



# Regional Conservation Partnership Program Alternative Funding Arrangement (AFA) Notice of Funding Opportunity



Fiscal Year 2026  
Natural Resources Conservation Service  
Notice of Funding Opportunity  
No. USDA-NRCS-NHQ-RCPP-AFA-26-NOFO0001451

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## NOTICE OF FUNDING OPPORTUNITY SUMMARY AND PROGRAM PRIORITIES

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

**Funding Opportunity Title:** Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFA) for Federal fiscal year (FY) 2026

**Funding Opportunity Number:** USDA-NRCS-NHQ-RCPP-AFA-26-NOFO0001451

**Assistance Listing:** 10.932, Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

**Due Date:** NRCS must receive proposals by 4:59 p.m. Eastern Time on August 24, 2026.

**Note:** The RCPP AFA and Classic FY 2026 notices of funding opportunity (NOFO) will run concurrently. For information on Classic proposals please see USDA-NRCS-NHQ-RCPP-Classic-26-NOFO0001450.

The RCPP promotes the coordination of NRCS conservation activities with partners that offer value-added contributions to expand our ability to address on-farm, watershed, and regional natural resource concerns. Through the RCPP, NRCS seeks to co-invest with partners to implement projects that provide solutions to conservation challenges thereby measurably improving the resource concerns they seek to address. RCPP promotes collaboration with partners, stakeholders, and various communities, which is paramount to achieving equity in NRCS programs and services.

Partners use this notice to propose projects that improve natural resources in one or more states or focus on priority concerns in NRCS-designated [Critical Conservation Areas](#) (CCAs). NRCS works with these partners to plan and carry out projects on farms, ranches and private forest land. Through the program, NRCS can provide funding to support both partners and producers. Proposals are selected through a competitive process based on their impact, the partner's contributions, and how well the partnership is managed.

Up to \$310 million is available for RCPP projects through this announcement and the FY 2026 Classic announcement using the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (2018 Farm Bill) funding [Working Families Tax Cut Act, Public Law 119-21](#). Proposals are accepted from all 50 States, the Caribbean Area (Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands), and U.S. territories in the Pacific Island Areas (Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands).

Up to \$30 million of the total available funding is being made available specifically for NRCS to enter into programmatic partnership agreements with Indian tribes. This set aside will be shared by this announcement and the FY 2026 Classic announcement.

RCPP AFAs are intended to reimburse projects led by partners that clearly demonstrate their

capacity, resources, and ability to provide technical and financial assistance to benefit conservation implementation. The expectation is that AFA Partners will be ready to implement the project quickly.

The 2018 Farm Bill provides the following 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.

**Note:** Pay for performance is a partner negotiated method used to pay for quantifiable benefits of implemented conservation activities in lieu of reimbursement for practice installation and management activities at NRCS payment rates.

- projects that seek large-scale infrastructure investments that generate conservation benefits for agricultural producers and nonindustrial private forest owners.

NRCS can make up to 15 AFA awards through this funding opportunity through Farm Bill funding.

**Submissions:** Proposals must be submitted through the [RCPP portal](#). See [section E](#) of this announcement for information on using the RCPP portal to submit proposals. Access to the RCPP portal requires a level 2 eAuthentication credential or a Login.gov credential. Obtaining a new Login.gov credential involves multiple steps and can take several days to complete. Instructions are posted on the [How to Apply to RCPP](#) web page listed below.

**For More Information:** Applicants must contact the appropriate state conservationists and state RCPP Coordinators prior to submitting a proposal. NRCS will use a state conservationist questionnaire to guide the conversations in alignment with program requirements and state level agency needs.

Proposals submitted without the benefit of the lead partner meeting with the state conservationist to discuss how their project can meet agency needs and program requirements through a completed questionnaire risk receiving reduced ranking scores. Without having this meeting potential partners will not be able to answer one or more of the questions within program rules and NRCS needs.

A list of state RCPP coordinators (as of the date of this announcement's posting) is on the [How to Apply to RCPP](#) web page.

Applicants can also email the RCPP inbox ([rcpp@usda.gov](mailto:rcpp@usda.gov)) with any questions about the announcement. The [RCPP website](#) is also a great source of current information about the program.

Interested applicants are encouraged to participate in one or more of the webinars below to learn about the program and how to apply.

## 2026 RCPP NOFO Applicant Resources

This webinar will provide general information for applicants submitting proposals for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). Please refer to the RCPP website for more information. [Regional Conservation Partnership Program | Natural Resources Conservation Service \(usda.gov\)](#)

- **RCPP NOFO Applicant Webinar – June 30, 2026 - 2:00 PM to 4:00 PM**  
<https://events.gcc.teams.microsoft.com/event/d8329fd1-0409-4b9c-9f37-9e184fc7f84e@ed5b36e7-01ee-4ebc-867e-e03cfa0d4697>
- **RCPP NOFO Applicant Easement Webinar – July 9, 2026 - 2:00 PM to 4:00 PM**  
<https://events.gcc.teams.microsoft.com/event/24547ad1-f99e-4161-a3ee-0bad228230c9@ed5b36e7-01ee-4ebc-867e-e03cfa0d4697>

Information on all webinars will be posted to the [How to Apply to RCPP page](#).

## A. PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

### 1. Legislative Authority

The RCPP is authorized by Subtitle I of Title XII of the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended ([16 USC 3871 et seq.](#)).

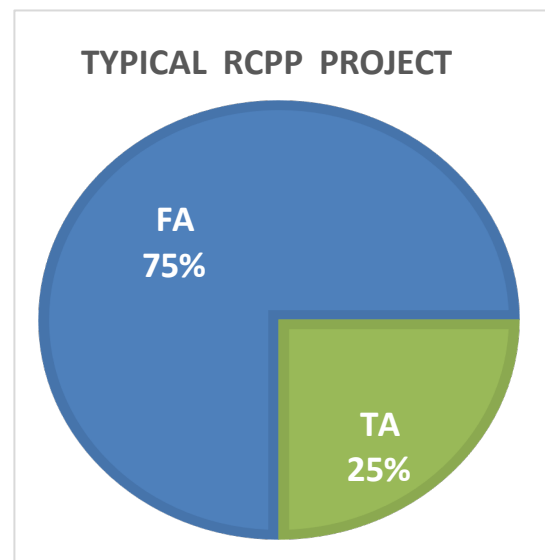
The Secretary of Agriculture has delegated the authority to administer RCPP to the Chief of the NRCS. NRCS is an agency of USDA. NRCS has promulgated regulations for RCPP implementation at [7 CFR Part 1464](#). All actions funded under this notice are subject to RCPP statutes and regulations.

Unmanned aircraft systems is an unallowable expense.

### 2. Delivering Assistance Through Alternative Funding Arrangements

NRCS delivers conservation solutions so agricultural producers can protect natural resources and feed a growing world. NRCS provides leadership and funding to ensure that all programs and services are made accessible to all customers, including reaching out to Native American tribal governments and organizations.

RCPP projects include both Financial Assistance (FA) and Technical Assistance (TA). FA funds are used to pay for the implementation of conservation assistance to producers, landowners, and communities. For proposals that require NRCS involvement in the delivery of FA or TA, please see whether RCPP Classic would be a better fit for your proposed RCPP project.



NRCS provides funding to partners to support conservation activities with eligible producers and landowners on (or benefiting) eligible land. RCPP AFA funding reimburses the lead partner for costs incurred to manage the project, complete conservation contracts benefiting eligible producers and the associated technical assistance provided.

Through this announcement, NRCS gives substantial preference to lead partners that can provide producers with the TA necessary to implement conservation activities that are part of an RCPP AFA project. NRCS will provide non-delegable TA for each project to fulfill compliance requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act

(NEPA), National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), and Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and will confirm as specified in the Programmatic Partnership Agreement (PPA) that participating producers that receiving RCPP funding comply with the Farm Bill payment eligibility requirements (Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) limitations and conservation compliance requirements for highly erodible lands and wetlands conservation (HEL/WC).

RCPP lead partners are highly encouraged to work closely with the appropriate NRCS state offices and state conservationists to:

- a. Determine if a proposed project aligns with RCPP's goals and policies,
- b. Identify then negotiate partner TA needs based on partnership capabilities, and
- c. Develop and submit a project proposal using the guidance in this notice.

For proposals that are dependent on NRCS delivery of FA, please see USDA-NRCS-NHQ-RCPP-Classic-26-NOFO0001450 and consider whether a Classic project would be a better model for your proposed RCPP project.

### 3. Program Vision and Goals

The RCPP follows a partner-driven approach to conservation that funds solutions to natural resource challenges on agricultural land. The following are the three key principles of RCPP.

- a. Impact. RCPP proposals must include effective and compelling solutions that address one or more natural resource concerns to help solve natural resource challenges. Assessing economic and other non-environmental impacts is optional and should only be included if they can be measured and modeled. Partners are responsible for evaluating a project's impact and results.
- b. Partner Contributions. Partners are responsible for identifying any combination of cash and in-kind contributions to leverage NRCS's RCPP investments to support or benefit project area producer contracts. Partner contributions are evaluated based on their share of project costs and the expertise to achieve project goals.
- c. Partnerships and Management. Partners must have the experience and ability necessary to manage the partnership and project, reach out to producers, and assess environmental impacts.

Successful RCPP applicants will (1) bring an array of financial and technical capabilities to projects; (2) quantify the conservation impacts of their prior work and collaborations with agricultural producers and landowners; and (3) propose sustainable and measurable approaches to achieving compelling conservation outcomes.

## B. FUNDING AVAILABILITY AND FUND POOL SELECTION

NRCS will award up to \$310 million through the FY 2026 AFA and Classic funding opportunity announcements. The maximum RCPP funding available for a single project selected under this announcement is \$10 million, including both FA and TA. The minimum funding amount for an RCPP project is \$250,000.

NRCS intends to allocate total funding equally between the following two funding pools: 1) NRCS-designated CCA funding pool and 2) the state and multistate funding pool. Proposals will need to select one of the funding pools and will only be considered for selection within that funding pool.

### 1. Critical Conservation Area (CCA) Funding Pool

The Secretary of Agriculture has designated eight [Critical Conservation Areas](#) that represent landscapes with identified priority resource concerns. Each CCA proposal must address at least one of the relevant CCA priority resource concerns. AFA proposals must select one or more of the conservation benefits in the following table that align with the CCA priority resource concerns. Proposals within the CCA funding pool that will include entity-held easement and/or rental activities should also include “Long Term Protection of Land” in their proposal in addition to a CCA priority resource concern. Proposals in the CCA funding pool that include “Long Term Protection of Land” as their only conservation benefit may be deemed ineligible. Each subaward, easement, or producer contract within a CCA project must also address one or more of the CCA priority resource concerns.

| CCA                             | CCA Priority Resource Concerns                          | CAA Conservation Benefits                  |
|---------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Chesapeake Bay Watershed</b> | Inadequate Habitat for Fish, Wildlife and Invertebrates | Aquatic Habitat                            |
|                                 |   | Terrestrial Habitat                        |
|                                 | Water Quality Degradation                               | Storage and handling of pollutants         |
|                                 |   | Field Sediment, Nutrient and Pathogen Loss |
|                                 | Field Pesticide Loss                                    |  |
| <b>Colorado River Basin</b>     | Excess/insufficient water/drought                       | Source Water Depletion                     |
|                                 |   | Weather Resilience                         |
|                                 | Inadequate Habitat for Fish, Wildlife and Invertebrates | Aquatic Habitat                            |
|                                 |   | Terrestrial Habitat                        |
|                                 | Soil Quality Degradation                                | Concentration of salts or other chemicals  |
|                                 | Water Quality Degradation                               | Field Sediment, Nutrient and Pathogen Loss |
| Salt Losses to Water            |   |  |
|                                 | Field Pesticide Loss                                    |  |
| <b>Great Lakes Region</b>       | Inadequate Habitat for Fish, Wildlife and Invertebrates | Aquatic Habitat                            |
|                                 |   | Terrestrial Habitat                        |
|                                 | Water Quality Degradation                               | Field Sediment, Nutrient and Pathogen Loss |

|                                     |   |  |
|-------------------------------------|---|--|
|                                     |   | Storage and handling of pollutants         |
|                                     |   | Field Pesticide Loss                       |
| <b>Longleaf Pine Range</b>          | Degraded Plant Condition                                | Degraded Plant Condition                   |
|                                     |   | Pest Pressure                              |
|                                     | Inadequate Habitat for Fish, Wildlife and Invertebrates | Aquatic Habitat                            |
|                                     |   | Terrestrial Habitat                        |
|                                     | Water Quality Degradation                               | Field Sediment, Nutrient and Pathogen Loss |
|                                     |   | Storage and handling of pollutants         |
| Field Pesticide Loss                |   |  |
| <b>Mississippi River Basin</b>      | Excess/insufficient water/drought                       | Source Water Depletion                     |
|                                     |   | Weather Resilience                         |
|                                     | Inadequate Habitat for Fish, Wildlife and Invertebrates | Aquatic Habitat                            |
|                                     |   | Terrestrial Habitat                        |
|                                     | Water Quality Degradation                               | Field Sediment, Nutrient and Pathogen Loss |
|                                     |   | Storage and handling of pollutants         |
| Field Pesticide Loss                |   |  |
| <b>Northeast Forests and Waters</b> | Degraded Plant Condition                                | Degraded Plant Condition                   |
|                                     |   | Pest Pressure                              |
|                                     | Inadequate Habitat for Fish, Wildlife and Invertebrates | Aquatic Habitat                            |
|                                     |   | Terrestrial Habitat                        |
|                                     | Water Quality Degradation                               | Field Sediment, Nutrient and Pathogen Loss |
|                                     |   | Storage and handling of pollutants         |
| Field Pesticide Loss                |   |  |
| <b>Prairie Grasslands</b>           | Degraded Plant Condition                                | Degraded Plant Condition                   |
|                                     |   | Pest Pressure                              |
|                                     | Excess/insufficient water/drought                       | Source Water Depletion                     |
|                                     |   | Weather Resilience                         |
|                                     | Inadequate Habitat for Fish, Wildlife and Invertebrates | Aquatic Habitat                            |
|                                     |   | Terrestrial Habitat                        |
| <b>Western Waters</b>               | Excess/insufficient water/drought                       | Source Water Depletion                     |
|                                     |   | Weather Resilience                         |
|                                     | Inadequate Habitat for Fish, Wildlife and Invertebrates | Aquatic Habitat                            |
|                                     |   | Terrestrial Habitat                        |
|                                     | Water Quality Degradation                               | Field Sediment, Nutrient and Pathogen Loss |
|                                     |   | Storage and handling of pollutants         |
| Field Pesticide Loss                |   |  |

The CCA project boundary must fall entirely within the CCA (including counties traversed by a CCA border, which are considered within the CCA boundary). For more information about CCAs, including the maps of CCA boundaries, visit the [NRCS CCA web page](#).

## 2. State and Multi-State Funding Pool

Proposals in the state and multistate category must be carried out either within a single state or in multiple states. For multistate projects, priority consideration will be given to proposals identifying a manageable number of states. For multi-State projects, the lead partner must identify the lead state from where the project will be managed.

### C. ELIGIBILITY INFORMATION

#### 1. Lead Partner Eligibility

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

- a. an agricultural or silvicultural producer association or other group of producers;
- b. a state or unit of local government;
- c. an Indian tribe;
- d. a farmer cooperative;
- e. a water district, irrigation district, acequia, rural water district or association, or other organization with specific water delivery authority to agricultural producers on agricultural land;
- f. a municipal water or wastewater treatment entity;
- g. an institution of higher education;
- h. 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;
- i. an entity, such as an Indian tribe, state government, local government, or a non-governmental organization, that has a farmland or grassland protection program that purchases agricultural land easements as defined in [7 CFR Part 1468.3](#);
- j. a conservation district.

The lead partner (applicant) for a proposal must meet one of the eligible partner categories. Each project must have a single lead partner, which is the entity that submits an RCPP proposal and negotiates a programmatic partnership agreement (PPA) with NRCS. The lead partner is ultimately responsible for ensuring that project deliverables are completed (including all partner contributions) and reporting on project outcomes.

Lead partners may be awarded RCPP funding to provide TA or, in some specific situations limited by regulation, to receive FA funds from NRCS as determined necessary by NRCS under [7 CFR Part 1464.26\(d\)](#) to (1) facilitate the conveyance of an easement from a producer to an eligible entity, (2) implement an eligible watershed activity, or (3) where a program contract requires the integration of a supplemental agreement to facilitate implementing an eligible land management or rental activity. Partners receiving such awards (typically managed as supplemental agreements) assume responsibility for all deliverables under such awards.

If the proposal includes enrollment of entity-held easements and the lead partner is not the eligible entity acquiring and managing the easements, the eligible-entity(ies) that will acquire and hold the entity-held easements must be named in the proposal.

### **Statutory Fund Use Controls:**

- (1) NRCS is prohibited by statute from paying any partner administrative expenses. This prohibition is discussed in greater detail in [section D\(3\)\(c\)](#) of this notice.
- (2) Eligible partners that receive RCPP funding through a PPA or supplemental agreements are not subject to the Highly Erodible Land/Wetland Compliance provisions (HEL/WC) [7 CFR Part 12](#), Farm Tract Eligibility (FTE) and Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) [7 CFR Part 1400](#) requirements. Anyone receiving FA as a producer participating in the program must meet 2018 Farm Bill eligibility requirements.
- (3) Partners providing RCPP funded assistance must document producers and lands benefited by such awards. NRCS must confirm benefited producer and land eligibility as a condition of partner payment eligibility. Lead RCPP award partners must monitor and report the conservation impacts accrued through program funded technical and financial assistance for CCA and state/multistate projects.
- (4) AFA Lead partners are responsible for delivering FA through contracts with, or contracts on behalf of eligible producers. RCPP funds obligated through an AFA award are administered by the lead partner or other partner in accordance with RCPP requirements.

## **2. Producer and Landowner Eligibility**

Agricultural producers or private landowners receiving FA funding as part of an RCPP project must:

- a. provide a tax identification number (American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Pacific Islanders may use another unique identification number for each individual eligible for payment, when applicable);
- b. provide the percentage of interest in a payment that is consistent with operation or ownership shares (when applicable);
- c. comply with the HEL/WC and Farm and Tract Eligibility requirements of the Food Security Act of 1985 in [7 CFR Part 12](#);

- d. comply with the AGI provisions or receive a waiver as described in section G (3) of this notice;
- e. meet the payment eligibility requirements included in [7 CFR Part 1400](#); and
- f. complete the eligibility forms necessary to support eligibility through Farm Service Agency (FSA) Farm Records and the 2018 Farm Bill.

Using information provided by the lead partner and the producer, NRCS and FSA are required to verify that participating producers are eligible to receive (or benefit from) RCPP funding and that they comply with the 2018 Farm Bill's payment eligibility and conservation compliance provisions. The lead partner providing financial assistance to producers, or performing work on behalf of producers, must provide NRCS and FSA with the documentation required to complete these determinations.

Additionally, NRCS is tasked with collecting sufficient information to verify that RCPP AFA projects and activities are in compliance with NEPA, as well as all applicable Federal, state, and local laws and regulations. While NRCS may establish agreements with partners for the collection of environmental and producer eligibility data, ultimate responsibility for analysis and decision making regarding these matters remains solely with NRCS.

### 3. Eligible Activities for Financial Assistance

In RCPP, an eligible activity is defined as a practice, activity, land rental agreement, easement, or related conservation measure that is available under the statutory authority for a covered program, as determined by NRCS in [7 CFR Part 1464](#).

Programs covered by NRCS identify eligible activities that can be implemented in accordance with RCPP program requirements.

The existing covered programs according to statute are:

- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)
  - Agricultural Land Easements ([ACEP-ALE](#))
  - Wetland Reserve Easements ([ACEP-WRE](#))
- Conservation Reserve Program ([CRP](#))
- Conservation Stewardship Program ([EQIP](#)) (excluding the Grassland Conservation Initiative)
- Environmental Quality Incentives Program ([EQIP](#))
- Healthy Forests Reserve Program ([HFRP](#))
- Public Law No. 83-566 Watershed Program ([Public Law No. 566](#)) (excluding the Watershed Rehabilitation Program at 16 U.S.C. 1012)

The following table outlines how the four RCPP FA activity types align with covered program authorities.

| FA Activity Type     | Covered Program Authorities                               |
|----------------------|---|
| Land Management      | EQIP, CSP, & ACEP-WRE/HFRP (restoration activity)         |
| Rental               | CRP   |
| Entity-Held Easement | ACEP-ALE/WRE and HFRP (easement acquisition component)    |
| Watershed Project    | Public Law No. 566 ( <a href="#">Public Law No. 566</a> ) |

In accordance with this list of covered programs, a wide range of conservation activities are eligible for inclusion in RCPP projects. As detailed in appendix A, and except for watershed projects, most RCPP conservation activities are implemented through individual RCPP contracts or agreements with eligible agricultural producers, landowners, or eligible entities. For RCPP AFA, as identified under [7 CFR Part 1464.26\(d\)](#), NRCS will provide FA funds to an eligible partner to implement eligible activities on behalf of eligible producers and on eligible land.

#### 4. Land Eligibility

RCPP funded assistance must be carried out on agricultural or nonindustrial private forest land or on associated land on which NRCS determines an eligible activity would help achieve conservation benefits. Eligible land must be shown in FSA records as private or tribal land and must be used for agricultural or forestry purposes.

“Associated land” is defined as land that is typically near production or conservation lands on farms or ranches but is not purposefully managed for food, forage, or fiber. 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.

Public land may be eligible as part of an RCPP project if the land is publicly owned agricultural land or associated land and the enrollment of such land is—

- (i) Appropriate for the type of eligible activity, and
- (ii) The eligible activity to be implemented on the public land is necessary and will

contribute meaningfully to achieving conservation benefits consistent with an approved project.

RCPP funding cannot be used to place conservation easements on land already protected because it is owned by a land trust or other entity that is required by statute or organizational intent to protect land from development.

## D. RCPP PROJECT FUNDING

The RCPP funding provided by NRCS is divided into two categories: FA and TA. Each RCPP project will receive a funding commitment at the time of proposal selection, as follows:

- At least 75 percent FA. These funds are used to reimburse the lead partner for RCPP activities implemented through partner-producer contracts, or partner-contractor agreements benefiting eligible producers.
- Up to 25 percent TA. These funds are obligated by NRCS into partner agreements to support implementation of conservation activities (e.g., planning, design, checkout) or provided to the lead partners to support implementation of conservation activities, or for project-wide support activities (e.g., project management, outcome assessment, producer recruitment and engagement).

According to program requirements, all proposal budgets will be capped at 25 percent for TA, and combined RCPP and TA contributions must support all project FA, as determined by NRCS.

### 1. Financial Assistance

FA is used to implement conservation activities. Proposals and RCPP agreements organize FA deliverables into the four FA activity types discussed in section C (3). A single RCPP project may propose any combination of these FA activity types offered in this NFO.

#### a. Conservation Practice Standards and Conservation Activities

[NRCS conservation practice standards](#) form the environmental and scientific basis for most of the NRCS-funded conservation. Applicants are encouraged to work with the appropriate NRCS state RCPP coordinators to identify and understand the use of existing NRCS conservation practice standards and conservation activities best suited for addressing project resource concerns and generating the conservation benefits associated with an RCPP project.

If existing conservation practices aren't available or appropriate for a proposed

project, RCPP partners can request within the proposal to work with NRCS to create interim practices that align with program rules and policies. These interim practices must follow NRCS procedures and stay within its legal authority. They also need to comply fully with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and related laws. If a project includes interim practices, the proposal must account for the extra time and resources required in both the timeline and budget.

## **b. Environmental Review Requirements**

Projects must meet the environmental review requirements demonstrating how they will comply with NEPA and other Federal, state, and local laws and regulations before NRCS can release RCPP funding. NRCS may not approve, or may withdraw, funding for Projects that do not realistically account for the time or expense of addressing these legal requirements, or where the project may result in unacceptably adverse impacts contrary to RCPP purposes.

NRCS policy requires site-specific environmental evaluations during the planning phase of individual awards (e.g., producer contracts or supplemental agreements) to ensure compliance with NEPA, and other Federal, state, and local laws and regulations and NRCS policy.

When innovative measures will supplement the NRCS conservation planning processes or conservation practice standards, a partner-provided environmental assessment may be required for NRCS review. This applies to all public works and watershed activities.

Project proposals should describe any NEPA, or other compliance needs and should reflect this information in the project timeline and budget. Expenses for these analyses must be itemized in project costs as either a partner TA contribution or (to the extent approved during PPA negotiations) as a potentially reimbursable, TA implementation item (see TA description in section D (2)). NRCS is responsible for compliance with [Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act](#) and [Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act](#). NRCS cannot delegate these responsibilities to partners. Partners may arrange and pay for any cultural resource or species occupancy surveys that are necessary for NRCS to assess project impacts. These surveys and any related consultations would be subject to NRCS approval and review processes.

NRCS, along with the lead partner or their designee, may decide that it's necessary to review any site-specific environmental evaluations (EEs) done during conservation planning or included in a project-level NEPA analysis. This applies to partner activities that are only happening because of RCPP funding (called connected actions). The partner is responsible for the cost and delays from these reviews, unless a different agreement is made during the Project Partnership Agreement (PPA) negotiations.

## 2. Technical Assistance

TA is used to implement FA activities and RCPP project management. TA to support FA may include all the traditional NRCS TA tasks. TA to support project management may include project management, producer recruitment and engagement, and outcomes assessment. TA amounts included in the proposal and agreement are considered estimates. There are many non-reimbursable technical activities that are more suitable for contributions such as providing training. The lead partner is responsible for ensuring that sufficient TA is available (for both NRCS funded TA and partner contributions to TA) to ensure delivery of all FA activities within a project.

NRCS is responsible for ensuring that RCPP conservation activities are implemented according to all 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 uses TA funds to manage the conservation planning, practice design, installation, and verification, as well as other needs associated with supporting the implementation of RCPP conservation activities.

Whether performed by NRCS, its partners, or a third party, TA activities must follow all applicable Federal requirements, including [NRCS planning procedures](#), [conservation practice standards](#), and [job approval authority](#). Partner TA activities must be performed at State Conservationist approved rates comparable to what NRCS typically pays for similar work. The rates must reflect actual costs to the partner to (1) minimize potential for improper payments associated with the use of RCPP funds for partner administrative expenses, and (2) prevent "wind falls" or "rent seeking" associated with incentive payments (which are not authorized in RCPP).

NRCS will work with lead partners to refine proposal budgets. This could include rebalancing the proposed TA budget to reflect NRCS and partner capacities, control proposed costs to the program, and reflect other necessary changes. At the time of project selection, NRCS will make publicly available the amount of TA funds that it will provide to the project.

The following are eligible TA activities:

- Supporting producer contracts for land management, rental contracts, and public works projects
- Project management
- Producer recruitment and engagement
- Outcomes assessment

| TA Activity Type | Eligible Activities |
|------------------|---------------------|
|------------------|---------------------|

|                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <p>TA-E<br/>(Enhancement)</p>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Other RCPP project-related producer recruitment and engagement, including inventories, analyses, and tools needed to inform participation.</u></li> <li>• <u>Project-related communications and coordination activities.</u></li> <li>• <u>Development and calculation of quantifiable project outcomes.</u></li> <li>• <u>Development of innovative conservation approaches such as pay-for-performance.</u></li> <li>• <u>Project management and partnership development to accomplish project goals.</u></li> </ul>   |
| <p>TA-I<br/>(Implementation)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Pre-application activities related to RCPP producer contracts, watershed activities. This can include completion of inventories or data collection to support environmental evaluations and other NEPA-related activities.</u></li> <li>• <u>Conservation planning to producers or landowners directly related to installation or management of eligible conservation activities.</u></li> <li>• <u>Practice design related to land management, rental, or watershed activities.</u></li> <li>• <u>Assistance with practice installation and verification.</u></li> <li>• <u>FA contract support services (e.g., securing and managing contracts for third-party services like engineering studies, surveys, and watershed projects</u></li> </ul> |

**a. Administrative/Indirect Costs**

The RCPP statute prohibits NRCS from reimbursing partners for administrative costs, which include 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 implementing the project. It is incumbent upon RCPP partners to provide sufficient evidence for NRCS to consider regarding any reimbursement costs directly related to the RCPP project.

#### **b. Equipment**

Equipment is defined as tangible personal property (including information technology systems) having a useful life of more than one year and a per-unit acquisition cost that equals or exceeds the lesser of the capitalization level established by the recipient or subrecipient for financial statement purposes, or \$10,000. Proposed use of program funds to purchase equipment must be clearly linked to eligible activities needed to accomplish project goals.

Equipment purchased with RCPP funds may only be used for eligible project purposes. RCPP project agreements also limit use of such equipment and stipulate terms of equipment disposition upon project expiration.

### **3. Partner Contributions**

#### **a. Expectations and Eligibility**

Statute requires partner contributions to constitute a significant part of the scope for each project. Partner contributions may consist of any combination of cash and in-kind support. Contribution is not match, but some FA activity types do have specific minimum match requirements (see [appendix A](#)).

NRCS strongly recommends that partners propose contributions that support or benefit producer contracts that enhance the overall impact and efficacy of an RCPP project. NRCS may select projects for funding at the full requested or a reduced amount. In such cases, a proportional reduction in the partner's contribution may be considered during project agreement negotiations.

To count as partner contributions, partner expenditures must

- be expended during the life of the RCPP project,
- occur within the project's geographic boundary,
- support the project's conservation benefits, and
- be supported by valuation methodologies included in the partner contribution letters.

Funding from Federal agencies other than USDA may be counted as partner contributions, provided that such funding meets the criteria. Partners are responsible for ensuring that the funding received from

other Federal agencies is used towards an RCPP project, as it may affect the determinations of non-Federal match for those agencies' purposes.

Expenditures for project development activities (such as producer recruitment and engagement by RCPP project partners between the time of project selection and agreement execution) may be counted as partner contributions if the proposal budget identifies the expenditures and NRCS approves them when the project is selected.

The following are some potentially eligible partner contributions:

- FA provided to producers or landowners to address one or more project conservation benefits, including a [Critical Conservation Areas](#) priority resource concern
- TA to producers or landowners for planning that is directly related to implementing or managing eligible conservation activities
- Time spent by partner staff to develop and enter into FA contracts or agreements to implement RCPP-eligible activities using non-NRCS funds
- Partner staff time or actual costs incurred that benefit the overall project such as:
  - Producer recruitment and engagement,
  - project-related communications and coordination among partners, and
  - developing and calculating quantifiable project outcomes
- Inventories and data to support environmental evaluations of applications for producer contracts
- Providing information or tools needed by NRCS to support agency producer eligibility determinations, evaluation, and ranking
- 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, and appraisals to satisfy NRCS requirements for watershed projects)
- Due diligence activities for entity-held easements
- Administrative costs (see section c for limits on when and how much of a partner's administrative costs are counted as contribution)

If a proposal is selected, NRCS will review the valuation methods during PPA negotiations or later amendments. All contributions must reflect the actual costs incurred during the project. If NRCS finds that the proposed contributions, valuation methods, or amounts don't meet the agreed requirements, the lead partner must provide acceptable replacements and update the contribution letters as needed. If suitable replacements aren't provided, NRCS may reduce the award, require changes to the PPA with

added oversight or terminate the agreement.

**b. Contributions, Match, and Producer Cost-Share**

Cost-Share is defined as the difference between the amount paid to a producer or landowner and the actual cost to install a practice or implement a conservation activity. Cost-share that is “donated” by a producer or landowner for land management activities cannot be counted as partner contribution. A landowner donation of the non-federal match for an entity-held easement is an eligible contribution.

Certain RCPP activities such as public works activities and entity held easements have specific minimum match requirements (as detailed in appendix A). Match provided by a partner towards an RCPP funded activity is also a potentially eligible contribution.

**c. Administrative (Indirect) Costs as Contribution**

Although RCPP funding can never be used to support partner administrative (indirect cost) expenses, partners providing TA as a contribution may also count some of their associated indirect costs as 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 the current published indirect cost rate as listed in [USDA General Terms and Conditions for Mutual Interest Agreements](#).
- Where indirect costs are to be included in partner contributions, they must be identified in the partner contribution letter and may only be reported in proportion to associated TA delivered (through contribution or RCPP funding).

**E. RCPP PROPOSAL REQUIREMENTS**

**1. Format and Instructions**

RCPP proposals must be submitted through the RCPP portal by the deadline in this notice. Late proposals will not be accepted unless accompanied by a ServiceNow ticket documenting a legitimate issue with the RCPP portal.

Proposals will not be accepted because of a failure to obtain a Login.gov credential. Partner establishment of an RCPP portal account well in advance of the deadline is advised.

Before starting a proposal in the RCPP portal, and at least 4 weeks prior to the proposal deadline, entities interested in applying to RCPP must request a meeting with the appropriate NRCS state conservationist or RCPP coordinator via email. Communication with state conservationists and state RCPP coordinators is critical to help partners:

- frame conservation benefits in terms of NRCS resource concerns,
- understand RCPP eligible activities and determine which activities are best suited to address NRCS resource concerns within the project area,
- develop their approach for projecting the conservation,
- establish a mutual understanding of NRCS and partner capacities and rules for the program (note that the RCPP AFA funding model depends on close coordination and collaboration between partners and NRCS to achieve project success), and
- identify issues in partner proposals that have the potential to complicate project implementation (e.g., the use of interim conservation activity standards, or the inclusion of atypical deed terms in entity-held easement deeds).

The state conservationist, in collaboration with the state RCPP coordinator, will use a questionnaire to document to guide discussions with the lead partner. Partners considering easements should also review the easement addendum to the questionnaire. A copy of the State Conservationist Questionnaire and easement addendum can be found on the [How to Apply to RCPP](#) page. Proposals submitted without the lead partner meeting with the state conservationist to discuss how their project can meet agency needs and program requirements through a completed questionnaire risk receiving low ranking scores.

A list of state RCPP coordinators (as of the date of this announcement's posting) is on the on the [RCPP How to Apply web page](#).

**Note:** RCPP proposals 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.

## 2. Proposal Content

RCPP proposals must adhere to the guidance in this section, which is consistent with the proposal entry screens of the RCPP portal. Letters of support from individuals or organizations other than contributing partners will not be considered in the review process.

- a. Project Contact Information. Lead partners must list both a primary and an 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) conservation benefits addressed by the project. For CCA projects, the conservation benefit must align with one or more of the priority resource concerns listed in section B of this notice.
  - RCPP projects typically last 5 years. Applicants may request a PPA length that is longer or shorter than 5 years and must justify the timeframe.
- b. List of Project Partners. In addition to the lead partner (applicant), the proposal must identify all nonlead partners expected to provide partner contributions. Briefly describe the role of each partner. In addition, in RCPP projects involving entity-held easements, if the lead partner will not hold all easements in the project, the proposal must identify at least one partner with authority to acquire, manage, and steward all easements. Proposals should also include other entities involved in acquisition such as co-holders or third-party right holders.
- c. Narrative Questions. In the RCPP portal, applicants must provide answers to questions related to the evaluation criteria found in section F of this notice. These questions require the applicant to describe partner roles and the compelling conservation need for the project, the goals and objectives, the geographic focus, the estimated number of participating producers (landowners), and the project management capacity of the identified partners, among other items. The RCPP portal restricts answers to a maximum number of characters, including spaces. Longer responses submitted outside of the RCPP portal will not be considered during proposal evaluations.

A copy of the narrative questions can be found in the FY26 Proposal Guide for Partners on the [RCPP How to Apply web page](#) in the Resources for Submitting a Proposal section.

- d. Project Outcomes. The proposal must document partner commitment to reporting project outcomes. While outcome details may be refined during project negotiations, each lead partner is responsible for reporting on at least one conservation outcome. Other outcome categories are optional (e.g. economic); however, if they are included in the proposal, they must also be incorporated into the PPA. A guidance document for outcomes reporting is posted on the [RCPP How to Apply web page](#) in the Resources for Submitting a Proposal section. All lead partners should carefully review the guidance document prior to drafting the proposal.
- e. NRCS Funding Request Tables. In the RCPP portal, applicants will complete two

NRCS funding request tables, one for NRCS FA and one for NRCS TA. Applicants will enter deliverables within these two tables, including the FA or TA activity type and the typical activities. Funding requests in the project proposal are estimates. Applicants should propose the most realistic and accurate funding levels possible. If a proposal is selected for funding, final budgets for selected projects will be negotiated during the PPA development phase.

- f. Contribution Deliverables Table. The applicant must also enter deliverables into the partner contribution table. Applicants must enter deliverables for each FA or TA activity type as well as the lead for each contribution.
- 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.
  - 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.
- g. Contribution Commitment Letters. A contribution letter is required from each partner providing project contributions. The contribution letters detail the estimated value of the contributions. 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 indicated in the PPA.
- h. Project Map. Lead partners must upload a file (jpg or .pdf) that clearly delineates the geographic scope of the project. Partners are advised to carefully consider project area boundaries to optimize:
- the potential applications for project assistance (big enough area to ensure demand), and
  - the probability that the project will deliver meaningful and measurable conservation outcomes during the term of the project (small enough to have an impact).
- i. Unique Entity Identifier (UEI). All RCPP applicants must register or have an active account within the System for Award Management (SAM). To register

for SAM, go to <https://sam.gov>. Once registration is complete, the applicant will be issued a UEI that must be included in your RCPP proposal. SAM registration must be renewed annually. Applicants should allow ample time to obtain or renew their SAM.gov account.

### 3. Submission Information

Applicants must submit proposals through the [RCPP portal by 4:59 p.m. Eastern Time on August 24, 2026](#).

Applicants must have an eAuthentication (eAuth) level 2 credential or a Login.gov credential to access the RCPP portal. Applicants must submit proposals through the RCPP portal. This is a department requirement and is non-negotiable. The steps will vary depending on whether an applicant has an existing credential or needs to obtain or upgrade an existing credential. Detailed instructions are posted on the [How to Apply to RCPP](#) web page. Develop the full proposal in the RCPP portal.

The RCPP portal automatically sends applicants an email to acknowledge receipt at the time of submission. Applicants are solely responsible for ensuring timely submission through the RCPP portal and are strongly advised to allow sufficient time to obtain eAuth and RCPP portal access. Applicants are advised that eAuthentication/login.gov credentials and RCPP portal access may take several weeks to complete.

NRCS will not consider:

- Incomplete proposals
- Proposals that do not meet NOFO requirements
- Proposals submitted after the deadline date listed in this notice
- Proposals submitted through registered or certified mail, 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.

### 4. Withdrawal of Proposals

Lead partners may withdraw their RCPP proposal at any time by pressing “withdraw” in the RCPP Portal proposal record. After the deadline has passed, please also send an email to the national RCPP inbox ([rcpp@usda.gov](mailto:rcpp@usda.gov)) notifying NRCS of the withdrawal.

## F. PROPOSAL REVIEW PROCESS

NRCS screens proposals for completeness and partner eligibility and determines whether the project addresses a CCA priority resource concern (if applicable).

Proposals determined by NRCS to be substantially incomplete (or otherwise ineligible) are eliminated from the RCPP competition. NRCS notifies lead partners of any proposals that have been removed from competition prior to the technical review. RCPP proposals that successfully pass initial screening are evaluated against the following technical review criteria. It is recommended that applicants use these criteria as a guide during proposal development.

## 1. Technical Review Criteria

Make sure your proposal and deliverables table cover the following:

### Impact (50 percent)

- Does the proposal clearly explain the conservation problem it will address?
- Are the expected benefits clearly described and realistic based on the project's plan and demonstrate existing producer demand for proposed project conservation activities?
- Is the project size appropriate for the problems it aims to solve?
- Are the project goals measurable and achievable (such as environmental or economic results attained by producers implementing conservation activities)?
- Are the proposed outcomes supported by benchmark data, and metrics to measure and analyze the accumulated impacts of the project?

### Partner Contributions (20 percent)

- Do partner contributions bring useful technical skills or resources to support producer contracts and project management? Do the contribution commitment letters, deliverables and valuation methods clearly support the project's goals.
- Are the contributions eligible and backed by clear and accurate valuation methods?

### Partnerships and Management (30 percent)

- Does the proposal clearly describe a partner model for delivering financial assistance to producers with supporting technical assistance through partner contracts with or on behalf of eligible producers?
- Does the proposal clearly explain what NRCS, and each partner will do, and show that the partners are qualified for their roles?
- Is the partnership the right size and mix to reach the project's conservation goals?
- Does the lead partner have experience managing similar projects successfully and propose a realistic for planning, carrying out and evaluating the project, including costs and tasks?
- Do the partners have a strong record of working with farmers, ranchers and landowners to boost participation? Is there a clear producer recruitment and engagement plan led by partners?

## **2. Proposal Evaluation Process**

All RCPP technical evaluations are performed by a national review team comprised of state and national level subject matter experts that are representative of the different regions of the United States. Proposal reviews use the previously outlined criteria. State or multistate and CCA proposal evaluations are coordinated by the relevant states. NRCS leadership reviews the results of the state evaluations and makes recommendations for funding to the Chief.

## **3. Agency Priority Topics for FY 2026 Notice of Funding Opportunities**

Proposals that address one or more agency priorities will be prioritized over similarly scored proposals within the same funding pool (state/multistate, and CCA).

- a. Projects based on land management activities encompassing various areas like soil health, water quality, healthy range and pasturelands, and wildlife habitat with an aim to improve land health, enhance resource management, and promote sustainable agriculture and long-term protection of agricultural, grassland and forestland viability.
- b. Soil health projects using practices that focus on minimizing soil disturbance, maximizing soil cover, increasing natural vitality, and maintaining living roots throughout the year. Such NRCS practices often include cover cropping, crop rotation, reduced tillage, surface residue management, grazing management and long-term protection of grasslands through entity held easement activities.
- c. Farmer focused projects with contributions that will provide financial assistance and/or technical expertise for planning and practice designs to support producer contracts.
- d. Precision agricultural (PA) projects that use PA technologies to target conservation efforts based on specific field conditions, potentially reducing costs and improving resource efficiency. Such may include using PA technologies in conjunction with conservation practices to ensure optimal land preparation with reduced erosion, enhanced nutrient and pesticide application rates and timing.
- e. Projects led by Indian Tribes. NRCS is reserving \$30 million for PPAs with Indian Tribes. Any unused funds will return to the general funding pool.

## **4. Notifications**

All applicants will receive notification of the outcome of their application. Following the notification of selection, the appropriate NRCS RCPP state coordinator will contact the lead partner to initiate negotiating and developing an RCPP PPA. Partners with projects not selected for funding can receive reviewer feedback on their proposals to enhance potential readiness for future NOFOs.

NRCS anticipates making announcements of RCPP project awards in

approximately 60 days from the closing of this announcement, with an anticipated project start dates around November 2026.

## **G. PROJECT INFORMATION AND ADMINISTRATION**

### **1. RCPP Programmatic Partnership Agreements**

After a proposal is selected to become an RCPP project, the lead state conservationist will initiate negotiations with the lead partner to define the final scope of responsibilities included in the RCPP PPA. PPAs are required to be completed by NRCS staff, with input and concurrence from the lead partner. The award notification will include a deadline for executing the PPA, failure to meet this deadline may result in the withdrawal of an RCPP award.

RCPP awards associated with that agreement may include RCPP producer contracts and supplemental agreements with eligible partners (e.g., easement program agreements and public works or watershed agreements, etc.). These RCPP awards are subject to negotiation and will be managed according to NRCS-developed terms and conditions necessary to ensure program and financial integrity.

The Partnership Program Agreement outlines NRCS and Partner expectations and commits RCPP funds to the project for its duration. The RCPP funds are obligated through Supplemental Agreements (SA) based on budgeted Financial Assistance (FA) types (e.g., land management or restoration, rental, entity-held easement agreements, public works or watershed structures with an approved design, etc.) and Technical Assistance (TA) Activity. It is expected that PPA and necessary supplemental agreement(s) for the obligation of funds will be negotiated and executed concurrently. Partners will not be reimbursed for work performed before the execution of the PPA or SA that obligates funds to that specific partner.

RCPP partnership agreements are programmatic instruments, containing specific terms and conditions in agency developed templates. NRCS retains final authority for all RCPP payment eligibility determinations. According to statute, an RCPP PPA may be extended only once, and for no longer than 12 months from the original agreement expiration date.

RCPP applicants should anticipate a project start date of November 2026.

### **2. Adjusted Gross Income Waivers**

Adjusted gross income (AGI) payment limitations do not apply to partners. AGI determination and payment limitation requirements do apply to producers and landowners participating in RCPP projects. During PPA negotiations following the announcement of a project award, the lead partner may request a waiver of

the AGI provisions for the entire RCPP project. An AGI applicability waiver eliminates the requirement for a producer or landowner to meet the AGI limitation requirements.

If the RCPP lead partner does not request or receive a project-level waiver of the AGI requirement, 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 will only be granted if NRCS determines that the waiver would result in the protection of environmentally sensitive land of special significance (see [7 CFR 1400](#)).

### 3. Civil Rights and Non-Discrimination

AFA lead partners accept the responsibility to implement 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 based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA. 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, religion, sex, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA. This policy of nondiscrimination applies to all employment practices, including hiring, compensation, benefits, promotion, training, and termination.

- The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), to the extent permitted by law, will no longer make grants or otherwise fund programs or activities that improperly discriminate on the basis of race or sex, including discrimination in the name of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policies. Instead, USDA will prioritize merit and efficiency. USDA recognizes programs and initiatives will have the greatest impact when these programs and initiatives put American farmers, ranchers, and foresters first by:
  - o Solving the most pressing challenges they face,
  - o Protecting America's food, fuel, and fiber supply to enhance national security,
  - o Supporting production of healthy and safe food for consumers,
  - o Expanding and developing domestic markets,

- o Training the next generation of agriculturalists, and
- o Fueling innovation to keep American farmers at the forefront of productivity.

#### 4. Reporting and Reimbursement Requirements

Lead partners must submit annual progress reports to NRCS that not only detail project activities, expenditures, producer recruitment and engagement, participation, and measurable outcomes, but also specifically document the changes and improvements to targeted natural resources resulting from conservation work completed during the project. Each report should summarize applications, contracts, and completed practices, and include clear evidence of how conservation efforts have impacted resource health—such as reductions in nitrogen levels in water, decreases in soil erosion, or other quantifiable environmental benefits. A final report and public fact sheet are required to communicate these resource impacts. Failure to meet reporting, timelines, or expenditure requirements may result in increased oversight or project termination. Project outcome metrics and monitoring deliverables, including resource condition change reports, will be established during partnership agreement development and must meet NRCS standards.

Any associated RCPP award executed through a supplemental agreement (such as TA agreements, or entity-held easement parcel contracts) may require additional reporting.

Any RCPP partner receiving a supplemental agreement is responsible for requesting payment from NRCS for completed deliverables. For example, if the lead partner requests payment for an enhancement TA task such as producer recruitment and engagement activities, NRCS will require submission of actual costs for hosting meetings, along with agendas and participant lists before remitting payment. This requirement stems from a statutory prohibition on the use of RCPP partner administrative expenses, which necessitates a high level of scrutiny of partner payments. Similarly, completion and documentation standards to establish payment eligibility for implementing TA or FA tasks must be included in negotiated supplemental agreements. NRCS and the awardee must agree to specific documentation requirements prior to execution of any award.

RCPP partners must document expenses paid by NRCS as well as partner contribution expenditures for 3 years beyond the expiration of a supplemental agreement. NRCS intends to audit a random sample of RCPP projects annually.

NRCS will provide RCPP lead partners:

- a semiannual report indicating the status of each pending and obligated

- RCPP contract associated with a lead partner's PPA, and  
• an annual report of TA expenditures associated with the lead partner's PPA.

## H. AGENCY CONTACTS

Partners with proposal-related questions are encouraged to contact the appropriate NRCS state RCPP coordinator. [The How to Apply to RCPP](#) web page maintains a list of NRCS state RCPP coordinators, which is updated for each funding opportunity. Potential applicants may also contact national RCPP staff by email at [rcpp@usda.gov](mailto:rcpp@usda.gov) with any general program or policy questions.

To report an issue with the RCPP portal please submit a help desk ticket by email or phone.

**Email:** [FPACITServiceDesk@usda.gov](mailto:FPACITServiceDesk@usda.gov)

**NRCS Support Hotline:** (800) 255-2434

## APPENDIX A – RCPP AGREEMENTS, CONTRACTS, AND CONSERVATION ACTIVITIES

### A. RCPP Funding Overview

Once an RCPP proposal is selected for funding, the lead partner and NRCS negotiate the terms of an RCPP partnership agreement. The agreement documents expectations of each project and the relationship between NRCS and the lead partner.

### B. Agreements and Third-Party Contracts

The following principles guide the development of RCPP contracts and agreements:

- Existing NRCS covered programs are used as a guide to identify eligible activities, but the regulations of the existing covered programs do not directly apply to RCPP. At the same time, foundational aspects of NRCS contracting processes (e.g., planning processes, conservation practice standards, and payment schedules) are maintained to ensure scientific rigor and financial integrity in RCPP agreements.
- For AFAs, four types of RCPP FA activities are proposed within the RCPP to address the wide range of eligible activities that are also available in covered programs and RCPP projects.

| RCPP Activity Type          | Associated Covered Program Authorities   |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Land management             | EQIP, CSP, ACEP-WRE (restoration), HFRP (restoration), all Public Law No. 566 ( <a href="#">Public Law No. 566</a> )-related infrastructure and land treatment work for benefit of specific producers or absent an approved watershed plan |
| Land rental                 | CRP  |
| Easement (entity-held)      | ACEP-ALE, expanded to include easements on land uses other than those traditionally eligible under the covered programs (e.g., wetlands, non-industrial private forest lands, floodplains, riparian areas).                                |
| Public works and watersheds | Public Law No. 83-566 ( <a href="#">Public Law No. 566</a> )   |

During proposal development, the portal will automatically assign contract types to each deliverable that can be updated during agreement negotiation. Partners are advised to consider the following contract types and any limits on their use in developing proposal budgets:

| RCPP Contract Type   | Associated Activities   |
|--|---|
| Programmatic Partnership Agreement and Supplemental Agreements | Agreements between NRCS and a partner to support delivery of FA or TA. Agreements are used to reimburse partners for the delivery of specific project deliverables. |
| Third-party Contracts  | Contracts between NRCS and a third party (e.g., engineering firm, easement appraiser, etc.) to support implementation of project activities.                        |

### C. Land Management Activities

Land management (including land restoration and improvement) activities may be delivered by the lead partner on behalf of eligible producers or through contracts between the lead partner and an eligible producer. The lead partner may also issue subawards to other eligible partners or third-party contractors to perform work on behalf of eligible producers. The conservation activities included under this category also include restoration and land management practices authorized under ACEP-WRE, HFRP, and the land treatment component of Public Law No. 83-566 ([Public Law No. 566](#)).

### D. Land Rental Activities

Land rental activities with eligible producers must address an RCPP project resource concern on eligible lands. Application, ranking, and contracting will emulate applicable aspects of the NRCS ranking processes.

NRCS and partners must ensure that any rental payments are not duplicative of other producer practice or activity payments. Proposals must include (1) project specific rental scenarios, (2) project (partner) driven ranking pools, (3) partner innovation in proposed conservation purposes that warrant rental contracts, and (4) how partner contributions will lead to greater conservation benefits.

### E. RCPP Entity-Held Conservation Easements

NRCS will enter into a cost-share agreement with eligible partners to assist those partners in their purchase of an RCPP easement from an eligible landowner (e.g., an entity-held easement). Projects funded through an AFA may only include entity-held easements. Easements held by the United States Government are not available under an AFA. RCPP funds may be used to purchase an easement for any land uses that addresses the conservation benefits and resource concerns identified in the RCPP project.

Under NRCS covered easement programs, agreements to assist with the purchase of entity-held easements are only available for the protection of eligible agricultural lands, including grasslands (ACEP-ALE). In contrast, an RCPP easement may be acquired on any lands eligible for RCPP, including (1) preservation of high-quality cropland or grasslands; (2) restoration or protection of degraded or natural wetlands, floodplains, riparian areas on associated lands; or (3) protection of nonindustrial private forest lands. Application,

ranking, easement acquisition processes, and contracting for RCPP easements emulate applicable aspects of ACEP and classic RCPP easement enrollments.

As stated in the Executive Summary of this NFO Applicants are expected to contact the appropriate State Conservationist(s) and State RCPP Coordinator(s) prior to submitting a proposal. The State Conservationist and their staff are equipped to facilitate discussion and dialogue which will answer questions related to RCPP Conservation Easement activities and the necessary details of implementing an RCPP project with easement activities which will assist in having those selected proposals move forward efficiently to a successfully negotiated project agreement.

The following is a table summarizing the RCPP easements

| Entity-Held Easements                |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| <b>Easement Holder</b>               | Acquired and held by an eligible entity that meets the requirements of <a href="#">7 CFR Part 1468.3</a> .  |
| <b>Easement Deed Requirements</b>    | <p>The eligible entity must incorporate the RCPP AFA minimum deed requirements into its own conservation easement.</p> <p>Entities may submit with their proposal a modified ACEP-ALE template deed or other proposed custom deed terms using the RCPP minimum deed terms as a guide. Approval of these deeds or deed terms will be documented in the PPA and Supplemental Agreement Type IV.</p> <p>Note: The RCPP AFA Minimum Deed Requirements and NRCS deed terms are posted on RCPP Easement Resources Library at <a href="https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/rcpp-regional-conservation-partnership-program/rcpp-easements">https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/rcpp-regional-conservation-partnership-program/rcpp-easements</a>.</p> |
| <b>Duration</b>                      | Easements are perpetual or maximum duration allowed under state law per ACEP-ALE authority of <a href="#">16 U.S.C. 3865b</a>   |
| <b>Potential Eligible Land Types</b> | Private agricultural land, nonindustrial private forest land, or associated lands (e.g., riparian areas, floodplains, seasonal or flooded wetlands).  |
| <b>Basis for RCPP Compensation</b>   | <p>The RCPP cost share (federal share) provided to eligible entities for their purchase of an entity-held easement is a percentage of the easement value (based on a before-and-after appraisal or approved alternative valuation method).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Up to 50 percent of the easement value with a U.S. Right of Enforcement for ACEP-ALE certified eligible entities acquiring 'ACEP-ALE like' easements</li> <li>• Up to 25 percent of the easement value without U.S. Right of Enforcement</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Valuation Methodology</b>         | Easement value is generally determined through an appraisal. Alternative valuation methods* may be considered (and may delay PPA negotiation and implementation). Alternative valuations  |

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|  | methods must be requested during the proposal phase by submitting the method to the NRCS national appraisers at <a href="mailto:NRCS.NationalAppraisers@usda.gov">NRCS.NationalAppraisers@usda.gov</a> prior to the end of the proposal submission deadline. Acceptance of the alternative valuation method will be documented in the PPA and Supplementation Type IV agreement.   |
| <b>Partner Match</b>                             | Partner match is required for entity-held easement acquisition and may consist of any combination of landowner donation toward easement value or partner cash contribution toward payment of easement compensation to the landowner.   |
| <b>Partner Contribution</b>                      | Non-federal match as well as due diligence activities performed or procured by a partner.  |
| <b>RCPP Award Type for Easement Purchase</b>     | Agreement entered into by NRCS with an eligible entity that will hold the easement on eligible land.   |
| <b>Allowed uses of RCPP Financial Assistance</b> | Cost of easement itself, cost for NRCS procured technical appraisal review and environmental database records search. RCPP financial assistance funds awarded for an entity-held easement may not be used for entity procured due diligence or any other purpose.  |
| <b>Entity Certification</b>                      | Eligible entities that are certified through ACEP-ALE may elect to use their certification on ALE-like easements. The eligible entity must be certified at the time the proposal is submitted and include in the proposal the processes they plan to use for easement acquisition. This will be documented in the PPA and Supplemental Type IV agreement with an optional exhibit. |
| <b>Buy-Protect-Sell Transactions</b>             | Not an eligible transaction type.  |

For RCPP AFA entity-held easements, NRCS may provide the Federal share of the purchase of the easement, which is up to 25 percent of the easement value (as determined by a before-and-after appraisal). For RCPP AFA entity-held easements, NRCS may provide the Federal Share of the purchase of the easement, up to 50 percent of the easement value (as determined by a before-and-after appraisal) with a U.S. Right of Enforcement for ALE-like easements with a certified eligible entity.

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 offer RCPP awards for cost-share assistance to purchase entity-held easements and will require NRCS collaboration with an eligible entity and eligible landowner. Only eligible entities that meet the requirements of [7 CFR Part 1468.3](#) may apply to be the holder of an RCPP entity-held easement.

Eligible entities need to address the RCPP AFA Minimum Deed Requirements through the use of entity developed deeds. Entities may submit with their proposal a modified ACEP-ALE template deed or other proposed custom deed terms using the RCPP minimum deed terms as a guide. Approval of these deeds, deed terms or deed templates will be documented in the PPA and Supplemental Agreement Type IV.

The availability of these options allows the partner, in consultation with NRCS, to determine which set of RCPP deed terms appropriately achieves the identified RCPP project purposes on a particular property. These deed terms are an essential component of the project proposal and the PPA.

NRCS will include in the AFA PPA and the relevant supplemental agreements the RCPP AFA deed, and applicable valuation methodology, land and landowner eligibility, and easement acquisition requirements. Eligible entities are responsible for ensuring that the conservation easement deed addresses the RCPP minimum deed requirements.

In order to determine the value of the easement, the appraisal or alternative valuation methodology, must take into consideration the terms of the conservation easement, including the conservation values that the easement will protect.

Similar to ACEP-ALE, easement acquisition-related costs and easement management costs are the responsibility of RCPP partners and cannot be reimbursed by NRCS. These costs may be counted as partner contributions based on final agreement terms and negotiated project deliverables.

## F. Public Works and Watersheds

Through the public works and watershed projects component of RCPP, eligible partners may receive financial assistance awards to implement immediate or future structural works of improvement that address watershed issues for the benefit of eligible land, like many projects completed under [Public Law No. 83-566](#). NRCS will only consider watershed activities that support design, design and construction, or construction only for projects developed in accord with NRCS Watershed Manual and National Engineering Manual. Construction only projects will be “shovel ready” to start with less technical need and may receive top priority for selection. Secondary consideration is given to Watershed projects in need of additional support.. An NRCS approved watershed plan is required for consideration of funding under this NFO.

**Note:** RCPP funding is not available to support the rehabilitation of any NRCS-assisted watershed structure, as that component of Pub. Law. No. 566 ([Public Law No. 566](#)) is expressly prohibited by RCPP statute.

RCPP project proposals must fully detail proposed public works and watershed activities possible to provide project reviewers with the information needed to assess project viability. While RCPP projects could design and install proposed public works and watershed projects, it is critical to fully complete a project from start to finish in the 5 years (or potentially longer) of an RCPP project, so details of both TA and FA

requests associated with public works projects must be included in the RCPP questionnaire section of the proposal.

NRCS is the approval authority for planning, designing, and overseeing the environmental responsibilities for RCPP public works activities (including adherence to NEPA and the Principles, Requirements, and Guidelines for Federal Water Resource projects). NRCS will generally satisfy these responsibilities by following NRCS watershed and engineering policy, except when otherwise negotiated. (Note: infrastructure projects that meet NRCS requirements for land management activity type are not necessarily subject to the same requirements as full water resource projects; please consult the RCPP coordinator in your state for additional information on how to determine which activity type is the best fit for any given situation.)

RCPP project proposals containing public works activities should identify: (1) the NRCS approved watershed plan (approving official and date of approval), (2) any proposed deviations from NRCS policy, and (3) existing designs that might help to accelerate implementation of RCPP public works activities. Information on the final disposition of any deviations from NRCS policy and the design and approval of prior plans are subject to project negotiations and the NRCS review and evaluation processes.

NRCS may discontinue assistance if the negotiation or the design phase (in design plus construction projects) of a project indicates that timely project completion is unlikely. It is NRCS's intent that only those proposals with robust active plans, detailed cost proposals, and proven partner capacities be considered for funding.

Applicants are reminded that all RCPP public works and watershed projects must have demonstrable ties to proposed RCPP project conservation benefits and eligible agricultural lands. In contrast to Public Law No. 83-566 ([Public Law No. 566](#)), RCPP does not include purposes such as recreation or municipal water supply as eligible.

When RCPP public works and watershed FA funds are budgeted and awarded in a project, agreement match (vs. project-level contributions) may be required. Public works improvements targeting purposes not related to flood control have a minimum requirement of 35 percent cash-match. Entities submitting flood control projects may request up to 100 percent of RCPP FA, though ranking may preclude their selection without substantial partner contributions (a feature of all RCPP projects).

Similarly, RCPP TA funding could potentially pay for the design entirely. In design only projects, contributions would need to provide meaningful conservation benefits, because a design by itself is unlikely to compete well against projects with more direct benefits.

With NRCS approval, public works project match may be counted as RCPP project contributions, but proposed partner contributions not directly associated with the public works activities cannot be counted toward public works match requirements.

Matching funds requirements may be reduced or waived if funding is awarded to a

project in which the benefits will principally accrue to communities or regions where most residents meet the limited resource or socially disadvantaged criteria included in the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended by the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018.

Additional flexibilities associated with these awards include the potential for experienced partners with demonstrated design, contracting, and implementation skills to contract innovatively, and the potential for partner contributions to be better expended and have greater impact in conservation activities.

As a reminder, land treatment activities related to Public Law No. 83-566 ([Public Law No. 566](#)) will be funded under land improvement, management, and restoration contracts with the producer rather than public works agreements.