

NRCS Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)
Frequently Asked Questions
4-25-14

- 1. Who administers the Conservation Innovation Grants?**
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

- 2. What is the purpose of CIG?**
CIG is intended to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies while leveraging the Federal investment in environmental enhancement and protection, in conjunction with agricultural production.

- 3. What program funds CIG projects?**
CIG was authorized under Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and funds for CIG come from EQIP.

- 4. Where can I find CIG funding opportunities?**
Funding notices announcing the availability of funds are published annually on the NRCS CIG website <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/cig/index.html> and on the Federal government's eGrants portal, www.grants.gov.

- 5. What is the funding opportunity number?**
USDA-NRCS-NHQ-14-01

- 6. Where can I find the application package on grants.gov?**
<http://www.grants.gov/web/grants/view-opportunity.html?oppId=250998>

- 7. Who should I contact for additional information?**
For programmatic information, please contact the National CIG Program Manager at (202) 720-8644 or gregorio.cruz@wdc.usda.gov, or Stacy Swartwood, Program Analyst, (202) 720-1895. For budget and administrative information, please contact the Grants and Agreements, Team Leader at USDA-NRCS (202) 720-4102 or sheila.leonard@wdc.usda.gov

- 8. Is it recommended that the proposal is not submitted at or very close to deadline due to overload of systems?**
Early submission is recommended in order to allow applicants time to review emailed submissions to ensure that the full package was sent and ensure that information technology system problems do not render applications ineligible.

- 9. Have there been any changes to the CIG announcement since the pre-proposal submittal?**
The CIG announcement has been updated to reflect 2014 Farm Bill requirements for EQIP.

- 10. How many years can a project last?**
CIG projects are limited to three years.

11. Who is eligible to apply?

CIG applications are accepted from State or local units of government, federally-recognized Indian tribes, nongovernmental organizations, and individuals.

12. Where can I implement my project?

CIG project implementation is limited to the 50 States, the Caribbean Area (Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands), and the Pacific Islands Area (Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands), and the District of Columbia.

13. Do the location eligibility requirements apply to the organization or the project site(s)?

The eligibility requirements for location apply to both the applicant organization and the location of the project.

14. Do I need to provide additional funding for the project?

Selected applicants may receive grants of up to 50 percent of the total project cost. Applicants must provide non-Federal funding for at least 50 percent of the project cost, of which up to one-half (25 percent of the total project cost) may come from in-kind contributions.

15. How do I qualify for the Beginning or Limited Resource Farmers or Ranchers, or Indian Tribes, or community based organizations comprised of or representing these entities 10% set-aside?

To compete for the set-aside funds, the applicant must make a declaration in the full proposal as described in Part V.A.10. of the 2014 CIG announcement. Further information about the set-aside can be found in Part II.E. starting on page 8, and definitions of Beginning Farmer or Rancher and Limited Resource Farmer and Rancher can be found on page 9 of the 2014 CIG announcement.

16. What if the producer that you are working with is limited funds, beginning farmer, and Native American?

The applicant entity itself must be a Beginning Farmer or Rancher, Limited Resource Farmer or Rancher, Indian Tribe, or community-based organization comprised of or representing these entities in order to qualify for the 10% set-aside funding pool.

17. Can you please explain in more detail the 10% funding pool?

The 10% set-aside funding pool is intended to encourage Beginning Farmers or Ranchers, Limited Resource Farmers or Ranchers, Indian Tribes, or community-based organizations comprised of or representing these entities to apply for CIG. If an applicant declares themselves a member of one of these groups, their application will be considered for the 10% set-aside funding pool first. If the 10% set-aside funding pool is exhausted, eligible applications will be considered for the main funding pool.

- 18. Are women farmers still considered "Historically underserved" (socially disadvantaged)?**
For the purposes of CIG, special consideration is extended to Beginning Farmers or Ranchers, Limited Resource Farmers or Ranchers, Indian Tribes, or community-based organizations comprised of or representing these entities. Women are not considered an additional group under this program.
(http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/financial/eqip/?cid=nrcs142p2_044211)
- 19. Is there a formal definition for a “community-based organization?”**
Recognized groups concerned with improving the quality of life for residents within local communities. Such organizations serve as project initiators and managers, thereby providing avenues for involvement with and access to locally led processes and activities. These groups include nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations with well-defined constituencies that include all or part of a particular community. Faith-based organizations, women’s groups, environmental groups, farm or woodlands groups, trade and professional associations, educational associations, and schools are all examples.
- 20. Will you please go over the definition of Historically Underserved Producers?**
Per the 2014 CIG announcement, page 3, section I.D.1., “Historically underserved individuals and groups include Beginning Farmers or Ranchers, Socially Disadvantaged Farmers or Ranchers, Limited Resource Farmers or Ranchers, Indian Tribes, or Community-Based Organizations comprised of or representing these entities.”
- 21. Can you explain a bit more on the transferability requirement?**
Per the 2014 CIG announcement, page 15, section V.A.3.i, “Identify the results and benefits to be derived from the proposed project activities, and explain how the results will be measured. Identify project beneficiaries, i.e., agricultural producers by type, region, or sector; historically underserved producers and communities; rural communities; and municipalities. Explain how these entities will benefit. In addition, describe how results will be communicated to others via outreach activities.”
- 22. What other requirements do I need to meet?**
CIG projects must involve EQIP-eligible producers. Applicants must describe the level of producer involvement in the application narrative.
- 23. Please expand on the project eligibility regarding Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) landowners. Do they have to be a matching partner in the grant or may they be participants?**
In order for a project to be eligible for CIG, projects must involve landowners who meet the EQIP eligibility requirements as set forth in 16 USC 3839aa-1. At the discretion of the applicant and project needs, a landowner can be either a matching funds partner or a participant.
- 24. Is it necessary to involve EQIP eligible landowners directly in the project? We are considering a tool building project at the regional scale and there is not an on the ground component at this time.**
Yes, in order for a project to be eligible for CIG, projects must involve landowners who meet the EQIP eligibility requirements as set forth in 16 USC 3839aa-1.

25. If we have a producer cost share requirement do all producers need to be EQIP eligible certified prior to grant submission and what should be included in proof of match for these producers?

Producers do not have to be certified EQIP eligible prior to grant submission. Proof of match requirements for these producers are the same as for all match sources.

26. Regarding the Average Adjusted Gross Income for EQIP eligibility, this requirement is regardless of their size as long as it is 66 % of their profits?

A person or legal entity shall not be eligible to receive any benefit described in subparagraph (B2) during a crop, fiscal, or program year, as appropriate, if the average adjusted gross of the person or legal entity exceeds \$900,000. This considers all income as adjusted gross income.

27. Can any agricultural producer that owns the land use these grants?

Yes, however if they are conducting the project activities on their own land exclusively, they must be EQIP-eligible and are subject to the 2014 Farm Bill EQIP payment limitations (\$450K).

28. If we have received a previous EQIP match, are we eligible for a CIG match?

The CIG funding level will depend on the type of EQIP match received. If the applicant is an agricultural producer or entity, then they must be EQIP-eligible and are subject to the 2014 Farm Bill EQIP payment limitations (\$450K).

29. The APF appears to say that cooperating farmers don't necessarily have to be landowners, just need to prove they have control of the land for the term of the proposed contract period (e.g. with a lease) - am I reading that correctly?

Yes. Control of land is a part of the EQIP eligibility requirement.

30. If the applicant conducts a project that involves cost sharing with landowners, do the landowners apply through EQIP, and if so, who signs off on the installed measures if NRCS cannot provide technical assistance under CIG?

The grantee is responsible for providing the technical assistance required to successfully implement and complete the project. NRCS will designate a Program Contact, Administrative Contact, and Technical Contact to provide oversight for each project receiving an award. Technologies and approaches that are eligible for funding in a project's geographic area through EQIP are ineligible for CIG funding except where the use of those technologies and approaches demonstrates clear innovation.

31. If a producer benefits from the project, how, or to what degree, will the benefit be calculated towards the \$450,000 limit on EQIP funding?

Direct payments using CIG federal funds to the producer count towards the \$450,000 payment limitation for the 2014 Farm Bill.

32. Do projects need to address an NRCS High Priority?

No, however projects must address at least one of the bulleted topics listed starting on page 3 of the APF and will receive additional consideration in the evaluation process if they address an NRCS High Priority.

33. Could a proposal qualify if it focuses purely on education and outreach?

Yes. One element of the announcement includes outreach and education.

34. If the project we are considering involves #10 CIG Projects Assessment, does this mean the review must be on a completed project where we were the applicant or can it be the review of a project or projects by other applicants in our area?

The intent of #10 CIG Projects Assessment is to review completed CIG projects.

35. May multiple agencies join together for a single application?

Multiple agencies or other entities can work together as collaborators in one project proposal. However, only one agency or other entity can be the applicant.

36. Is there any guidance on sub-contractors arrangements?

The grantee is responsible for all sub-awards and assuring the responsible parties follow the appropriate terms and conditions. All sub-awards are subject to the same federal requirements as the grantee. The grantee is responsible for assuring/monitoring that the sub-awards follow the requirements. The grantee will also be the one penalized if there are issues with sub-award actions. (7CFR 3015 and 7 CFR 3016)

37. Can a USDA ARS collaborator be listed as a co-PI? They cannot receive funds though, correct?

Federal employees can serve as technical advisors on CIG project teams. They cannot receive recompense for serving in this role in the form of salary, honoraria, travel, or gifts.

38. Must the matching funds be secured at the time of application, or can they be pending?

At the time of full proposal application, applicants must include written verification of commitments of matching support (including both cash and in-kind contributions) from non-federal third parties.

39. How do applicants show matching commitments?

At the time of full proposal application, applicants must document match in the SF-424A budget sheet and narrative p. 11, section IV.B.3.a. and b. and also include written verification of commitments of matching support (including both cash and in-kind contributions) from non-federal third parties.

40. Are individual object class codes needed for cash and in-kind contribution documentation?

For the full proposal, individual object class codes are needed for cash and in-kind contribution documentation.

41. Can you specify what 'cash' match includes?

Third party contributions as cash or cash from recipient's employee services.

42. Would staff time committed to the project by a project partner be considered cash or in-kind match? What other types of activities or experiences can be considered in-kind match?

Generally, staff time is considered in-kind since that person will be a paid staff member of the organization whether the NRCS proposal is funded or not. In some situations it might be cash:

for example, if the staff incurs additional hours specifically for the project or if a person is hired specifically for the purpose of meeting a project requirement, then those hours could be counted as cash, unless their salary is to be paid by the grant. There may some donated equipment, information, or assistance where cash is not transferred that would be considered in-kind.

43. If monitoring is part of the project, and a State Agency uses state funds to cover the costs of analytical tests, would that be considered as 'cash match'?

To determine what costs are allowable Refer to the Federal Cost Principles for State, Local, Indian Tribal Governments, 2 CFR Part 225.

44. Are in-kind contributions (high tunnel, equipment, etc.) from farmers acceptable as matching funds?

Depending on the type of entity, please reference the applicable cost principle in Table A at the end of the FAQ to determine what costs are allowable.

45. Can cash match from previous EQIP producers be used to match current grant application?

No. Matching funds must be part of the new project.

46. Can any utility rebate be utilized as the cash part of the match?

Depending on the type of entity, please reference the applicable cost principle in Table A at the end of the FAQ to determine what costs are allowable.

47. The newly released farm bill (section 1492- matching fund requirements) seems to contain text that indicates USDA ARS will no longer be responsible for providing matching for the CIG grant, can you confirm or deny this?

Section 1492 does not apply to EQIP or its CIG program. Instead, the statute only applies to the ARS statutes and programs identified in section 1492(d).

48. Can a federal entity receive a subcontract from the applicant/project director to assist with completion of the project?

Yes, but CIG federal request funds cannot be used to pay the subcontract.

49. Regarding indirect costs, can they be counted towards match of applicant? And would such match be considered cash match?

Yes the IDC can be counted towards a match. As it relates to cash match, it depends on whether the IDC rate is applied to the entire funded amount or a specific budget category that is supported by the budget narrative.

50. We have an NICRA. Our proposed rate for our next fiscal year is higher. Can we budget at our proposed rate? If not, is unrecovered indirect allowed as match?

The current rate for FY2014 must be used because agreements will be executed in FY2014. Unrecovered indirect is not allowed as match. (Unrecovered indirect is not allowed. Only active current rates will be accepted. The agreement will be signed in FY 2014 and that rate will apply.)

51. We have a federally approved provisional 2014 indirect cost rate. Is that considered the current indirect rate we should use?

Yes.

52. Can you confirm that we can request our full indirect cost rate on the USDA CIG program? We do have a federally negotiated rate of XX% for Research and YY% for Public Service/Extension.

Per the 2014 CIG announcement, page 16, section V.A.6.a, “applicants wishing to claim indirect costs must have a federally approved indirect cost rate.” This means that if you have a federally negotiated rate, you may claim indirect costs. Once your indirect cost rate agreement is received, eligible charges to the grant are dependent on that approved rate.

53. Is there a limit to Indirect Cost rates? The RFP only states that if we have a negotiated rate that rate is acceptable. I assume that means an outreach/extension rate not a research rate - and we can use the negotiated rate?

For 2014 CIG program, no limit has been set on IDC rates. The appropriate type IDC rate will be accepted as documented.

54. Are corporations eligible to apply?

Yes, eligible entities include Federally recognized Indian tribes, State and local units of government, and non-governmental organizations and individuals. Corporations fall under the non-governmental organizations category.

55. Can the project be located in one state only? And can a project be funded that includes collaboration with that state’s Extension Service/land grant university research arm?

Yes, the projects can be located in only one State. The applicant will determine the partnership that best fit their needs.

56. Can an applicant apply for a national CIG and a state component CIG in the same year for the same project? (Understanding that one would be declined if the other was awarded)

Yes.

57. What involvement might a local NRCS office have in this application or project process?

CIG is a competitive grants process. NRCS personnel may provide general guidance to potential applicants on the appropriate forms to submit, program information, instruction on completing blocks or sections of forms, etc. Local NRCS offices cannot assist with the development of an application.

58. What are our limitations in working with our local NRCS personnel on the project should it be selected for funding?

NRCS personnel can be involved in a technical advisor capacity.

59. How many pages are allowed/expected for the Environmental Impact sections?

The length of the analysis should be commensurate with the complexity of the project proposed and the environmental resources impacted directly, indirectly, or cumulatively. You can find this on page 15 of the Announcement for Program Funding.

60. Regarding the environmental evaluation process, NRCS field office staff indicated that the applicant must complete the EE Worksheet and submit that with the CIG application. Is that accurate?

This year we are not requiring applicants to complete the EE Worksheet. Please see page 15 of the announcement regarding the requirement for Assessment of Environmental and Social Impacts. You may want to refer to the EE Worksheet and its instructions, fact sheets, guide sheets, and resource consideration sheet to help you think through the types of impacts to discuss.

61. Is there a way for researchers to be involved in this grant program?

Even though CIG cannot fund research projects, researchers can offer or collaborate in projects that encompass the development, evaluation, implementation, and monitoring of conservation adoption approaches or incentive systems; or conservation technologies, practices, systems, procedures, or approaches; or environmental soundness with goals of environmental protection and natural resource enhancement.

Yes. Publishing the results of the data collected is an example of transferability.

62. While CIG does not fund research, is capturing data to demonstrate the efficacy/utility of the activity to other landowners/operators an eligible activity (i.e., yield/cost data).

Yes. Capturing monitoring data and publicizing it can validate basic research data sets, expand the geographic coverage of existing data sets, and is an example of transferability.

63. While CIG does not fund research, it does encourage monitoring and data collection for the purposes of outreach and extension (transferability). Does that mean that it is still acceptable to publish the results of the data collected?

Yes. Capturing monitoring data and publicizing it can validate basic research data sets, expand the geographic coverage of existing data sets, and is an example of transferability.

64. If sampling or monitoring is required by the project activities, is eLab certification required?

No, eLab certification is not required.

65. I downloaded Standard Form 424 for federal assistance from grants.gov but the expiration date is 31/12/2012. Is it the correct form to fill in?

Yes, the forms are correct.

66. Can an applicant submit several applications?

Yes. Page 14, Section IV.B, last paragraph, 2nd sentence states “If submitting applications for more than one project, submit a separate application for each project.”

67. Can the proposed budget fund the purchase of equipment?

It will depend on the type of entity, please reference the applicable cost principle in Table A at the end of the FAQ to determine what costs are allowable.

68. Could the grant be used for the cost of the solar greenhouse for the cost of a feasibility study?

It will depend on the type of entity, please reference the applicable cost principle in Table A at the end of the FAQ to determine what costs are allowable:

69. If you are a current grantee can you still apply for the current CIG RFP?

Yes. It is recommended that there not be substantial overlap with or duplication of any previous or current CIG project's goals. Please refer to requirements found on page 17 of the APF: "(9) Declaration of Previous CIG Projects Involvement: Identify any previously awarded CIG projects related to this proposal and any of their principal investigators. Detail the purpose, outcomes to date, and how this new proposal relates to the previous award."

70. Is there a minimum grant amount that will be considered under this opportunity? (size of project that will be competitive?)

There is no minimum grant amount. However, the applicant should present a budget that demonstrates a successful completion of the project.

71. How is the grant award distributed? Is it dispersed up front or must participants submit for reimbursement for project expenses?

Funding is disbursed on a reimbursable basis; however, recipients can submit a request for advance payment covering project activities up to 30 days from the date of submission.

72. When is the last date funding can be spent after the 3 years and when would the final report be due?

Project costs must be incurred before the expiration of the grant. The final technical report is due within 90 days of grant expiration.

73. Our Pre-proposal contact PI was wondering if he could switch the Applicant PI to another faculty that was listed on the pre-proposal? This would also mean a change in prime applicant organization. It is allowable?

Yes, but make sure to reference the identification number (R ####) assigned to your pre-proposal in your full proposal and ensure that the new applicant organization is an eligible entity.

74. Is there any flexibility in the final budget amount compared the pre-proposal? Either up or down?

Yes. Please refer to page 11 of the APF: "Note: Please note that we understand these are preliminary figures at this point. If the application is approved for full submission there may be differences once the full details of the budget are developed."

75. What is the required \$3000 travel fund? Can that be in-kind? Who will be traveling and with what objective in relation to this grant?

The \$3000 travel fund is for CIG recipients to share their project results and benefit from peer to peer technology transfer opportunities identified in coordination with the NRCS National Technical Contact for the project. The funding can be in-kind, cash match, or part of the federal funding request.

76. For #7 List of Letters of Support: Should that really just be a list of who is committing cash or in kind support?

The list can include other organizations that have provided a letter of support but are not pledging cash or in-kind match as well as Written Verification of Commitments of Matching Support (Pledge Agreements). For each organization, include entity name, location, role, and if a commitment of cash or in-kind support has been made, the value.

77. Where do the required letters of support (written verification of commitments of matching support) get attached, under #8? Is the “separate pledge agreement” described under #8 different than a letter of support?

The Written Verification of Commitments of Matching Support (Pledge Agreements) should be attached under #8. The Pledge Agreement is only different from a Letter of Support if the organization is not pledging cash or in-kind match.

78. Does the matching support information need to get summarized again and inserted after the budget narrative (#5b)?

The List of Letters of Support (#7) that follows the Detailed Budget Narrative section for Cost Share is adequate documentation for #8 Matching as well.

79. Do the letters of support count against the page count?

No.

80. Can you please provide clarification on the Letters of Support and Written Verification of Commitments? For example, if a third party organization is providing General support, as Cash Match and an In-Kind Match, does it require that we get three separate documents from the third party or can these be all rolled into one document?

One document per third party organization is sufficient.

81. For the Declaration of Previous CIG Project Involvement and Past Performance, is this required for just the Prime or does this apply to any subcontractors as well?

Only the applicant entity.

82. What if your agency has previously received a CIG, but not for a similar project and you had no involvement in that CIG award?

The Declaration of Previous CIG Project Involvement and Past Performance is linked to the applicant entity.

83. Which state conservationists should we inform about our application if we are not entirely sure about which states we will be active in?

Any states in which you think you might conduct project activities.

84. What email address should be cc'd when emailing state conservationist(s) for verification?

nrcscig@wdc.usda.gov

85. It seems like there is no difference between the pre-proposal SF-424 forms and the proposal formset. Is it possible to just update a copy of the pre-proposal forms?

Yes, but make sure they are all updated consistently and that they are signed.

86. The SF-424 asks for a one-page abstract. Is this the same thing as the Announcement for Program Funding’s request for an executive summary?

We will accept executive summary submission through the one-page abstract section of the SF-424.

87. If we are submitting via email, and not via grants.gov, how should we handle the signature?

Print out, sign, and scan the signature page and add it to the submission or use the Adobe e-signature capabilities.

Table A: Federal Cost Principles

Type of Organization	Applicable Federal Cost Principle
Education Institution	2 CFR Part 220
Nonprofit Organization	2 CFR Part 230
State, Local, Indian Tribal Governments	2 CFR Part 225
Commercial Organizations	48 CFR Section 31.2