing natural resources concerns through targeted coordination with producers and landowners, 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.
- Projects that use innovative approaches to leverage the Federal investment in conservation with private financial mechanisms, in conjunction with agricultural production or nonindustrial private forest resource management. These projects may

include pay-for-performance, pay-for-success, and environmental market approaches.

- Any other project consistent with RCPP program goals and objectives that cannot be effectively carried out through RCPP Classic.

D. Administration Priorities

Climate-Smart Agriculture

NRCS intends to award a significant portion of the available AFA funding to proposals that address Climate Smart Agriculture and Forestry approaches, systems, and practices. Such proposals must be consistent with one of the project types above and may address carbon market approaches, approaches that create new markets for agricultural commodities produced with climate smart technologies and practices, other innovative agricultural conservation approaches or technologies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and/or sequester carbon, and activities that increase agricultural resiliency and adaptation.

Urban Agriculture

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

Racial Justice & Equity

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

E. Historically Underserved Producers

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

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

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

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

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

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

F. Overview of the RCPP Application and Selection Process

Applicants submit a full application in response to this funding announcement, following the guidance in part V of this notice. NRCS evaluates proposals following the guidance in part VI of this notice.

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

G. NRCS Project Oversight and TA Responsibilities

NRCS will participate in each RCPP AFA project. At a minimum, NRCS is required to verify that participating producers comply with the Farm Bill's AGI, HEL and WC 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.

H. Final Rule

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

II. FUNDING AVAILABILITY

NRCS can make up to 15 awards through this RCPP AFA funding announcement. For the FY22 RCPP Classic and AFA competitions there is a total of up to \$225 million available (the FY 2022 AFA competition will be implemented through a separate funding announcement). Fifty percent of RCPP funding is dedicated to NRCS-designated critical conservation area (CCA) projects and 50 percent to projects in the State/multistate category.

The maximum 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 programmatic partnership agreements (PPA) and supplemental agreements (SA) with lead partners. Terms of PPA and SA agreements will 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 and approved by NRCS.

RCPP funds, at the time of agreement execution, remain available for the duration of the project, generally not to exceed 5 years from the date of partnership agreement execution. Partners may request an agreement term of longer than 5 years in exceptional circumstances (see section V). For all RCPP awards, a single 1-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 critical conservation area (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 2022 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

RCPP Critical Conservation Areas	Priority Resource Concerns
Longleaf Pine Range (AL, FL, GA, LA, MS, NC, SC, TX, VA)	• Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates • Degraded plant condition • Water quality degradation
Western Waters (ID, OR, WA, CA)	• Excess/insufficient water/drought • Water quality degradation • Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates
Northeast Forests and Waters (CT, MA, ME, NH, NY, RI, VT)	• Water quality degradation • Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates • Degraded plant condition
Prairie Grasslands Region (CO, KS, IA, MO, MN, MT, ND, NE, NM, OK, SD, TX, WY)	• Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates • Degraded plant condition • Excess/insufficient water/drought
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 project boundaries must fall entirely 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 (AGI) Waivers

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

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

III. ELIGIBILITY INFORMATION

A. RCPP Partners

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

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

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

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

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

B. Contributing Partners

In addition to any contributions coming from the lead partner, RCPP projects may include direct or in-kind contributions from other entities, known as “contributing partners.” Contributing partners may be an eligible partner (entities described in the list in section III.A above) and may also be a third-party individual or organization (even a non-USDA Federal agency) that would not qualify as an eligible partner by the statutory definition. Note, however,

that the lead partner is ultimately responsible for delivery of all partner contributions.

C. Producers and Landowners

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

- Provide a tax identification number. Where applicable, American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Pacific Islanders may use another unique identification number for each individual eligible for payment;
- Where applicable, provide the percent interest share in a payment consistent with operation or ownership shares;
- Comply with the HEL and WC provisions found in 7 CFR Part 12; and
- Comply with the AGI provision or receive a waiver as described in section II.B of this announcement.

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

Qualified partners awarded supplemental agreements to implement entity-held easements or public works activities are not subject to HEL, WC, Farm Tract Eligibility (FTE), and AGI requirements.

Lead partners are responsible for working with NRCS to ensure that any producer or landowner receiving RCPP funding through an AFA project is in compliance with HEL and WC provisions and the AGI limitation. These checks of producer or landowner eligibility must be completed prior to executing individual enrollment contracts or agreements and prior to issuing payments. Lead partners must furnish the data required for NRCS to complete compliance checks.

D. Eligible Activities

1. Covered Program Authorities

The RCPP statute includes several USDA programs for NRCS to use as a guide for determining eligible RCPP activities. The “covered programs” are the:

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program
- Conservation Stewardship Program
- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program
- Healthy Forests Reserved Program
- Public Law 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 RCPP Classic, but authorized conservation activities are defined by 7 CFR part 1464.

If partners intend to carry out land improvement activities without using existing NRCS technical standards or payment methods, applications must describe the alternative approach in enough detail to give NRCS confidence that the project will be successful and any payments to producers or landowners are credible. 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.

2. RCPP AFA Entity-Held Easements

U.S.-held easements are not available under the RCPP AFA component. Under RCPP AFA, all easements must be acquired and held by a qualified eligible entity. Partners are invited to propose innovative conservation easement approaches in agricultural settings, however, eligibility requirements (outlined in this section above and below) associated with entities (that hold AFA easements), the lands under easement, and each landowner must be met.

For RCPP AFA entity-held easements, NRCS will provide up to 25 percent of the fair market value of the easement, as determined by a before-and-after appraisal. Entity-held easements acquired through an RCPP AFA project will not include a United States Right of Enforcement held by USDA and thus will not be included in NRCS's easement stewardship portfolio. NRCS will not perform easement deed or appraisal review prior to closing but may conduct such reviews prior to payment or as part of a post-closing quality assurance review.

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

NRCS will include in the AFA PPA and/or relevant supplemental agreement a set of minimum deed requirements*, and applicable appraisal, eligibility, and easement acquisition requirements. Eligible entities are responsible for ensuring that the conservation easement deed addresses the RCPP minimum deed requirements and have the option, but are not required, to use the non-US Right of Enforcement version of the RCPP minimum deed terms available under RCPP Classic.

*The RCPP Classic minimum deed terms and AFA minimum deed requirements are posted on the RCPP [How to Apply web page](#).

3. Environmental Compliance

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 NRCS-completed 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 section VII. B, "Environmental Review Requirements," for additional information.

E. Land Eligibility

RCPP funded project activities must be carried out on eligible agricultural or nonindustrial private forest land or on associated land on which NRCS determines an eligible activity would help achieve conservation benefits. Partner contributions must occur with the project area and have a demonstrable positive impact on eligible lands. Generally, eligible land must be shown in Farm Service Agency records as private or Tribal and be used for agricultural or forestry purposes.

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

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

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

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

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

IV. RCPP AFA Project Funding

RCPP funding provided by NRCS is divided into two categories—financial assistance (FA) and technical assistance (TA). Each RCPP project will receive a maximum commitment of funding as follows at the time of proposal selection:

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

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

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

A. Technical Assistance

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

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

Implementation Technical Assistance

Technical assistance is required for field-level conservation planning, practice design, installation and verification, and other needs associated with supporting the implementation of

RCPP conservation activities. For RCPP, these activities are known as Implementation Technical Assistance, or TA-I.

For AFA projects, it is expected that lead partners, other project partners, or third parties will carry out TA-I activities necessary to implement a project's conservation activities. When TA-I activities are carried out by partners or a third party, they must be carried out according to applicable Federal requirements, including NRCS planning procedures, conservation practice standards, and negotiated technical requirements. Any partner TA-I activities must be carried out at defensible rates approved by NRCS.

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

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

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

TA-I budgets in project proposals are tentative. The flexible RCPP agreement structure allows for TA-I to be either expended by NRCS or obligated to a partner at any time during the life of a project. During both PPA and any subsequent supplemental agreement negotiations, NRCS will work with lead partners to refine proposal budgets so that TA-I is expended as efficiently as possible to ensure project success.

Enhancement Technical Assistance

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

A maximum of 7 percent of the total RCPP funding request is available as TA-E. It is anticipated that not all items potentially eligible for TA-E will be funded in selected projects

due to the 7 percent cap. Where additional TA-E is required for project success, partners must provide contributions for enhancement activities when the cap is exceeded.

If applicants do not request TA-E as part of their proposal, that TA funding will be folded back into program funding as determined by NRCS. Proposals submitted without TA-E requests may be allowed to convert unneeded TA-I to TA-E during proposal negotiations, but such conversions are at the sole discretion of NRCS.

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

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

For AFA projects, lead partners generally assume the responsibility to carry out all TA activities to ensure conservation activities are implemented, outcomes are reported, the partnership is coordinated, etc. To that end, the strict line between Enhancement TA (up to 7%) and Implementation TA (18%) may be waived during project negotiation. Lead partners planning to request additional Enhancement TA at the expense of Implementation TA should identify known needs in narrative responses to proposal questions. If the partner can provide assurances that conservation implementation will not suffer and additional TA-E funding is justified, NRCS may waive the 7% cap on TA-E during project negotiations.

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

B. Administrative Costs

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

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

C. Partner Contributions

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

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

To count as partner contributions, partner expenditures must be:

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

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

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

The table below includes potentially eligible Partner Contributions.

Potentially Eligible Partner Contributions
Deliver financial assistance and benefits to producers or landowners to complement RCPP funding, addressing one or more project resource concerns.
Develop and manage RCPP agreements with NRCS.
Other RCPP project-related outreach and education, including inventories, analyses, and tools needed to inform outreach.
Inventories and data to support environmental evaluations.
Providing information or tools needed by NRCS to support agency eligibility determinations, evaluation, and ranking.

Potentially Eligible Partner Contributions
Develop and enter into FA contracts or agreements to implement RCPP-eligible activities using non-NRCS funds.
TA to producers or landowners for planning directly related to installation or management of eligible conservation activities.
TA to support delivery of eligible FA or resource assessment services (e.g., securing and managing contracts for third-party services like engineering studies, surveys, appraisals to satisfy NRCS requirements for U.S.-held easements or watershed projects).
Project-related communications and coordination activities.
Due diligence activities for Entity-held easements.
Development and calculation of quantifiable project outcomes.
Manage the leveraging of other funds related to the RCPP project goals and objectives.
Development of innovative conservation approaches.
Project management and partnership development to accomplish project goals.
Staff development/training/capacity building.
Developing/maintaining connections to related conservation efforts.
Administrative costs (see Section IV.D. for limits on eligible administrative costs)

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

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

- Organizations that have an active Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement (NICRA) with the Federal Government must use the rate identified in the NICRA to determine the indirect costs to be included in a negotiated PPA as contributions. Current NICRAs must be uploaded as part of the RCPP project proposal in the RCPP portal where applicable.
- Entities without a NICRA may use a de minimis rate of up to 10 percent indirect costs rate.
- To determine the amount of indirect costs that may be counted as partner contribution for RCPP, the NICRA rate or the de minimis rate may only be charged against the same partner's negotiated TA contributions.
- Due to the unique nature of RCPP agreements, NRCS may identify certain partner expenses as administrative costs that are not defined as indirect costs in an organization's NICRA. Partners may request that such partner expenses be considered partner contribution beyond the NICRA rate (partners may flag this in the proposal's

Contributions deliverables table and discuss with NRCS if the proposal is selected for an award).

- Where indirect costs are to be included in partner contributions, they must be identified in the contributions deliverables table as “Other Eligible Contributions” and listed separately so that NRCS can clearly determine that 1) the appropriate rates are being used and 2) the indirect contributions are only being claimed against the partner provided TA as required above.

V. RCPP AFA Project Proposals

A. Format and Instructions

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

At least 4 weeks prior to the proposal deadline, and before starting to enter a proposal in the Programs Portal, entities interested in applying for an RCPP AFA project are advised to request a meeting with the appropriate NRCS State RCPP Coordinators.

Communication with State RCPP Coordinators is critical to help partners—

- Frame conservation benefits in terms of NRCS resource concerns;
- Understand RCPP AFA-eligible activities and which activities are best suited to treat NRCS resource concerns within the project area;
- Develop their approach for measuring conservation (and potentially economic and social) outcomes of RCPP projects;
- Establish mutual understanding of program and partner capacities and rules (for both NRCS and partners).

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

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

B. RCPP AFA Proposal Content

The RCPP AFA project application must adhere to the guidance below, which is consistent with the design of the application entry screens of the NRCS Programs 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 NRCS staff. The primary contact should be the project director (i.e., the individual coordinating project activities) and the alternate contact should be the administrative contact (i.e., the individual managing

administrative components of the project such as project payments, etc.).

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

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

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

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

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

- a. Tie to Project Scope—how the contribution furthers project

implementation for the benefit of producers.

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

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

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

As described in Section IV.B above, partner contributions can include partner administrative expenses, within limits. To help NRCS to evaluate the eligibility of administrative expense contributions, applicants should either include them as a separate line item(s) or make the administrative expenses clear if they are included in a contribution line item (e.g., personnel costs).

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

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

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

Applicants should allow ample time to obtain or renew a SAM number.

VI. PROPOSAL EVALUATION

A. Evaluation Criteria

RCPP AFA proposals 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 proposal 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 lead partner propose to generate substantial conservation benefits, and are those benefits likely to be achieved based on proposed project methods and approaches?
- Is the project area the appropriate scale for the resource concern(s) and goals identified?
- Does the proposal describe an approach to measure and report on achievable environmental project outcomes? What about economic and social outcomes?

2. Partner Contributions (25 points)

- To what extent are partner contributions value-added and bringing unique and qualified expertise or resources to the project to enhance project outcomes (e.g., cash vs. in-kind, FA vs. TA, TA skills and expertise)?
- Do proposed contribution deliverables, contribution commitment letters, and valuation methods demonstrate a clear and compelling relationship to project deliverables and outcomes?
- Are contribution deliverables and valuation methods clearly documented?

3. Innovation (25 points):

- Does the project propose innovative methods or approaches for conservation planning, implementation, or assessment, or propose the use of promising new technologies that have a demonstrated likelihood of success?
- Does the lead partner 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):

- Is the proposal supported by a robust partnership that includes a diversity of entities and organizations? Is the partnership of a size and composition required to achieve the proposed conservation benefits?
- Is the project timeline realistic, reflecting the time, tasks, and expenses needed to carry out project planning, implementation, and evaluation needs?
- Does the lead partner demonstrate experience managing similar conservation projects,

- executing deliverables, and successfully getting conservation on the ground?
- For multistate projects, is the number of States included in the project a reasonable number to facilitate effective project management?
- Do the partners have a history of collaboration and engagement with agricultural producers and private landowners to ensure high levels of participation? Does the proposal include a strategy for partner-led outreach and education to agricultural producers and private landowners?
- Does the proposal meaningfully encourage or include the participation of historically underserved producers and landowners, including socially disadvantaged, beginning, limited resource and veteran farmers and ranchers?
- Does the partnership include an organization(s) that has a history of collaborating with or representing HU producers?

B. Proposal Evaluation Process

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

VII. AWARD INFORMATION AND ADMINISTRATION

A. RCPP Partnership and Supplemental Agreements

After a project proposal is selected to become a AFA project, the lead State Conservationist will initiate negotiations with the lead partner to define the final scope and responsibilities of the AFA partnership agreement. PPAs are designed to be completed by NRCS staff, with input and concurrence from the lead partner. The lead NRCS State office will lead PPA negotiations and ensure the agreement is finalized and signed by the deadline included in the award announcement. This process will include detailed discussions on the roles of the lead partner, contributing partners, and NRCS in implementing the project, including the provision of FA and TA funding.

The RCPP partnership agreement serves as the agreement guiding the project. There is no funding obligated through the RCPP partnership agreement. Rather the RCPP 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. RCPP AFA applicants should anticipate a project start date of December 31, 2022.

Following execution of the RCPP AFA partnership agreement, the obligation of RCPP funds will be made through 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.

Prior to the execution of any RCPP supplemental agreements, NRCS and the lead 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 such as producer outreach activities, then the 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 lead partner 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 lead 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 lead partner fails to produce documentation of reimbursable and partner contribution expenditures, NRCS may require the lead partners to take remedial action. If lead partners are unable to satisfy NRCS's requirements, the RCPP AFA partnership agreement or supplemental agreements may be suspended or terminated.

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, NHPA, ESA, 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 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, NHPA, ESA, 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 NHPA and section 7 of the ESA may also be required for projects not using NRCS conservation practice standards.

Project proposals should incorporate explicit acknowledgment of any NEPA, NHPA, ESA, or 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 NHPA and section 7 of the ESA 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.

C. Civil Rights and Non-Discrimination

AFA lead partners accept the responsibility of implementing nearly all components of a RCPP project. As part of that responsibility, lead partners must comply with Federal Civil Rights and non-discrimination statutes, regulations and policies. Lead partners must not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity, religion, reprisal, and where applicable, political beliefs, marital status, familial or parental status, sexual orientation. Entities providing technical services to producers and landowners must comply with all Federal requirements as an equal opportunity employer. This includes administering policies and practices that are designed to prevent discrimination against any qualified employee or applicant on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity, religion, reprisal, and where applicable, political beliefs, marital status, familial or parental status, sexual orientation, or all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program, or protected genetic information in employment or in any program or activity conducted or funded by the USDA. This policy of nondiscrimination applies to all employment practices, including hiring, compensation, benefits, promotion, training, and termination.

D. Reporting Requirements

Reporting requirements are included in RCPP partnership agreements. Lead partners are required to submit annual progress reports through the Programs Portal. These reports include information on any subcontracts awarded, the use of RCPP 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.

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

E. Notifications

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

F. Withdrawal of Applications

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

VIII. SUBMISSION INFORMATION

Applicants must submit applications through the NRCS Programs Portal at <https://nrcs-sites.secure.force.com/>

Applicants must have eAuthentication (eAuth) level-2 credentials to access the Programs Portal. This is a Departmental requirement and is non-negotiable. The steps for obtaining eAuth permissions to submit a proposal 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 Programs portal system access (designated user only) (<https://nrcs-sites.secure.force.com/>) under “New Users” Click “Start Here.”
- Develop full application in Programs Portal.

The Programs Portal automatically sends applicants an email to acknowledge receipt at the time of submission. Applicants are solely responsible for ensuring timely submission through the Programs Portal and are strongly advised to allow sufficient time to obtain eAuth and Programs Portal access, and to complete the application in the Programs 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, or submitted by mail, fax or courier.

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

IX. AGENCY CONTACTS

Partners with questions are encouraged to contact the appropriate NRCS State RCPP coordinator with proposal-related questions. State Coordinators are often the person best suited to answer partner questions about proposals and RCPP in general. The [RCPP website](#)

maintains a list of NRCS State RCPP Coordinators updated for each funding opportunity. Potential applicants may also contact national RCPP staff by email at rcpp@usda.gov with questions.