

RCPP Proposal Frequently Asked Questions

Updated May 2023 to incorporate questions on the RCPP Improvement process and current notice of funding opportunity.

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General Questions

1. What are the key differences between RCPP Classic and Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFAs)?

The purpose of AFAs is to fund innovative and partner-led projects that implement conservation activities and achieve conservation benefits that might not be possible or would be more difficult under RCPP Classic. There are three key differences—

- *All producers/landowners sign contracts with the lead or other partner and are reimbursed by the lead partner or other partner.*
- *With the exception of activities that cannot be delegated by NRCS, all technical assistance should be delivered by the lead partner or through an entity subcontracted by the lead partner.*
- *AFA awards are reserved for projects that cannot be carried out, or not as effectively carried out, under RCPP Classic.*

2. Who needs to get eAuth permissions and access to the RCPP portal to submit a proposal?

Only a single individual needs to obtain an eAuth credential and portal access in order to submit a proposal and if selected, negotiate an agreement. An eAuth credential is issued to a specific individual and cannot be transferred or shared by multiple individuals. If the POC developing the proposal or negotiating an agreement needs to change they can be granted access to an existing proposal/project after they have obtained their own eAuth credential.

3. How is the NRCS lead state selected for multi-state projects, and is this selected by the partner?

The lead partner submitting the proposal must identify the lead State in the portal. This should be the state in which the largest percentage of the work will be performed.

4. What is the role of NRCS service centers in RCPP projects?

For projects carried out under RCPP Classic, local NRCS offices play a prominent implementation role. Once PPA is active, and appropriate delegations are in place NRCS staff in local offices enroll producers and landowners in RCPP contracts and easements, complete Highly Erodible Lands/Wetlands Conservation determinations, AGI compliance checks, and carry out other project management activities. Local offices are also responsible for completing implementation TA activities, such as planning, design, installation and checkouts of RCPP producer contracts, unless an approved supplemental TA agreement is in place for partners to carry out some or all of these implementation TA activities.

5. Is there a minimum amount of land a project needs to work on? Can pilot projects with a limited area coverage on individual but not geographically linked farmland be funded?

There is not a minimum amount of land required for an RCPP proposal. However a project that includes only a single farm or ranch is unlikely to be funded unless proposal documents eligibility and the justifies why the proposed work cannot be carried out under a covered program (ACEP-ALE, ACEP-WRE, CSP, EQIP, HFRP, PL-566) contract with that specific landowner.

6. Can I submit a single proposal for both funding opportunities?

No, each funding opportunity has different goals and requirements so to apply for both funding opportunities you will need to create and submit two separate proposals.

7. Can RCPP funding be used to support conservation research?

No, RCPP funding supports implementation of on-the-ground conservation activities and not research. However, partners are welcome to include research activities funded through partner contributions as part of a proposed project.

8. How does NRCS define Historically Underserved Communities?

HU definitions can be found on the NRCS website [here](#).

9. Who do we speak with if we have a problem or a concern specific to our local coordinator e.g. difficulty reaching a coordinator, concerns about quality of information, etc.?

State coordinators are ultimately under direction of the local State Conservationist, while program policies are the purview the NHQ programs team. Generally partner questions should be coordinated at the local level (e.g. state coordinator or State Conservationist), and program questions beyond coordinator expertise can be directed to headquarters.

10. Where do I look for current “renewal” guidance?

Renewal opportunity will be announced via National Bulletin and possibly separate notices to potentially eligible partners; final details for this Fiscal Year are expected this summer.

11. Can a current RCPP awardee expand the geographic scope of their project by starting another RCPP project that mirrors an earlier project, but with a larger geographic scope?

No. However, either renewal or a new separate proposal/project could achieve a comparable end...albeit under a different partnership agreement.

12. Are for-profit companies eligible as lead project partner?

Please review list of eligible partners in NFO and statute; for-profit companies qualify in some instances as entities with a history of working collaborative with producers.

13. Can an RCPP project overlap in geography with another RCPP project?

Yes, though NFO precludes identical projects, even if funded in different fund pools.

14. What is a producer? What is HU? Etc.

Many of the terms in RCPP NFO are common to the Farm Bill, and Farm Bill definitions apply. Partners with limited Farm Bill experience will need to familiarize themselves with both Farm Bill and NRCS standard operating procedures to best position themselves for success during the proposal and implementation phases of any RCPP project. RCPP coordinators are available to assist in this process, and may even be in a position to help partners sidestep necessity of some of these sorts of “research steps” depending on proposal specifics.

Funding Pools

15. Is either funding pool (State/Multi-State & CCAs) more competitive?

Neither pool is consistently more competitive than the other, it has varied among different funding opportunities.

16. Can I apply to both funding pools with a single proposal?

No, the proposal must select a single funding pool which will then limit the resource concerns or conservation benefits that can be selected for proposals under the CCA.

17. How do I know if I'm applying for the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) or regular Farm Bill funds?

All proposals will be considered for IRA or regular Farm Bill funds. Partners can identify if their proposal aligns with climate-smart priorities, and those proposals will be prioritized for funding through IRA.

18. How are funds allocated between funding pools?

Statute requires a 50/50 split between the State/Multi-State and CCA funding pools.

State/Multi-State Funding Pool

19. Is there any preference to single state versus multi-state proposals?

NRCS has no preference between single state or multi-state proposals, however projects are expected to provide a demonstrable impact to project resource concerns and can be addressed comprehensively on a significant portion of eligible lands in project area where they occur. As noted in the funding announcement, for multi-state proposals NRCS gives priority to proposals that include a manageable number of states. History has shown that projects carrying out activities in many states are difficult to manage.

Critical Conservation Areas (CCAs)

20. Can a proposal include multiple CCAs?

No, each proposal within the CCA funding pool may select only a one CCA.

21. If a county is partially within the boundaries of a CCA, can it be included within the RCPD project boundaries? Can I include land adjacent to the CCA?

Any county that falls entirely or partially within the CCA boundaries can be included in a RCPD proposal for the CCA funding pool. You cannot include any counties that are not partially within the CCA boundaries.

22. Can we propose changes to the CCA boundaries and priority resource concerns?

Not at this time. By statute the CCAs cannot be reviewed or updated more than once every five years. The last review was conducted in 2021 so CCA designations, boundaries, and priority resource concerns cannot be modified at this time.

Contributions

23. Is there a required minimum contribution ratio?

There is not a minimum required contribution ratio, but contributions are part of the proposal evaluation process.

24. Can a federal agency provide contributions and be a contributing partner?

Generally, Yes. However, USDA agencies (NRCS, Forest Service, etc.) cannot provide partner contributions. Federal assistance provided by agencies outside of USDA can count as long as the contributions meet requirements included in the funding announcement. The lead partner should ensure that it has the express permission of the funding agency to propose the Federal contributions for the RCPP project.

25. Are there limits/requirements related to federal vs. not federally funded contributions i.e. could all contributions come from a federal agency?

There are no requirements in this regard; however, statute directs agency to prioritize projects which leveraging federal investments with partner contributions so if two projects were otherwise identical, including the physical nature of contributions, but only one included non-federally funded contributions, the project with non-federal funding would likely earn more points under the “impact” criteria.

26. Does financial or technical assistance funded by partner contributions need to adhere to NRCS standards and specifications?

If both the financial assistance and supporting technical assistance are partner contributions then they do not necessarily need to follow NRCS standards and specifications, unless they are also tied to RCPP funding in a producer contract or SA. Additionally, 1) all partner contributions cannot degrade a natural resource, and 2) all contributions must meet NFO requirements, be included in negotiated deliverables, and be completed during the term of the PPA. Questions about specific examples should be directed to the appropriate state RCPP Coordinator.

27. Do contributions need to be expended in the same geographic area as the RCPP project? Or can they be used somewhere else as long as there is a nexus between project objectives and resource concerns?

All partner contributions must be expended within the geographic boundary of the RCPP project and be completed during the life of the RCPP project.

28. Can non-lead partners count their indirect costs as contribution? What if a partner does not have a negotiated indirect rate (NICRA)?

Partners providing technical assistance as a project contribution may count some or all of related indirect costs as contribution, consistent with NFO limits, including: partners without a federally approved NICRA may use a 10% de minimis rate. To calculate the maximum amount of indirect costs use the following formula.

Contribution Value = NICRA (or 10%) x Technical Assistance paid for by the partner.

Where indirect costs are to be included in contribution deliverables, valuation method must clearly document how applicable limits will be maintained.

29. Can landowner in-kind and other contributions be used as project contribution?

For RCPD Classic: Producer share of land management practices or US held easements cannot be counted as part of the project contribution.

For AFA: Yes, the AFA funding announcement states that verifiable producer and landowner expenses may be counted as partner contribution.

In both AFA and classic, landowner donations of easement value toward EHE can be counted as contribution.

In an AFA land management context, verification could take the form of producer receipts for third-party services or necessary equipment rentals. The AFA funding announcement precludes non-verifiable costs (including producer-provided labor, risk or forgone income) from counting as partner contributions.

30. What is the earliest we can begin counting contributions?

Partners may potentially count any contributions made after the date of the award; to be credible they must be included in negotiated PPA, thus eligible and valuation are subject to NRCS prior approval, and those determinations will not be "final" until PPA is finalized.

31. Can a Tribe or Tribal Conservation District partner with Bureau of Indian Affairs to improve efficiency on an existing BIA project where a majority of the producers are tribal members?

RCPD funds can not be used to "supplement another agency's appropriation," so there are definitely projects where this would NOT be allowable. However, depending on the specific BIA work needing improvement, and the terms of the BIA assistance contract used to fund it, there also could be instances where RCPD could assist. Please contact RCPD coordinator and discuss details.

32. Do private sector voluntary Carbon Credits "count" as contribution?

Contributions must go toward delivering conservation; they can not merely record financial transactions. If partner will make direct payments to a producer to encourage producer to provide conservation benefits, then that payment may be credible as a contribution, if defensible argument made that work would not occur but for the added incentive of the credit payment. However, the mere existence of a carbon market or fact that RCPD funded work qualified a producer to receive a credit payment would, in and of themselves, not support such payments as contribution.

33. Would we be able to set up a trust fund to be utilized as a maintenance account. That would be spent over the life of the practice. However, be able to be counted as being spent within the 5 years??

No. Contributions must be expended during term of project to be credible as contribution.

Proposal Budgets

34. If we apply for a maximum award, are we limited to a maximum award or would we still be eligible for a lesser amount?

NRCS leadership may elect to make offers of award in any amount.

35. Can a partner request funding other than a 75/25 split between financial assistance (FA) and technical assistance?

Yes you may note your intent to request a funding split other than 75/25 by including a variance request in your proposal. However your proposal deliverables will have to follow the standard 75/25 split and selection does not guarantee a waiver for a different funding split will be approved during agreement negotiation.

36. Can all of the Enhancement TA requested within a proposal fall under a single category (i.e. Project Management)?

Partners may request up to 7% of the total project for Enhancement TA. The full Enhancement TA request can fall under a single activity, however note that partners will be required to ultimately justify and provide supporting documentation for TA activities prior to reimbursement by NRCS.

37. Is a project more competitive if the 18% negotiable TA is given to NRCS vs the partner?

For Classic: There is no preference for NRCS-delivered Implementation TA (TA-I) vs partner-delivered TA-I. However, TA-I requested by partners will only be awarded via Supplemental Agreement(s) (SA) when NRCS determines that TA-I SA awards are consistent with FA delivery requirements, and SA awardee partner(s) are qualified to provide TA-I in support of FA delivery.

For AFAs: Partners are expected to perform most, if not all TA other than non-delegable activities such as eligibility determinations and NEPA approval. Proposals that require additional support from NRCS to deliver TA in support of FA activities will not score as highly.

38. Would an outreach event for landowners qualify as technical assistance?

Please see the NFO for a more complete list of allowable TA activities. Producer outreach activities can either fall under Enhancement TA (if reimbursed by NRCS) or partner contribution.

39. Which entities can receive a supplemental agreement to deliver technical assistance that is reimbursed by NRCS?

Any entity which meets the regulatory definition of a “partner” can potentially receive NRCS funding via a supplemental agreement.

RCPP Financial Assistance Activities (FA)

General FA Questions

40. What does “addressing” conservation benefits mean?

NRCS FA efforts must address local problems, and typically do so via some combination of management practices, structural practices and or easements. Problems may or may not be completely resolved, or measurable, but NRCS planning procedures, and practice standards establish processes for determining acceptable treatments. Please discuss situational details and processes with your state coordinator.

41. Is there a limit to the amount of funding a landowner can receive under a farm bill? If so, what is the amount??

No. RCPP does not have “participant payment limitations” like some other NRCS programs. Contract limits do apply to Land Management and Rental, per program rules at time of contract execution.

42. In an AFA, if partner is trying to pay an incentive to producers to adopt a given land management practice, can that payment exceed 75% of typical cost?

Where payment methodology relies on payment schedules/typical costs, NRCS can pay up to the lesser of 100% of cost to partner or 100% of typical cost. Partner contributions can increase partner payment above 100%, or can be used to complement RCPP funding at a lower level (e.g. a 50/50 split).

Easements

43. How do we determine the maximum amount NRCS will reimburse a landowner for a US-held easement or a partner/eligible entity for an entity-held easement?

NRCS pays for a portion of the value of the conservation easement. This value is determined by the difference in the appraised fair market value of the land with and without the easement applied.

For US-Held easements the maximum federal share of the easement acquisition cost is based on the level of restrictions included in the minimum deed terms and could be 100%, 75%, or 50% of the appraised market value of the easement.

For Entity-Held easements the maximum federal share of the easement acquisition cost is based on whether the deed includes a US Right of Enforcement and can be either 50% or 25%. An additional 25% will be available for parcels for Historically Underserved producers/landowners. See the relevant funding opportunity for more details.

44. Can the lead partner request a variance to eliminate the partner cash match requirement for each individual RCPP easement?

There is no partner cash requirement for RCPP easements, however NRCS only pays for a portion of the easement value depending on the type of easement and the deed terms (see question 30). The remaining value of the easement not reimbursed by NRCS can be covered by landowner donation, partner cash, or any combination of the two.

45. What are the types of deed terms available in entity-held easements?

NRCS has three types of minimum deed terms (MDT) that may be used for Entity-Held Easements and may include a US-Right of Enforcement.

- *Easement for Agricultural Use (minimally restrictive)*
- *Easement for Compatible Agricultural Use (moderately restrictive)*
- *Easement for Conservation Values (highly restrictive).*

These MDT must be incorporated into the body of the entity’s deed without changes and in its entirety, or attached to the entity’s deed. See the [Resources for Lead Partners](#) page for more information and to review the MDT documents.

46. If an entity has an approved ACEP-ALE conservation easement template, can the template be

used for RCPP?

Yes. An entity may also propose using an easement template approved under ACEP-ALE with appropriate adjustments made for RCPP funding and project purposes. As part of their proposal, applicants may submit the proposed draft “template” deed planned for use to implement the project.

47. In states that do not offer HFRP, can an RCPP project include HFRP-like easements?

RCPP easements are not tied to a specific land use but instead based on the purpose of the deed (which could be “HFRP” like), how restrictive the deed terms are, who holds the easement, and whether or not it contains a U.S. government right of enforcement.

48. If an entity-held easement is a partner contribution (not paid for by any NRCS FA funds), does that easement still need to meet the NRCS minimum deed requirements?

When non-NRCS-funded easements are part of a RCPP project (i.e., they are funded by partner contributions), partners must provide NRCS assurances and NRCS must agree that such easements are generating conservation benefits and consistent with project scope and goals, objectives and deliverables. Additionally, value of such “contribution only” easements must be based on defensible appraisal methods similar to RCPP assisted easements.

49. Can a proposal include an RCPP assisted easement that isn’t permanent?

No. RCPP assisted easements must be permanent (or the maximum allowed under state law). Shorter term easements (weather contribution or RCPP assisted) would be considered a “land rental” activity for an RCPP project and should be identified as such in the RCPP proposal.

50. What does it mean to include a US Right of Enforcement on an Entity-Held Easement?

This means if the holder of the easement fails to enforce the terms of the easement, then the US can step in to enforce the terms of the easement. The Minimum Deed Term addendums with US Right of Enforcement MDTs contain the language which would convey these rights.

51. Do RCPP easements have increased payment limits for Grasslands of Special Significance?

No, RCPP easements are not tied to specific land use and do not have special payment scenarios based on land use.

52. Would an entity’s certified status under ACEP-ALE carry over into RCPP?

No, certified entity status does not apply to RCPP. Statutory authority for certified entity status is specific to ACEP-ALE.

53. What are the requirements for counting landowner donation as part of the project contributions?

In both RCPP classic and AFA, Landowner donations toward the value of the easement may count as part of the project’s contribution for entity-held easement. It does not need to be a parcel pre-identified in the proposal to count. (Note: unreimbursed costs incurred by participants in RCPP classic producer contract do not count as partner contribution in US-Held Easement, Land Management, or Rental activities, consistent with similar programs)

54. Who is responsible for due diligence activities, and can the partner be reimbursed for any due diligence services they provide?

In US-Held Easements, NRCS is responsible for due diligence activities but may elect to engage a partner to procure NRCS due diligence products via a SA. In Entity-Held Easements, the participating partner/entity is responsible for providing most due diligence services. For entity-held easements, NRCS is responsible for procuring the appraisal technical review and can provide hazardous materials records search. RCPP funds cannot be used for any due diligence products that are responsibility of the partners.

55. Can RCPP funds be used to pay the “stewardship fees” collected by many entities.?

No.

56. How does RCPP address an increase in the value of a conservation easement from the time the application is submitted until the actual appraisal is completed?

If the application and agreement are based on an estimate of the CE value - and the post agreement results in an increase in CE value - the federal share can be increased, but only to the extent that there are funds available in the project.

57. Can an easement protect both riparian areas and working farmland in the same easement?

The same Minimum Deed Term (MDT) can be used for multiple land uses, but they depend on how the land will be managed after the easement is in place. Please review the MDTs to see whether the land could be under one easement or would require multiple easements.

58. For RCPP U.S. held government easements, can another federal agency (other than NRCS) hold these?

No. NRCS is the holder of all RCPP U.S. held easements.

Land Rentals

59. Where can a partner find NRCS land rental rates?

RCPP rental awards will be based on one of two rental practice types: RFRN and RFRP. Each year, payments available in RFRN based producer contracts shall be limited to 100% of the state Agricultural Land Values and Cash Rents as determined by the National Agricultural Statistics Service for the most similar land uses (Irrigated Farmland, Non-Irrigated Farmland, or Range/Pastureland). Payments available in RFRP based producer contracts shall be limited to 100% of project specific rates as proposed by state/partner based on the NRCS payment schedule methodology (which addresses factors such as labor, materials, forgone income etc.). Project specific RCPP rental rates (RFRP) can be negotiated per program policy (check with state RCPP coordinator for requirements.)

Watershed Projects

60. Can a RCPP proposal include a watershed project without an existing approved watershed plan?

No, NFO requires an NRCS approved watershed plan as a pre-requisite for funding of RCPP watershed FA activity.

61. Can we design and build public irrigation facilities that become Federal Reclamation infrastructure? And design to U.S. Bureau of Reclamation standards rather than NRCS?

No. RCPP cannot fund a project that would most likely be considered supplementing another Federal agency's appropriation.

62. Do watershed/public works activities or structures need to follow PL-566 policies and processes?

Yes; however, NRCS has limited authority to consider waivers of specific PL-566 requirements, typically where such deviations would involve deviation from agency policy, vs. legal requirements applicable to all governmental activities (e.g. NEPA, Principles and Guidelines of Water Resource Projects) NRCS welcomes innovative approaches to watershed and public works activities. For AFA proposals (if selected) NRCS must ensure that the structure(s) comply with NEPA and other Federal laws and regulations, and is engineered and constructed to agency standards.

63. Do Watershed Rehab projects qualify under the RCPP with PL 566?

No; rehab authority is excluded from RCPP by statute.

64. Can a dam removal be considered as a watershed project?

Yes, but removal must provide eligible benefits and be addressed in a PR&G compliant watershed plan.

Payments

65. Can the lead partner request an advance payment rather than reimbursement?

NRCS possesses limited authority for making advances of RCPP funds. If a lead partner selected for an award identifies a need for an advance payment(s), the lead partner must notify the relevant State RCPP Coordinator to explore possibilities.

66. What is the difference between increasing rental payments to make them more market representative and an incentive payment there any maximum or minimum funding limits governing contracts between lead partners and producers?

NRCS authority is limited to 100% of actual cost; so while we can "increase rental payments (up to 100% of actual cost to producer of the associated deferral)" we cannot exceed actual cost, as such an exceedance would require specific statutory authority.

67. I see that indirect costs are mentioned on page 20 of NOFO - are these still allowed?

RCPP funds can not be used to reimburse partners for administrative expenses. Limited indirect costs are potentially eligible as contribution as outlined in NFO (including on page 20).

68. Can RCPP funds be used to fund a capital expense associate with development of a product like biochar?

No, generally not. RCPP FA is to fund full implementation of an activity to address a

resource concern, not each step along the way: so site delivery of biochar would not likely be a eligible deliverable, but delivery and application might be, depending on project particulars, costs etc.

AFA-Specific Questions

69. Are there any maximum or minimum funding limits governing contracts between lead partners and producers?

NRCS does not anticipate issuing funding limits for contracts between the lead partner and producers or landowners, however, AFA rankings must be consistent with federal civil rights and non-discrimination laws.

70. Are there some examples of a “pay for performance” conservation approach?

NRCS provides financial assistance to reimburse partners for actual costs to partners of ensuring producers implement eligible conservation activities.

Examples of a pay for performance approach:

- 1) a partner pays a producer based on (modelled) tons of carbon he/she sequesters through improved forest management. NRCS later re-imburses the partner for the producer payment.*
- 2) a producer is paid for the pounds of nitrogen or phosphorous runoff avoided through implementation of nutrient management activities.*

A lead partner proposing a pay for performance approach must in its proposal describe the approach in enough detail to allow reviewers and NRCS an understanding of how producers would be compensated and for what actions, and how NRCS can be assured that meaningful conservation benefits would be delivered.

71. Can the lead partner pay a contributing partner to negotiate contracts with eligible producers/landowners?

The lead partner may engage other partners or subcontracts to support the implementation of RCPP financial or technical assistance activities for the benefit of eligible producers/landowners. Important limits on this authority include, but are not limited to: 1) the lead partner is ultimately responsible for the delivery of RCPP FA financial assistance as agreed to in PPA, 2) TA-I can only be used to support delivery of RCPP FA, not contribution (only) contracts, 3) TA-I and TA-E costs associated with contract delivery and project management respectively are only be reimbursable where included in an active SA, and 4) FA may not (ever) be used to pay for TA costs.

72. Do you use NRCS payment scenarios when determining TA-I?

Generally no; most are instead tied to partner hourly staff costs, potentially with task specific caps as well (e.g. \$40/hr, not to exceed \$1,000 per plan...). Details are negotiated to recognize both Statutory limits on use of RCPP funds, and partners existing record keeping systems in effort to minimize (if not necessarily avoid) too much additional record keeping.

NEPA

73. Who is responsible for complying with NEPA/NHSA/ESA?

NEPA decision making is a non-delegable/inherently governmental function, for which NRCS must always retain TA-I. In AFA, and Classic Watershed activity SA, the lead partner is expected to provide all required information necessary to support NRCS's NEPA determinations. Conversely, in RCPP Classic Producer Contracts and EHE Parcel Contracts, NRCS is also responsible for managing TA-I (and partner contributions where applicable) to ensure the agency has the information needed to inform NEPA determinations.

74. Can a proposal include costs for a third-party to satisfy NHPA requirements?

NEPA, NHPA and other environmental costs may be included in a proposed budget to the extent that they can be accomplished within the funding limits for Implementation and Enhancement TA categories without adversely affecting potential implementation (i.e., a project budget that proposes Implementation TA be used to carry out extensive NHPA activities but does not account for the Implementation TA needed for project planning, design, installation and checkout is unlikely to be successful). Projects with extensive environmental or cultural resource needs may need to account for some or all those costs as partner contributions in order to be competitive.

RCPP Improvement Process and FY23 Notice of Funding Opportunity

75. What is the RCPP Improvement Effort?

NRCS is working to identify ways to streamline and simplify RCPP, ease the burden on employees and partners, and help maximize flexibility for partners. The RCPP Improvement Effort will identify and evaluate problems associated with RCPP and develop meaningful and actionable improvements. This effort represents a collaboration of partners, staff and USDA senior leadership.

76. Why are changes being made to the program?

NRCS is working to identify ways to streamline and simplify RCPP for employees and partners in response to internal and external feedback. NRCS is taking action to improve RCPP processes and implementation to better achieve the purposes of the program.

77. What are the key changes NRCS is looking to make?

Using guidance provided by leadership and information from partner listening sessions and employee and partner surveys, NRCS identified seven key focus areas for improvement. Each focus area has a dedicated team working to address identified issues and provide recommendations. The focus areas are:

- 1. Simplifying and Reducing the Number of Agreements*
- 2. Reducing Lengthy RCPP Easement Transactions*
- 3. Improving the RCPP Portal*
- 4. Consistent Guidance and Training for Employees and Partners*
- 5. Simplifying Technical Assistance Structure*
- 6. Improving the Conservation Desktop*
- 7. Simplifying the Partner Reimbursement Process*

While we work on bigger changes to the program, we have already worked to improve the RCPP

notice of funding opportunity, announced on May 19, to help immediately address identified concerns as much as possible.

78. How is NRCS determining what improvements are needed?

NRCS identified common themes from partner listening sessions and employee and partner surveys, which led NRCS to focus on seven areas of improvement.

79. How were these changes informed by partner feedback?

NRCS held listening sessions and conducted surveys to gather feedback from partners.

80. When will the changes be implemented?

Final recommendations will be delivered by September 1, 2023. Implementation of improvements are slated for fiscal year 2024.

81. Where can I find more information?

Information about RCPP can be found on the [RCPP website](#).

82. Will the RCPP improvement effort impact this year's funding opportunity?

Yes, this year's notice of funding opportunity reflects some improvements, which include an increase of project funding ceilings, simplification of financial assistance and technical assistance structure, a stronger emphasis on locally led, and easement deed flexibilities. In addition, the announcement of Classic and Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFA) are announced simultaneously.

83. Has NRCS simplified its Technical Assistance (TA) allocations?

Yes, NRCS has simplified its TA allocations by reserving NRCS TA for inherently governmental functions outside the project budget. Partners will have the flexibility to identify their TA funding needs in the proposal.

68. How will NRCS treat renewal or expansions of existing projects?

NRCS continues to offer project renewals of existing successful projects. The Chief has the discretion to expand existing projects and will do so based on the demand for, and availability of, funding.

84. How will NRCS evaluate proposals for IRA versus regular Farm Bill funds?

Please see the evaluation criteria in the NFO. For projects funded through IRA funds, NRCS will prioritize proposals that best meet IRA statutory intent on climate mitigation activities when making awards. For non-IRA funds, projects will be funded using evaluation criteria in the funding opportunity, which includes a broader suite of conservation and natural resource impacts.

85. How does information in the notice of funding opportunity relate to the RCPP Improvement Effort?

While we work on our bigger changes to the program, we have already worked to improve this year's RCPP notice of funding opportunity to help immediately address identified concerns as much as

possible.

86. I previously applied for Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities. How can I apply for RCPP?

Applicants that previously applied for Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities should refer to the Fiscal Year 2023 RCPP notice of funding opportunity. All interested applicants are encouraged to attend our upcoming webinars on May 24 and June 7, 2023. Information on how to join those webinars and other webinars on RCPP can be found on the [RCPP website](#).

87. How will NRCS ensure that smaller projects can be competitive with the larger projects, especially with the maximum project amount being raised to \$25 million?

NRCS is size neutral in its proposal evaluation and funding allocation process. NRCS evaluates proposals based on impacts, partner contributions, and partnerships and project management.

88. How will NRCS increase capacity for technical assistance to implement the IRA?

NRCS is increasing its capacity by hiring new employees, entering into agreements with partners, and contracting for services.

89. What kinds of conservation solutions and strategies are considered climate forward?

Information can be found on the [Climate-Smart Mitigation Activities](#) webpage. Note that the list of climate-smart practices will be updated on a rolling basis.

90. How does this announcement support key Biden-Harris Administration priorities on climate and conservation?

Through its programs, NRCS works with landowners to identify solutions to key natural resource concerns. NRCS conservation efforts are an important strategy in supporting key priorities for the Biden Harris Administration, including the implementation of E.O. 14008 on Tackling the Climate

91. Who is eligible to apply for an AFA?

RCPP AFA eligibility is the same as RCPP Classic. Entities that are classified as one of the following organizational types can serve as an eligible RCPP partner:

- 1. An agricultural or silvicultural producer association or other group of producers.*
- 2. A state or unit of local government.*
- 3. An Indian Tribe.*
- 4. A farmer cooperative.*
- 5. A water district, irrigation district, acequia, rural water district or association, or other organization with specific water delivery authority to agricultural producers.*
- 6. A municipal water or wastewater treatment entity.*
- 7. An institution of higher education.*
- 8. An organization, business or entity with an established history of working cooperatively with producers, as determined by NRCS, to address:*
 - a. local conservation priorities related to agricultural production, wildlife habitat development, or nonindustrial private forest land management; or*
 - b. critical watershed-scale soil erosion, water quality, sediment reduction, or other*

natural resource issues.

9. *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 1468.3.*

10. *A conservation district.*

92. Are tribal entities eligible for the \$50 million AFA funding?

Federally recognized Indian Tribes and Alaskan Native Corporations are eligible to apply for the AFA funding.

93. What kinds of conservation solutions are eligible through RCPP?

RCPP promotes coordination of NRCS conservation activities with partners that offer value-added contributions to expand our collective ability to address on-farm, watershed, and regional natural resource concerns.

94. Will there be more webinars?

Currently we have scheduled two webinars: May 24, 2023 and June 7, 2023. Information on how to join those webinars and other webinars on RCPP can be found on the [RCPP website](#).

95. What type of large-scale infrastructure projects qualify for RCPP?

As with all investments under RCPP, infrastructure projects must be in service of a conservation outcome. Through the public works/watershed projects component of RCPP, eligible partners may receive financial assistance awards to support immediate or future implementation of structural works of improvement to address watershed-scale issues for the benefit of eligible land, similar to many projects completed under Public Law 83-566.

Proposal Evaluation

96. Can you help me understand how the Innovation Narrative Questions will be blended in with the other Narrative Questions? It was very confusing to see the Innovation Narrative Questions since it was no longer in the Selection Criteria.?

For the current NFO, “Innovation” is not considered inherently positive, but rather is considered among others with respect to impact, contribution, or partner experience. Consider a proposal from a partner with a proven track record implementing conservation contracting utilizing the innovation proposed within an RCPP project, as well as a detailed plan as to how the innovation will be realized within RCPP program structure (to ensure NEPA compliance or other affected requirements); clearly innovation would be a benefit and evaluation would capture that benefit in impact, contributions etc. But if partner is proposing an untried, innovative idea, and lacks a detailed vision of how to integrate it into RCPP structures, innovation could actually become a detriment to potential for project success.

97. Can you help me understand how the Innovation Narrative Questions will be blended in with the other Narrative Questions? It was very confusing to see the Innovation Narrative Questions since it was no longer in the Selection Criteria.?

Yes, to extent proposal demonstrates that past partner success demonstrates partner project management expertise or touches one of the other ranking pillars. Unlike “renewals” however, there is not a separate process for “successful partner applicants..

Outcomes

98. Will Successful RCPP applicants in the past receive any sort of priority in future project rankings?

Depending on the specific conservation benefits targeted in a project, modelling is an acceptable way to assess outcomes. Model would need to be appropriate for project specific situation, and additional coordination with state coordinator is a recommended starting point.