

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) – Expectations of Partners for Project Outcomes Data and Reporting

Background

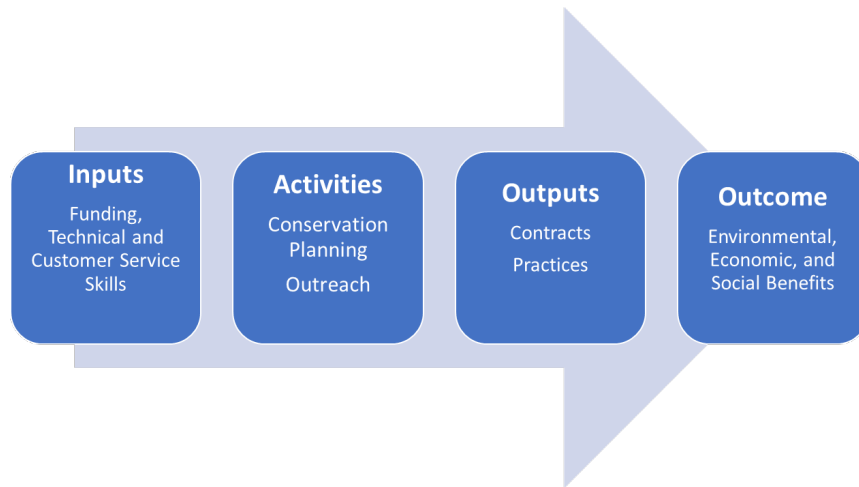
Historically, RCPP partners have been required to report on project deliverables, activities or outputs. Examples include acres of closed conservation easements, number of Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans completed, acres of cover crops implemented, acres of pollinator habitat created, number of Partner TA-funded conservation plans written, and others.

The 2018 Farm Bill increases expectations of accountability and return-on-investment, including a new emphasis on environmental (and economic and social) outcomes¹. This is true across many NRCS programs, but especially for RCPP. Below is an excerpt from the Farm Bill’s Manager’s Report for RCPP:

“The Managers emphasize the importance of a partner’s duty to quantify the environmental outcomes of their RCPP projects, and partners are encouraged to assess and report on the economic and social outcomes of their projects, as partners may be able to encourage increased adoption of conservation practices. The Managers expect the Secretary to provide guidance to partners on how to quantify and report on the outcomes of their projects. This guidance should include methods and tools that can be used to quantify outcomes at varying scales appropriate to projects (regional, state, county, watershed, field, etc.), and for the various natural resource concerns addressed by projects.”

While the Farm Bill is clear that it is a duty of partners to develop and report outcomes, NRCS intends to provide assistance to partners to increase consistency in reporting. NRCS submits RCPP data to Congress annually to support program funding, as well as every two years through a formal Congressional report. The increased expectations on and accountability from partners will add significant value to future Congressional reporting.

What are outcomes?



Outcomes are the measurable environmental, economic and social impacts of RCPP project activities. Examples of outcomes are pounds of nitrogen runoff avoided, tons of carbon sequestered, cost savings to producers, number of neighboring producers adopting a practice, decision factors leading to producer adoption of a soil health management system, etc. These are just examples--project outcomes should reflect the local conservation, economic and social priorities of the partnership, producers, private landowners and communities.

What is required for a RCPP proposal?

The RCPP portal requires partners submitting proposals to describe their proposed approach for developing, measuring and reporting the expected environmental outcomes of an RCPP project. While every detail of how the partnership intends to quantify outcomes need not be included, RCPP proposal evaluators will want to see that partners have given thought to how they will approach measuring and reporting of outcomes. Estimates of expected project outcomes should be provided if possible, however, the methodology for outcome measurement will be further developed during the agreement negotiation process. It should be clear in the proposal how the project deliverables connect to expected outcomes.

Only environmental outcomes are required. However, inclusion of economic and/or social indicators analyses are given priority consideration in the RCPP evaluation criteria. More details on economic and social outcomes are provided in the background below.

What are the expectations for selected proposals?

Once a project is selected for funding, the lead partner and NRCS will work collaboratively to develop the data collection and outcomes reporting plan that will be attached as an exhibit to the RCPP partnership agreement. This guidance document outlines the expectations for RCPP partners so that they may prepare competitive proposals that address the new outcomes reporting requirements.

State RCPP Coordinators will be the contact for lead partners and will be available to assist with reporting throughout the life of RCPP projects.

What do partners need to do during the life of the funded project?

As each project is unique, outcomes reporting requirements will be itemized in the agreement exhibit as a data collection and outcomes reporting plan. RCPP partners are required to report annual progress on outcomes-related activities and to report on project outcomes progressively, with the final report including total project outcomes (realized and projected future outcomes).

Environmental Outcomes (required)

The ability to develop, measure and report on environmental outcomes of RCPP projects will vary by project type, natural resource concern, and available tools and methods. NRCS may be able to assist with environmental outcomes modeling for some projects that address water quality improvements using standard conservation practices, consistent with the agency's Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP). Outcomes for some projects may be directly measured. Other projects may rely solely on local scientific expertise.

The customizable outcomes template below might be helpful to partners as they consider how to measure, monitor or model for environmental outcomes. The example provided is for wildlife resource concerns, but the template is easily modified for water quality, water quantity and soil health. For other resource concerns for which the template is not easily customized, lead partners may work with State RCPP Coordinators to develop a template(s) appropriate for their projects.

Customizable Template Sample:

With the RCPP investment of A dollars matched by B partner contributions over C year (s) we have made a lasting improvement to the biodiversity of the D (geographic region) over initial benchmark E) by improving F acres habitat and increasing our {priority species} population by G to a naturally sustainable size that will benefit the region for H years.

A = Total RCPP funds dispersed over **C** period of time

B = Partner contributions (cash and in-kind)

C = Defined number of years

D = Defined geographic area in the RCPP agreement

E = benchmark conditions developed for the outcome from the partnership agreement. Each outcome should have a benchmark against which to measure E and F.

F = Acres of wildlife habitat improvement practices for the RCPP project

G = to be modeled or estimated figures based on the best professional judgement of a scientific expert

H = Connected to reference in F (define assumptions such as regeneration time, lifespan, population dynamics, etc.)

Economic Outcomes (optional)

Understanding the economic and financial impact to producers of implementing conservation actions is critical to driving lasting adoption of conservation practices and systems. Conservation actions that negatively impact a producer's net profit are less likely to be implemented and sustained.

Economic indicators can quantify the financial impacts conservation practices on a farm, ranch of forestland. Economic indicators that may be used to report outcomes include (but are not limited to):

- Conservation cost effectiveness—the cost to the producer of practice implementation vs. conservation benefits.
- Economic/financial benefits—the impact of conservation implementation on net profit, the value of farmland/farm assets, etc.
- Valuation of ecosystem benefits—benefits to downstream beneficiaries, local economies, etc.

Partners measuring economic outcomes will need to collect financial information from producers and measure baseline economic indicators at the outset of the project, and then evaluate change in those economic indicators over time. A case study approach is a commonly used means of reporting on the economic and financial impacts of conservation implementation. For economic and financial analyses, partners should refer to the NRCS technical note on developing economic case studies, [available here](#). Applicants are encouraged to consult the resources available on [this NRCS website](#).

Partners are also free to explore other analytical approaches, in consultation with their State RCPP Coordinator(s). Examples of project-based economic analyses include two documents ([ONE here](#) and [TWO here](#)) developed by Illinois Corn Growers Association as part of their Precision Conservation Management RCPP project.

Development and implementation of an approach to quantify economic outcomes quantification should be viewed as an opportunity for RCPP lead partners to engage non-traditional RCPP partners such as ag lenders and data platforms in pursuit of innovative and replicable analytical models for future projects. Partners planning to report on economic outcomes should make sure that the effort is overseen by a qualified staff person or third party.

Social Outcomes (Optional)

Reporting of social outcomes can inform strategies to increase adoption of conservation practices and systems in pursuit of lasting change beyond the duration of an RCPP project. Social outcomes analyses consider the factors that go into a producer's decision to undertake conservation activities, how that producer's decision influences other producers, and any

broader impacts on communities. Factors included in evaluation may include (but are not limited to):

- Characteristics of producers and forestland owners
- Farm, forest or ranch characteristics
- Perceptions of characteristics of conservation practices
- Social capital of project participants
- Community characteristics
- Timing of conservation adoption
- Evaluation of management capabilities
- Conservation adoption motivations
- Technical assistance needs
- Information/Education needs
- Financial assistance needs to motivate conservation adoption

Partners measuring social outcomes should measure baseline social indicators at the outset of the project and then evaluate change in those social indicators over time. In measuring social outcomes of an RCPP project, partners should maintain a focus on the factors motivating or influencing landowners and communities to adopt—and maintain— conservation approaches.

Partners may wish to refer to the Social Indicators Data Management and Analysis (SIDMA) tool. SIDMA was developed by the Great Lakes Regional Social Indicators Team, and provides resources for measuring, organizing and analyzing social indicators related to conservation practices. While SIDMA was developed for use in water quality projects, extrapolation of its methods to other resource concerns is generally straightforward.

To explore and use the online tool, SIDMA (Social Indicators Data Management and Analysis), visit the [SIDMA website](#). Partners who conduct an analysis of social outcomes of their project should make sure that this effort is overseen by a qualified staff person or third party.