

## **NI440-310 – NRCS Program Ranking through Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART)**

### **Part 310 – NRCS Program Ranking through Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART)**

#### **310.0 Purpose**

- A. To provide States with guidance and materials on NRCS program ranking and utilization of Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART).
- B. All NRCS programs will utilize CART for ranking applications.

#### **310.1 Background**

- A. Traditional ranking tools have been developed as a weighted ranking process to prioritize all eligible applications, conduct ranking on eligible applications, and recommend prioritized eligible applications for funding.
- B. CART is a decision support system designed to:
  - (1) Provide a consistent, and replicable framework for steps 1-6 of the conservation planning process based on geospatially referenced information, client-provided information, field observations as appropriate, and planner expertise.
  - (2) Support program neutral planning—plan first, fund as appropriate.
  - (3) Directly and consistently transfer inventory and assessment information and client decisions related to conservation practice adoption to the ranking tool, if the client is interested in financial assistance, to avoid duplication, increase prioritization on critical areas based on geospatial priorities and site-specific data, and provide better outcomes and a framework for continuous improvement.
  - (4) Automatically rank applications in multiple ranking pools to provide the most advantageous situation for the client and to help planners prioritize workload toward those clients who are most likely to receive funding.
  - (5) CART allows States to incorporate State-specific information into the ranking process through the development and implementation of specific ranking pools. These are extensively customizable with geospatial and planner data and should allow for effective prioritization of program delivery.
- C. National Ranking Templates
  - (1) National program managers will configure national ranking templates for all NRCS programs and initiatives. The National Ranking Templates contain four parameters that will be customized for each program to reflect the national level ranking priorities. The four parameters are:
    - (i) Land use and modifiers
    - (ii) Resource Concerns
    - (iii) Practices
    - (iv) Ranking Component Weights
  - (2) Land Uses—NRCS has developed land use designations to be used by planners and modelers at the field and landscape level. Land use modifiers more accurately define the land's actual use and provide another level of specificity and help denote how the

land is managed. Land use designations and modifiers are defined in Title 180, National Planning Procedures Handbook, Part 600.

- (3) Resource Concerns—An expected degradation of the soil, water, air, plant, or animal resource base to the extent that the sustainability or intended use of the resource is impaired. Because NRCS quantifies or describes resource concerns as part of a comprehensive conservation planning process, that includes client objectives, human and energy resources are considered components of the resource base.
- (4) Practices—A specific treatment, such as a structural or vegetative measure, or management technique, commonly used to meet specific needs in planning and implementing conservation, for which standards and specifications have been developed.
- (5) Ranking Component Weights—A set of five components that comprise the ranking score for an individual assessed practice schedule. The components include vulnerability, planned practice points, program priorities, resource priorities, and efficiency. The points for vulnerability, planned practice points, and efficiency are garnered from the assessment portion of CART.

#### D. Ranking Pools

- (1) Each State program manager will be able to create State-specific ranking pools, from the parameters established in the National Ranking Templates. Ranking pool customization will allow States to focus funding on priority resource concerns and initiatives particular to that State or other subdivision. This should be informed through the locally led process.
- (2) The ranking tool portion of CART allows States to identify the specific land uses and modifiers, resource concerns, and conservation practices that determine eligibility for and ranking within a given ranking pool or pools.
- (3) For a given resource concern, CART will establish a site vulnerability and a planned practice score. Site vulnerability is determined by subtracting the existing condition and existing practice scores from the thresholds. The planned practice score will be based on the sum of the planned practice on that land unit that addresses the resource concern. These two scores will be weighted by a ranking pool to address the resource concerns prioritized by that ranking pool.
- (4) The ranking pool will contain a display group that contains a set of questions with the following sections: applicability, category, program questions, and resource questions. The applicability and category sections are limited to a single question within the display group, whereas the program and resource question sections must contain at least one question. This is the only part of the overall ranking score that includes local and State resource and program priorities.
- (5) States are required to publish the program ranking criteria prior to an application batching or cut-off date. Exhibit A can be customized and posted to the NRCS States' websites to satisfy this requirement.

### **310.2 Best Management Practices**

#### A. Application Processing

- (1) States may accept a single application form from an applicant(s) to document their interest in program funding. A unique application identification number must be linked to the ranking pool when submitting for funding selection in Conservation Desktop, thus the single application can be entered in the appropriate business tool multiple times for each applicable ranking pool associated with the assessment.

- (2) An applicant is not required to submit an application prior to completing a CART assessment; however, an application does need to be received by the application cut-off deadline established by the State in order to be considered for the funding period.
- (3) States should review all available ranking pools prior to making preapproval selections. The preapproval selections that occur first will remove practices from availability in other ranking pools or removal of other practices from ranking pools for funding.

**B. Ranking Pool Development Considerations**

- (1) States should review their past ranking pools and identify ways to consolidate ranking pools in order to streamline the ranking process for the field staff. The ranking pools contain categories that can be used to group similar applications for ranking. The category can be a text or geospatial question. Examples of categories include administrative areas, land uses, or enrollment types.
- (2) States should review their current local or State questions and determine if the questions will be answered through CART assessment, geospatially answered, or rewritten to provide separation of applications for funding.

**310.3 Resource Concerns**

Resource concerns are one of the parameters for ranking templates and ranking pools that States may use to determine priority and eligibility for ranking. A resource concern is the resource condition that does not meet minimum acceptable condition levels as established by resource planning criteria shown in the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG), Section III. This implies an expected degradation of the soil, water, air, plant, animal, or energy resource base to the extent that the sustainability or intended use of the resource is impaired. Resource concern categories are used to organize resource concerns into groups that have functional similarities. For planning purposes, some resource concerns are divided into components that show a clear distinction in the causal factors, mitigation actions, and anticipated environmental effects. The below table lists the 47 NRCS resource concerns, as well as their categories and components.

Table 1: List of resource concern categories and associated concerns and components.

<b>Resource Concern Category</b>	<b>Resource Concern</b>	<b>Resource Concern Component</b>
Air quality emissions	Emissions of airborne reactive nitrogen	Reactive nitrogen – confined animal activities
		Reactive nitrogen – diesel engines
		Reactive nitrogen – nitrogen fertilizer
		Reactive nitrogen – non-diesel engine combustion equipment
		Reactive nitrogen – open burning
	Emissions of greenhouse gases - GHGs	GHGs – carbon stock
		GHGs – confined animal activities
		GHGs – nitrogen fertilizer

Title 440 – National Instruction

<b>Resource Concern Category</b>	<b>Resource Concern</b>	<b>Resource Concern Component</b>
	Emissions of ozone precursors	Ozone – confined animal activities
		Ozone – diesel engines
		Ozone – non-diesel engine combustion equipment
		Ozone – open burning
		Ozone – pesticides VOCs
	Emissions of particulate matter (PM) and PM precursors	PM – confined animal activities
		PM – diesel engines
		PM – dust from field operations
		PM – dust from unpaved roads
		PM – nitrogen fertilizer
		PM – non-diesel engine combustion equipment
		PM – open burning
		PM – pesticide drift
	Objectionable odor	Odor – confined animal activities
Odor – nitrogen fertilizer		
Aquatic habitat	Aquatic habitat for fish and other organisms	Aquatic habitat for fish and other organisms
	Elevated water temperature	Water temperature effects on aquatic habitat
Concentrated erosion	Bank erosion from streams, shorelines, or water conveyance channels	Bank erosion from streams, shorelines, or water conveyance channels
	Classic gully erosion	Classic gully erosion
	Ephemeral gully erosion	Ephemeral gully erosion
Degraded plant condition	Plant productivity and health	Plant productivity and health
	Plant structure and composition	Plant structure and composition
Field pesticide loss	Pesticides transported to groundwater	Nonpoint pesticide leaching loss
	Pesticides transported to surface water	Nonpoint pesticide drift to surface water
		Nonpoint pesticide surface loss
Field sediment, nutrient and pathogen loss	Nutrients transported to groundwater	Nonpoint nitrogen leaching loss
		Nonpoint phosphorus leaching loss

Title 440 – National Instruction

<b>Resource Concern Category</b>	<b>Resource Concern</b>	<b>Resource Concern Component</b>
	Nutrients transported to surface water	Nonpoint nitrogen surface loss
		Nonpoint phosphorus surface loss
	Pathogens and chemicals from manure, biosolids, or compost applications transported to groundwater	Nonpoint pathogen loss to groundwater
	Pathogens and chemicals from manure, biosolids, or compost applications transported to surface water	Nonpoint pathogen surface loss
	Sediment transported to surface water	Sediment from erosion sources
Fire management	Wildfire hazard from biomass accumulation	Wildfire hazard from biomass accumulation
Inefficient energy use	Energy efficiency of equipment and facilities	Energy efficiency of equipment and facilities
	Energy efficiency of farming/ranching practices and field operations	Energy efficiency of field operations
Livestock production limitation	Feed and forage balance	Feed and forage balance
	Inadequate livestock shelter	Inadequate livestock shelter
	Inadequate livestock water quantity, quality, and distribution	Inadequate livestock water quantity, quality, and distribution
Pest pressure	Plant pest pressure	Chemical resistance
		Invasive species
		Plant pest pressure
Salt losses to water	Salts transported to groundwater	Salt loss to groundwater
	Salts transported to surface water	Salt loss to surface water
Soil quality limitations	Aggregate instability	Aggregate instability
	Compaction	Compaction

Title 440 – National Instruction

<b>Resource Concern Category</b>	<b>Resource Concern</b>	<b>Resource Concern Component</b>
	Concentration of salts or other chemicals	Concentration of salts or other chemicals
	Organic matter depletion	Organic matter depletion
	Soil organism habitat loss or degradation	Soil organism habitat loss or degradation
	Subsidence	Subsidence
Source water depletion	Groundwater depletion	Groundwater depletion
	Inefficient irrigation water use	Inefficient irrigation water use
	Surface water depletion	Surface water depletion
Storage and handling of pollutants	Nutrients transported to groundwater	Concentrated nutrient and pathogen leaching loss from domestic animal confinement, including milkhouse waste and silage leachate
		Concentrated nutrient and pathogen leaching loss from storage and handling of manure, compost, biosolids, or non-ag food waste
	Nutrients transported to surface water	Concentrated nutrient and pathogen effluent from domestic animal confinement, including milkhouse waste and silage leachate
		Concentrated nutrient and pathogen surface loss from domestic animals standing in surface water
		Concentrated nutrient and pathogen surface loss from storage and handling of manure, compost, biosolids, or non-ag food waste
	Petroleum, heavy metals, and other pollutants transported to groundwater	Concentrated agrichemical leaching loss from storage and handling of fertilizer and pesticides
		Mine waste remediation and containment – groundwater
		Petroleum and other pollutant containment to groundwater
	Petroleum, heavy metals, and other pollutants transported to surface water	Concentrated agrichemical runoff loss from storage and handling of fertilizer and pesticides
		Mine waste remediation and containment – surface water
		Petroleum and other pollutant containment to surface water
	Terrestrial habitat	Terrestrial habitat for wildlife and invertebrates
Weather	Drifted snow	Drifted snow

Title 440 – National Instruction

<b>Resource Concern Category</b>	<b>Resource Concern</b>	<b>Resource Concern Component</b>
resilience	Naturally available moisture use	Drought susceptibility
		Moisture management
	Ponding and flooding	Ponding and flooding
	Seasonal high-water table	Seasonal high-water table
	Seeps	Seeps
Wind and water erosion	Sheet and rill erosion	Sheet and rill erosion
	Wind erosion	Wind erosion

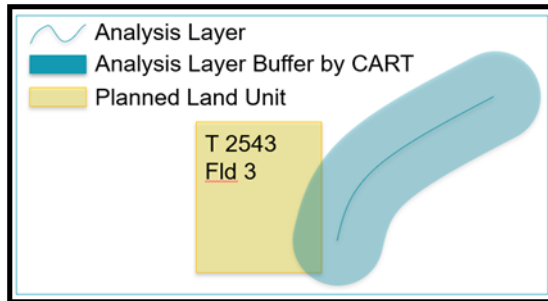
The following program considerations are also grouped with resource concerns and can be selected for ranking priority and eligibility.

Table 2. List of program consideration category and associated considerations and components.

Program Consideration Category	Program Considerations	Program Consideration Components
Long-term protection of land	Loss of functions and values	Loss of floodplain functions and values
		Loss of forestland functions and values
		Loss of wetland functions and values
	Threat of conversion	Agricultural land conversion to nonagricultural uses
		Grassland conversion to non-grassland uses

### 310.4 Definitions

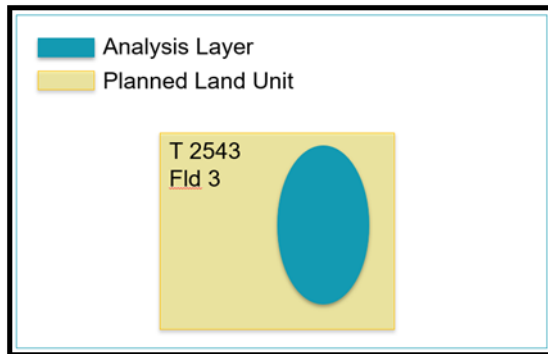
- A. Applicability—A question used in a ranking pool display group to determine if an assessed practice schedule is in or out of a ranking pool. The question can be geospatial or text based and does not garner any points in the ranking score.
- B. Buffer—A geospatial analysis option used in CART display groups. The planned land unit intersects the specified analysis layer by a configurable buffer distance, but does not include option for buffer and then intersect percent. The analysis layer geometries allowed include point, multipoint, polyline, and polygon.



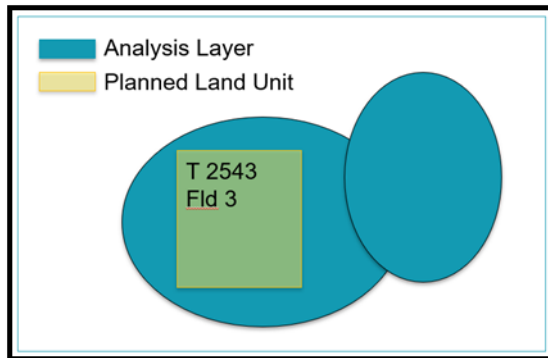
- C. Category—A question used in ranking pool display group-to-group applications, so they are ranked with “like” applications within a single ranking pool. The question can be geospatial or text based and does not garner any points in the ranking score.



D. Contains—A geospatial analysis option used in CART display groups. The planned land unit completely contains a single feature of the analysis layer. The analysis layer geometries allowed include point, multipoint, polyline, and polygon.

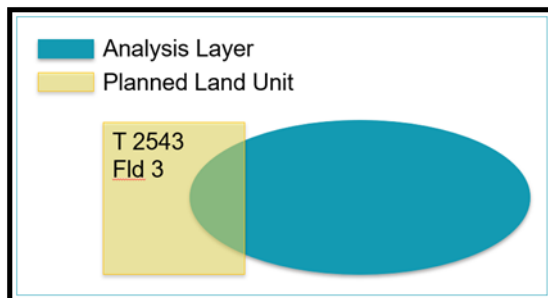


E. Contained—A geospatial analysis option used in CART display groups. The planned land unit is completely contained within a single feature of the analysis layer. The analysis layer geometry allowed includes polygon.

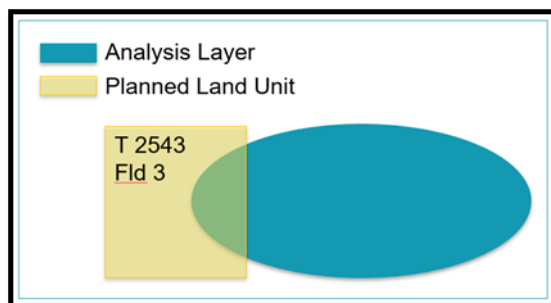


F. Display Group—A set of questions associated with a specific ranking pool that includes the following sections: applicability, category, program questions, and resource questions.

G. Intersect—A geospatial analysis option used in CART display groups. The planned land unit must intersect the analysis layer. The analysis layer geometries allowed include point, multipoint, polyline, and polygon.



H. Intersect with Percent—A geospatial analysis option used in CART display groups. The planned land unit intersects the analysis layer by a configurable percent defined by the user. The analysis layer geometry allowed includes polygon.



I. National Ranking Template—A framework of national criteria used to develop NRCS program ranking criteria and includes the following parameters: land uses and modifiers, resource concerns, practices, and ranking component weights.

J. Program Questions—Questions can be geospatial or text based and are used for program priorities, required policy-based ranking questions, or locally led ranking questions. Questions can be configured to be conditional depending on how other questions are answered, can be yes/no, multiple choice, or multiple answer, and points can be positive or negative.

K. Ranking Pool—State-established ranking criteria developed within the parameters of the National Ranking Template and includes the following parameters: land uses and modifiers, resource concerns, practices, ranking component weights, and a specific display group. The ranking pool is linked to a spending plan or a subaccount.

L. Resource Questions—Questions can be geospatial or text based and are used for resource priorities, resource-based, or locally led ranking questions. Questions can be configured to be conditional depending on how other questions are answered, can be yes/no, multiple choice, or multiple answer, and points can be positive or negative.

M. Spending Plan—The annual allocation process of prioritizing and planning how funds will be utilized and distributed to a State, center, or project. A single fund source may be associated with multiple spending plans. A spending plan can only be linked to a single ranking pool.

N. Subaccount—A fund account set up in ProTracts to fund program agreement items. A subaccount can be linked to only a single ranking pool.

### 310.5 Exhibits

- A. Program Ranking Criteria for Publication
- B. Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) Ranking Guidance Amended October 2020
- C. ACEP-Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) National Ranking Template
- D. ACEP-ALE Grasslands of Special Environmental Significance (GSS) National Ranking Template
- E. ACEP-Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) National Ranking Template Amended October 2020

## Title 440 – National Instruction

- F. Agricultural Management Assistance Program (AMA) Ranking Guidance Amended November 2021
- G. AMA National Ranking Template Amended November 2021
- H. Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) Ranking Guidance Amended November 2021
- I. CSP General National Ranking Template
- J. CSP General National Ranking Template Amended November 2021
- K. CSP-Mississippi River Basin Initiative (MRBI) Ranking Guidance Amended October 2020
- L. CSP-MRBI National Ranking Template Amended October 2021
- M. CSP-Long Leaf Pine Initiative (LLPI) Ranking Guidance Amended October 2020
- N. CSP-LLPI National Ranking Template Revised October 2021
- O. Emergency Watershed Protection Program – Floodplain Easements (EWPP-FPE) Ranking Guidance
- P. EWPP-FPE National Ranking Template
- Q. Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) Ranking Guidance Amended November 2021
- R. EQIP General National Ranking Template Amended November 2021
- S. EQIP Joint Chiefs’ Landscape Restoration Partnership (JCLRP) Ranking Guidance Amended October 2020
- T. EQIP-JCLRP National Ranking Template Revised October 2021
- U. EQIP-LLPI Ranking Guidance Amended October 2020
- V. EQIP-LLPI National Ranking Template Revised October 2021
- W. EQIP-MRBI Ranking Guidance Amended October 2020
- X. EQIP-MRBI National Ranking Template Amended October 2021
- Y. EQIP National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) Ranking Guidance Amended October 2020
- Z. EQIP-NWQI National Ranking Template Amended October 2021
- AA. EQIP WaterSmart Initiative (WSI) Ranking Guidance Amended October 2020
- AB. EQIP-WSI National Ranking Template Amended October 2021
- AC. EQIP Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) Golden-Winged Warbler Ranking Guidance Amended October 2020
- AD. EQIP WLFW Golden-Winged Warbler National Ranking Template Revised October 2021
- AE. EQIP WLFW Gopher Tortoise Ranking Guidance Amended October 2020
- AF. EQIP WLFW Gopher Tortoise National Ranking Template Revised October 2021
- AG. EQIP WLFW Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative Ranking Guidance Amended October 2020

## Title 440 – National Instruction

- AH. EQIP WLFW Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative National Ranking Template Revised October 2021
- AI. EQIP WLFW Monarch Butterfly Ranking Guidance Amended October 2020
- AJ. EQIP WLFW Monarch Butterfly National Ranking Template Revised October 2021
- AK. EQIP WLFW New England Cottontail Ranking Guidance Discontinued October 2021
- AL. EQIP WLFW New England Cottontail National Ranking Template Discontinued October 2021
- AM. EQIP WLFW Sage-Grouse Initiative Ranking Guidance—Retired
- AN. EQIP WLFW Sage-Grouse Initiative National Ranking Template—Retired
- AO. EQIP WLFW Southwestern Willow Flycatcher Ranking Guidance Amended October 2020
- AP. EQIP WLFW Southwestern Willow Flycatcher National Ranking Template Amended October 2021
- AQ. Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) Ranking Guidance Amended October 2021
- AR. GLRI Invasive Species National Ranking Template
- AS. GLRI Nearshore National Ranking Template Amended October 2021
- AT. GLRI Wildlife Habitat National Ranking Template
- AU. Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP) Ranking Guidance
- AV. HFRP National Ranking Template
- AW. Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) – 2014 Farm Bill Ranking Guidance Amended November 2021
- AX. RCPP-ACEP-ALE National Ranking Template Amended October 2020
- AY. RCPP-CSP National Ranking Template Amended November 2021
- AZ. RCPP-EQIP National Ranking Template Amended November 2021
- BA. RCPP-HFRP National Ranking Template
- BB. RCPP-ACEP-WRE National Ranking Template Amended October 2020
- BC. RCPP – 2018 Farm Bill Ranking Guidance Amended July 2022
- BD. RCPP – 2018 Farm Bill Land Management and Rentals National Ranking Template Amended November 2021
- BE. CSP WLFW Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative Ranking Guidance Amended October 2020
- BF. CSP WLFW Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative National Ranking Template Revised October 2021
- BG. CSP WLFW Sage-Grouse Initiative Ranking Guidance—Retired
- BH. CSP WLFW Sage-Grouse Initiative National Ranking Template—Retired
- BI. Water Bank Program (WBP) Ranking Guidance
- BJ. WBP National Ranking Template Amended October 2020

## Title 440 – National Instruction

- BK. Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Ranking Guidance
- BL. CRP National Ranking Template—Reserved
- BM. EQIP Disaster Relief Ranking Guidance
- BN. EQIP Disaster Relief National Ranking Template
- BO. AMA-Risk Management Agency (RMA) National Ranking Template
- BP. Reserved
- BQ. CSP WLFW Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI) Greater Sage-Grouse (GRSG) Ranking Guidance
- BR. CSP WLFW SGI GRSG National Ranking Template Revised October 2021
- BS. CSP WLFW SGI Gunnison Sage Grouse (GUSG) Ranking Guidance
- BT. CSP WLFW SGI GUSG National Ranking Template Revised October 2021
- BU. EQIP WLFW SGI GRSG Ranking Guidance
- BV. EQIP WLFW SGI GRSG National Ranking Template Revised October 2021
- BW. EQIP WLFW SGI GUSG Ranking Guidance
- BX. EQIP WLFW SGI GUSG National Ranking Template Revised October 2021
- BY. RCPP 2018 Farm Bill Entity-Held Easements National Ranking Template
- BZ. Reserved
- CA. EQIP Soil Health Program National Ranking Template
- CB. EQIP Honey Bee Pollinator Initiative Ranking Guidance Discontinued October 2021
- CC. EQIP Honey Bee Pollinator Initiative National Ranking Template Discontinued October 2021
- CD. ACEP-WRE Reserved Right Grazing National Ranking Template
- CE. RCPP-WRE Reserved Right Grazing National Ranking Template
- CF. ACEP-ALE-GSS Hayed National Ranking Template
- CG. EQIP Conservation Incentive Contracts (CIC) Ranking Guidance—Retired
- CH. EQIP CIC National Ranking Template—Retired
- CI. EQIP Edge of Field Ranking Guidance
- CJ. EQIP Edge of Field National Ranking Template
- CK. EQIP Climate Smart Agriculture and Forestry Ranking Guidance—Retired
- CL. EQIP Climate Smart Agriculture and Forestry National Ranking Template—Retired
- CM. EQIP-CIC National Ranking Guidance
- CN. EQIP-CIC National Ranking Template
- CO. RCPP 2018 Farm Bill US-Held Easements National Ranking Template—New
- CP. RCPP 2018 Farm Bill LM for US-Held Easement Restoration National Ranking Template—New