

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 use of the Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART).
- B. All NRCS programs will use 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 and prioritize 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, then rank, select, and fund as appropriate.
 - (3) Directly and consistently transfer inventory and assessment information and client decisions related to conservation practice adoption to the ranking tool. This direct information transfer avoids duplication of effort, increases prioritization on critical areas based on geospatial criteria and site-specific data, improves outcomes, and provides a framework for continuous improvement.
 - (4) Automatically rank applications in multiple ranking pools to provide the most advantageous evaluation of the application and to help planners prioritize workload toward those applications that are most likely to receive funding.
 - (5) Allow the incorporation of State-specific information into the ranking process through the development and use of specific ranking pools. These are customizable with geospatial and planner data and allow for the 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) Conservation Practices and Activities
 - (iv) Ranking Component Weights
 - (2) Land Use and Modifiers—NRCS has developed land use designations to be used by planners and modelers at the field and landscape level. Land use modifiers accurately define the land’s actual use and provide another level of specificity to 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) Conservation Practices and Activities—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 individually assessed practice schedule. The components include vulnerability, planned practice points, program priorities, resource priorities, and efficiency. These weights are applied to the points garnered through the assessment and ranking portions of CART and result in the final assessment score in the ranking pool.

D. Ranking Pools

- (1) Each State program manager will create State-specific ranking pools, from the parameters established in the national ranking templates. Ranking pool customization allows 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 and activities that determine eligibility for and ranking within a given ranking pool or pools.
- (3) For a given resource concern, CART will calculate 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 is based on the sum of the planned practice scores on the land unit that addresses the resource concern. These two scores will be adjusted based on the ranking component weights designated for the individual 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 may contain multiple questions and 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 must publish the program ranking criteria prior to an application batching or cut-off date for the applicable program. 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), where appropriate, 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 must be received by the application cut-off deadline established by the State to be considered for the funding period.
- (3) States should review all available ranking pools and associated practice lists prior to making preapproval selections. The funding pool selected for preapproval that occurs first will remove the practices from consideration in the remaining matched ranking pools for funding consideration.

B. Ranking Pool Development Considerations

- (1) States should identify ways to consolidate ranking pools to streamline the ranking process. 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 they will be answered through the 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. 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 49 NRCS resource concerns, as well as their categories and components.

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

Resource Concern Category	Resource Concern	Resource Concern Component
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
	Emissions of ozone precursors	Ozone – confined animal activities
		Ozone – diesel engines

Title 440 – National Instruction

Resource Concern Category	Resource Concern	Resource Concern Component	
		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
			PM – windblown dust
	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	
	Nutrients transported to surface water	Nonpoint nitrogen surface loss	
		Nonpoint phosphorus surface loss	
	Pathogens and chemicals from manure, biosolids, or compost applications	Nonpoint pathogen loss to groundwater	

Title 440 – National Instruction

Resource Concern Category	Resource Concern	Resource Concern Component
	transported 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
	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

Title 440 – National Instruction

Resource Concern Category	Resource Concern	Resource Concern Component
	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	Terrestrial habitat for wildlife and invertebrates
Weather resilience	Drifted snow	Drifted snow
	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.

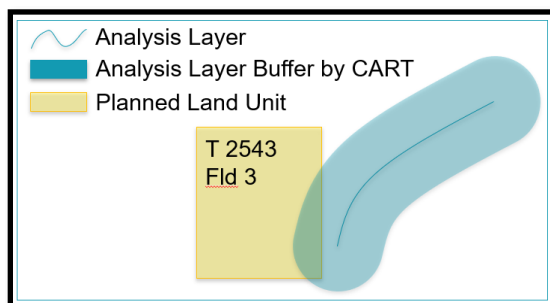
Table 2. List of program consideration category and associated considerations and components.

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
Long-term protection of land	Threat of conversion	Agricultural land conversion to nonagricultural uses
		Grassland conversion to non-grassland uses

310.4 Definitions

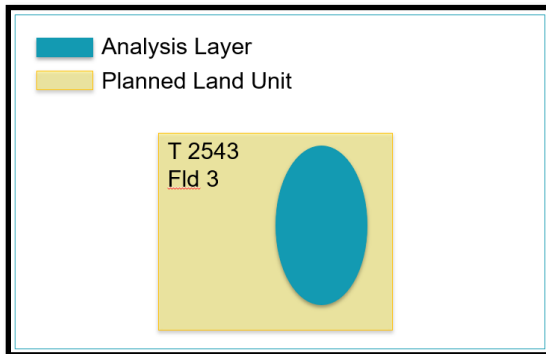
A. **Applicability**—A question used in a ranking pool display group to determine if an assessed planning land unit is in or out of a ranking pool. The question can be geospatial or text based and does not garner any points in the ranking score.

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 with percent. The analysis layer geometries allowed include point, multipoint, polyline, and polygon.

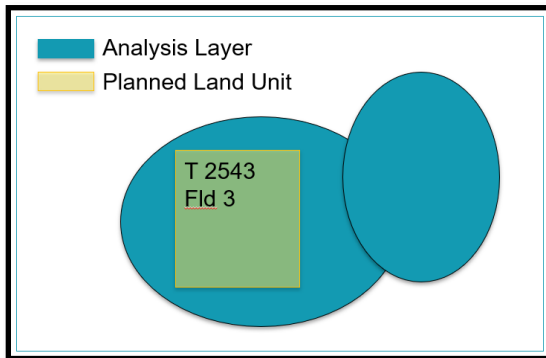


C. **Category**—A question in the ranking pool display group that is used to group applications that meet the category criteria, which allows for “like” applications to be ranked within a single ranking pool. The question can be geospatial or text based and does not garner any points in the ranking score.

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.

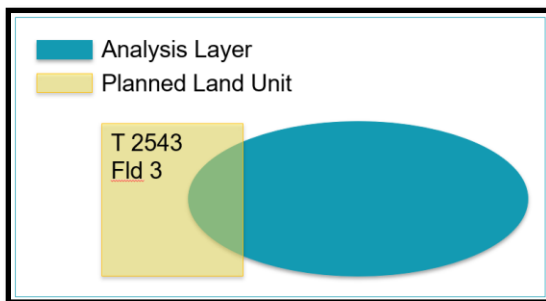


E. Contained—A geospatial analysis option used in CART display groups. The planned land unit is completely contained within a single feature of the analysis layer. The analysis layer geometry allowed includes polygon.

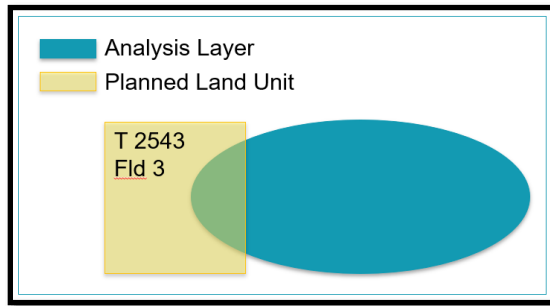


F. Display Group—A set of questions associated with a specific ranking pool that includes the following sections: applicability, category, program questions, and resource questions.

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. Practice Schedule—A conservation plan or record of decision.

K. 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.

L. 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.

M. 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.

N. 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.

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

310.5 Exhibits

- A. Program Ranking Criteria for NRCS Publication—Amended October 2022
- B. Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2020
- C. ACEP-Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) General National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- D. ACEP-ALE-Grasslands of Special Environmental Significance (GSS) National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022

Title 440 – National Instruction

- E. ACEP-Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) General National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- F. Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) Program and AMA-RMA Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2022
- G. AMA National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- H. Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) Classic and Renewals Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2022
- I. CSP-FY 23 Renewals National Ranking Template—Amended November 2021
- J. CSP General National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- K. CSP-Mississippi River Basin Initiative (MRBI) Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2020
- L. CSP-MRBI National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- M. CSP-Long Leaf Pine Initiative (LLPI) Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2020
- N. CSP-LLPI National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- O. Emergency Watershed Protection Program – Floodplain Easements (EWPP-FPE) Ranking Guidance
- P. EWPP-FPE National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- Q. Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2022
- R. EQIP General National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- S. EQIP Joint Chiefs’ Landscape Restoration Partnership (JCLRP) Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2020
- T. EQIP-JCLRP National Ranking Template—Amended October 2021
- U. EQIP-LLPI Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2020
- V. EQIP-LLPI National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- W. EQIP-MRBI Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2020
- X. EQIP-MRBI National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- Y. EQIP National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2020
- Z. EQIP-NWQI National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- AA. EQIP WaterSMART Initiative (WSI) National Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2022
- AB. EQIP-WSI National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- AC. EQIP Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) Golden-Winged Warbler Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2020
- AD. EQIP WLFW Golden-Winged Warbler National Ranking Template—Amended October 2021
- AE. EQIP WLFW Gopher Tortoise Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2020

Title 440 – National Instruction

- AF. EQIP WLFW Gopher Tortoise National Ranking Template—Amended October 2021
- AG. EQIP WLFW Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2022
- AH. EQIP WLFW Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative National Ranking Template—Amended October 2021
- AI. EQIP WLFW Monarch Butterfly Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2020
- AJ. EQIP WLFW Monarch Butterfly National Ranking Template—Amended October 2021
- AK. EQIP WLFW New England Cottontail Ranking Guidance—Retired
- AL. EQIP WLFW New England Cottontail National Ranking Template—Retired
- 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 2022
- AP. EQIP WLFW Southwestern Willow Flycatcher National Ranking Template—Amended October 2021
- AQ. EQIP Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2022
- AR. EQIP GLRI Invasive Species National Ranking Template
- AS. EQIP GLRI Nearshore National Ranking Template—Amended October 2021
- AT. EQIP GLRI Wildlife Habitat National Ranking Template
- AU. Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) Ranking Guidance
- AV. HFRP General National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- AW. Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) – 2014 Farm Bill Ranking Guidance—Amended May 2022
- AX. RCPP-ACEP-ALE National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- AY. RCPP-CSP National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- AZ. RCPP-EQIP General National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- BA. RCPP-HFRP National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- BB. RCPP-ACEP-WRE General National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- BC. RCPP – 2018 Farm Bill Ranking Guidance—Amended July 2022
- BD. RCPP – 2018 Farm Bill Land Management and Rental National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- BE. CSP WLFW Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2022
- BF. CSP WLFW Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative National Ranking Template—Amended October 2021
- BG. CSP WLFW Sage-Grouse Initiative Ranking Guidance—Retired

Title 440 – National Instruction

- BH. CSP WLFW Sage-Grouse Initiative National Ranking Template—Retired
- BI. Water Bank Program (WBP) Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2022
- BJ. WBP National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- 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—Amended October 2022
- BO. AMA-Risk Management Agency (RMA) National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- BP. Reserved
- BQ. CSP WLFW Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI) Greater Sage-Grouse (GRSG) Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2022
- BR. CSP WLFW SGI GRSG National Ranking Template—Amended October 2021
- BS. CSP WLFW SGI Gunnison Sage-Grouse (GUSG) Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2022
- BT. CSP WLFW SGI GUSG National Ranking Template—Amended October 2021
- BU. EQIP WLFW SGI GRSG Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2022
- BV. EQIP WLFW SGI GRSG National Ranking Template—Amended October 2021
- BW. EQIP WLFW SGI GUSG Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2022
- BX. EQIP WLFW SGI GUSG National Ranking Template—Amended October 2021
- BY. RCPP 2018 Farm Bill Entity-Held Easements National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- BZ. Reserved
- CA. EQIP Soil Health Program National Ranking Template—Retired
- CB. EQIP Honey Bee Pollinator Initiative Ranking Guidance—Retired
- CC. EQIP Honey Bee Pollinator Initiative National Ranking Template—Retired
- CD. ACEP-WRE Reserved Grazing Rights National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- CE. RCPP-ACEP-WRE Reserved Grazing Rights National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- CF. ACEP-ALE-GSS Hayed National Ranking Template—Retired
- 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—Amended October 2022
- CK. EQIP Climate Smart Agriculture and Forestry Ranking Guidance—Retired

Title 440 – National Instruction

- CL. EQIP Climate Smart Agriculture and Forestry National Ranking Template—Retired
- CM. EQIP-CIC National Ranking Guidance—Amended October 2022
- CN. EQIP-CIC National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- CO. RCPP 2018 Farm Bill US-Held Easements National Ranking Template—Amended October 2022
- CP. RCPP 2018 Farm Bill LM for US-Held Easement Restoration National Ranking Template
- CQ. ACEP-WRE GLRI Nearshore Ranking Guidance—New
- CR. ACEP-WRE GLRI Nearshore National Ranking Template—New
- CS. EWPP-FPE GLRI Nearshore Ranking Guidance—New
- CT. EWPP-FPE GLRI Nearshore National Ranking Template—New