

Part 531 – Regional Conservation Partnership Program Manual

Subpart B – Program Funding Announcements, Proposal Solicitation, Evaluation, and Selection

531.10 General

- A. This subpart provides policy related to program funding announcements, proposal solicitation, evaluation, and selection of partner proposals for programmatic partnership agreement (PPA) development.
- B. NRCS enters into PPAs with the lead partner to establish the framework under which Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) assistance will be delivered in the project area.
- C. NRCS reviews, evaluates, and selects RCPP proposals through a competitive process based on the criteria established within 7 CFR Part 1464, this subpart, and detailed in the applicable RCPP notice of funding opportunity (NFO).
- D. Each proposal must identify and address at least one resource concern. Proposals submitted in a critical conservation area (CCA) must address at least one priority resource concern associated with the CCA. See the appropriate NFO and subpart U, exhibit 531.204K, “Critical Conservation Areas and Resource Concerns,” of this manual for details on the CCAs and associated resource concerns.
- E. See subpart C, “Proposal and Programmatic Partnership Agreements,” subpart E, “Supplemental Agreements,” and subpart F, “Program Contracts,” of this manual for additional guidance.

531.11 Program Funding Announcements

- A. NRCS will:
 - (1) Periodically announce RCPP project funding opportunities through an NFO; and
 - (2) Make public the criteria and review process that will be used to evaluate proposals.
- B. Announcement Types
 - (1) Classic.—RCPP classic projects build upon traditional covered program authorities. NRCS directly manages all RCPP financial assistance (FA) awards to producers, leveraging partner involvement through partner contributions or partner-provided technical assistance (TA).
 - (2) Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFAs).—In contrast to RCPP classic projects, under AFA projects, NRCS negotiates FA delivery methods with partner(s) and the partner delivers the RCPP assistance to producers. NRCS assists partners with implementation as established by the PPA, NFO, and program guidance.
 - (3) Renewals.—Opportunities for lead partners to apply for a renewal are not publicly announced. Instead, the Financial Assistance Programs Division (FAPD) Projects Branch releases guidance to State offices, who in turn notify eligible lead partners of renewal opportunities. Typically, renewals are offered to lead partners of active partnership agreements set to expire in the succeeding fiscal year. Through a renewal, a lead partner receives additional funding to maintain or expand the original project scope. Each lead partner selected for a renewal negotiates a new PPA based on the partner’s renewal proposal, renewal opportunity guidance, and the most recent, applicable NFO.
- C. Each Classic and AFA NFO establishes specific requirements that apply to proposals selected under that NFO.

- (1) RCPP applicants must identify in their proposals whether they are applying for the CCA, or State or multistate fund pool.
 - (i) CCA Pool.—CCAs represent geographic areas with common resource concerns designated by the Secretary of Agriculture. For each CCA, NRCS identifies priority resource concerns. CCA applications must address at least one of the relevant CCA’s priority resource concerns. CCAs and priority resource concerns are identified within the applicable NFO. See subpart U, exhibit 531.204K, “Critical Conservation Areas and Resource Concerns,” of this manual for details on the CCAs and associated resource concerns.
 - (ii) State or Multistate Pool.—Proposals in the State or multistate category may be carried out either within a single State or in multiple States. For multistate projects, priority consideration may be given to applications identifying a reasonable and manageable number of States.
- (2) FAPD provides guidance on NFOs to both partners and NRCS staff.

531.12 Proposal Ranking, Evaluation, and Selection

NRCS ranks, evaluates, and selects proposals through a competitive application process based on the criteria outlined below and as further described in the applicable NFO and 7 CFR Section 1464.21.

- (1) Ranking Criteria.
 - (i) Each NFO outlines the specific review criteria, which are consistent with the following program principles:
 - Impact.—Project proposals offer and advance effective and compelling solutions that address one or more natural resource conservation priorities.
 - Partner Contributions.—Partners co-invest in shared conservation stewardship by leveraging contributions against the NRCS investment in an RCPP project. Substantive, value-added contributions that have clear potential to improve project outcomes are prioritized.
 - Innovation.—Projects integrate multiple conservation approaches, implement innovative conservation strategies or technologies, build new partnerships, outcome-based performance measures and methods, or effectively take advantage of RCPP flexibilities to deliver and advance conservation solutions.
 - Partnership and Project Management.—Partners bring technical and financial assistance, valued experience, expertise, and capacity to manage collaborative projects, provide effective information, outreach, and training to producers and landowners, and successfully quantify the conservation (and when possible, economic and social) outcomes of an RCPP project.
 - (ii) In addition to the criteria listed above, priority consideration may be given to proposals that:
 - Meaningfully engage historically underserved farmers and ranchers and Indian Tribes within the area covered by the project;
 - Assist producers in meeting or avoiding the need for a natural resource regulatory requirement;
 - Include a high percentage of producers in the area to be covered by the agreement;
 - Significantly leverage non-Federal financial and technical resources and coordinate with other local, State, or national efforts;
 - Include a diversity of stakeholders;
 - Deliver a high percentage of applied conservation to achieve conservation benefits or address the priority resource concern for a designated CCA;
 - Build upon existing restoration, watershed, or assessment plans; or

- Meet other factors that are important for achieving the purposes of the program, as determined by NRCS.
- (iii) For CCA proposals:
- NRCS selects proposals within a CCA that address one or more priority resource concerns for which the CCA is designated.
 - NRCS identifies the designated CCAs and publishes the associated priority resource concerns and ranking criteria within applicable NFOs.
- (iv) Renewals
- Renewals are selected through a noncompetitive process, based on available funding.
 - Renewals criteria include factors that reflect the success of the lead partner’s existing project, including attainment of project goals and objectives, TA/FA expenditures, timeliness and completion of project reporting, and partner contribution expenditures.
- (2) Evaluation Process and Selection.
- (i) Classic
- State offices evaluate submitted proposals based on criteria published in the NFO. Incomplete proposals are eliminated from the competition. State conservationists submit to FAPD Projects Branch a ranked list of evaluated proposals in priority order, by fund pool.
 - FAPD Projects Branch screens proposals for eligibility and consistency with program policy.
 - FAPD Projects Branch analyzes State proposal evaluations and develops a recommended list of awards for consideration by NRCS and Departmental leadership. The NRCS Chief makes the final award decisions and may consider available funding, geographic diversity, applicant diversity, and other factors in making the final selections.
- (ii) AFA
- AFA proposals are evaluated by a national review team based on criteria published in the NFO. Incomplete proposals are eliminated from the competition.
 - FAPD Projects Branch screens proposals for eligibility and consistency with program policy.
 - States in which project work is proposed provide feedback on proposals, with State conservationists indicating support or lack of support for each proposal.
 - FAPD Projects Branch analyzes the national review team evaluations and State feedback to develop a recommended list of awards for consideration by NRCS and Departmental leadership. The NRCS Chief makes the final award decisions and may consider available funding, geographic diversity, applicant diversity, and other factors in making the final selections.
 - NRCS must not enter into more than 15 AFAs in any given fiscal year.
 - In determining whether to offer to fund a proposal through an AFA, NRCS will consider the extent to which the proposal:
 - Achieves conservation benefits on a regional or watershed scale;
 - Involves investments in infrastructure related to agricultural or nonindustrial private forest production that would benefit multiple producers and address natural resource concerns such as drought, wildfire, or water quality impairment on the land within the proposal area;
 - Addresses natural resource concerns, including the development and implementation of watershed, habitat, or other area restoration plans;
- Note:** Partner proposals focused solely or largely on planning are unlikely to be competitive.

Title 440 – Conservation Programs Manual

- Uses innovative approaches to leverage the NRCS Federal investment with private financial mechanisms, such as:
 - Pay-for-Performance, or
 - Support for an environmental market
- Otherwise demonstrates that the goals and objectives of the program would be more easily achieved by offering to fund the proposal through an AFA agreement.

(iii) Renewals

- State offices evaluate eligible lead partners' renewals proposals.
- FAPD Projects Branch screens proposals for eligibility and consistency with program policy. Based on this screening and State office evaluations, award recommendations are developed for consideration by agency and Departmental leadership. The NRCS Chief makes the final selection decisions.

(3) Notification of Project Selection.

NRCS notifies all successful and unsuccessful applicants of the Chief's decisions. For Classic competitions, lead State offices make the notifications and provide proposal feedback to unsuccessful lead partners. For AFA proposals, FAPD Projects Branch makes the notifications and provides feedback to unsuccessful lead partners.