

Ranking Criteria for NRCS Programs – Fiscal Year 2024 Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) – Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

Application Overview

Any applicant may submit an application for participation in IRA ACEP. NRCS has developed the following ranking criteria to prioritize and select applications that best address the applicable program purposes and priority natural resource concerns nationally.

The Secretary of Agriculture established a national application batching period from September 27 to November 17, 2023. The Easement Programs Division will select the highest ranked applications for funding, based on applicant eligibility and the NRCS ranking process. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2024, NRCS will use the Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART) to assess and rank all eligible applications for IRA ACEP.

Inventory and Assessment in CART

CART is a decision support system designed to provide a consistent, replicable framework for the conservation planning process based on geospatially referenced information, client-provided information, field observations, and NRCS conservation planner expertise. CART is designed to assist NRCS conservation planners as they assess site vulnerability and existing conditions and identify natural resource concerns for a unit of land.

CART assessments of existing management and conservation efforts are compared against conservation planning criteria thresholds to determine the additional level of conservation efforts needed to address identified natural resource concerns. NRCS uses the results to identify conservation planning activities for the client. NRCS also uses CART to consolidate resource data and program information to prioritize program delivery and report outcomes of NRCS investments in conservation.

In general, resource concerns fall into one of three categories for the assessment method used in CART to assess and document a resource concern:

- **Client Input/Planner Observation:** A streamlined list of options is presented to the planner to document the client's activities and the planner's observation of the resource concerns present. These observations are compared to the conservation planning criteria thresholds.
- **Procedural/Deductive:** A large group of resource concerns fall into this category and are assessed using a resource concern-specific evaluation tool or a list of inventory-like criteria. Due to the variability in State tools, assessment questions and answers will be broad in nature to allow States to align them with State conditions.
- **Predictive:** The remaining resource concerns are assessed using a predictive interactive model simulation. The CART systems attempt to replicate the outcomes related to the assessment threshold outcomes compared to the model outputs.

After identifying resource concerns and describing existing conditions, planned conservation practices and activities can be added to the existing condition to determine the state of the proposed management system. Practices that are needed to support primary conservation practices and activities are also identified, but do not add conservation management points to the total.

If the client is interested in financial assistance through an NRCS conservation program, the inventory and assessment information, along with client decisions related to conservation practice adoption, are directly and consistently transferred from the assessment portion of CART to the ranking portion of CART. Based on the transferred assessment information and the conservation practices proposed for implementation, CART identifies the appropriate program ranking pool(s).

Ranking in CART

In general, NRCS program ranking criteria uses the following guiding principles:

- Degree of cost-effectiveness of the proposed conservation practices and activities;
- The level of performance of proposed conservation practices and activities;
- Treatment of resource concerns or national priority resource concerns;
- Magnitude of the environmental benefits resulting from the treatment of resource concerns reflecting the level of performance of the proposed conservation practices and activities; and
- Compliance with Federal, State, local, or tribal regulatory requirements with regards to natural resources.

CART uses a set of National Ranking Templates developed for each NRCS program and initiative. The National Ranking Templates contain four parameters that are customized for each program to reflect the national level ranking criteria. The four parameters are:

1. **Land Uses** – NRCS has developed land use designations to be used by planners and modelers at the field and landscape level. Land use modifiers more accurately define the land’s actual use and provide another level of specificity and help denote how the land is managed. Land use designations and modifiers are defined in Title 180, National Planning Procedures Handbook, Part 600.
2. **Resource Concerns** – The resource condition that does not meet minimum acceptable condition levels as established by resource planning criteria. This implies 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, which includes client objectives, human and energy resources are considered components of the resource base.
3. **Practices** – A specific treatment used to address resource concerns, such as structural or vegetative measures, or management techniques that are planned and implemented in accordance with applicable standards and specifications.
4. **Ranking Component Weights** – A set of five components comprise the ranking score for an individual land-based assessment. The five components are:
 - a. **Vulnerability** – Site vulnerability is determined by subtracting the existing condition and existing practice scores from the thresholds. This score is weighted by ranking pool to address the resource concerns prioritized by that ranking pool.
 - b. **Planned Practice Effects** – The planned practice effect score is based on the sum of the planned practice on that land unit that addresses the resource concern. This score is

weighted by ranking pool to address the resource concerns prioritized by that ranking pool.

- c. **Resource Priorities** – National and State resource priorities are established to address the most critical land and resource considerations and are based on NRCS national and State priorities identified with input from national, State, and local stakeholders.
- d. **Program Priorities** – National and State program priorities are established to maximize program effectiveness and advance program purposes and are based on NRCS national and State priorities identified with input from national, State, and local stakeholders.
- e. **Cost Efficiency** – Summation of ‘Planned Practice Points’ divided by the log of the ‘Average Practice Cost’.

NOTE: The points for vulnerability, planned practice effects, and cost efficiency are garnered from the assessment portion of CART.

Easement Programs Division created FY 2024 IRA ACEP ranking pools within the above-described National Ranking Template parameters. The IRA ACEP ranking pools contain a set of questions that are divided into the following sections – applicability, category, program questions, and resource questions. Ranking pool customization allows NRCS to focus funding on priority resource concerns and initiatives identified at the nationally with input from NRCS stakeholders. Each eligible application may be considered for funding in all applicable ranking pools by program.

NRCS Resource Concerns

The following table lists the 47 resource concerns NRCS uses during the Conservation Planning process.

Categories	NRCS Resource Concerns
Soil	1. Sheet and rill erosion
	2. Wind erosion
	3. Ephemeral gully erosion
	4. Classic gully erosion
	5. Bank erosion from streams, shorelines, or water conveyance channels
	6. Subsidence
	7. Compaction
	8. Organic matter depletion
	9. Concentration of salts or other chemicals
	10. Soil organism habitat loss or degradation
	11. Aggregate instability
Water	12. Ponding and flooding
	13. Seasonal high-water table
	14. Seeps
	15. Drifted snow
	16. Surface water depletion
	17. Groundwater depletion
	18. Naturally available moisture use
	19. Inefficient irrigation water use
	20. Nutrients transported to surface water
	21. Nutrients transported to groundwater
	22. Pesticides transported to surface water

	23. Pesticides transported to groundwater
	24. Pathogens and chemicals from manure, biosolids, or compost applications transported to surface water
	25. Pathogens and chemicals from manure, biosolids, or compost applications transported to groundwater
	26. Salts transported to surface water
	27. Salts transported to groundwater
	28. Petroleum, heavy metals, and other pollutants transported to surface water
	29. Petroleum, heavy metals, and other pollutants transported to groundwater
	30. Sediment transported to surface water
	31. Elevated water temperature
Air	32. Emissions of particulate matter (PM) and PM precursors
	33. Emissions of greenhouse gasses (GHGs)
	34. Emissions of ozone precursors
	35. Objectionable odors
	36. Emissions of airborne reactive nitrogen
Plants	37. Plant productivity and health
	38. Plant structure and composition
	39. Plant pest pressure
	40. Wildfire hazard from biomass accumulation
Animals	41. Terrestrial habitat for wildlife and invertebrates
	42. Aquatic habitat for fish and other organisms
	43. Feed and forage imbalance
	44. Inadequate livestock shelter
	45. Inadequate livestock water quantity, quality, and distribution
Energy	46. Energy efficiency of equipment and facilities
	47. Energy efficiency of field operations

Program-Specific Information

Inflation Reduction Act (IRA)

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Agricultural Land Easement (ACEP-ALE)

The following IRA ACEP-ALE national ranking criteria are included in the “Applicability Question” section of ranking pools for IRA ACEP-ALE: Did the applicant apply for IRA ACEP-ALE enrollment?

The following IRA ACEP-ALE national ranking criteria are included in the “Category Question” section of ranking pools for IRA ACEP-ALE: Which target area applies to the parcel being offered for enrollment into IRA ACEP-ALE?

Based on the IRA ACEP-ALE national priorities, the answer choices are (1) grasslands under threat of conversion; (2) agricultural lands under threat of conversion; and (3) active agricultural rice cultivation on subsiding highly organic soils.

The following IRA ACEP-ALE national ranking criteria are included in the “Program Questions” section of ranking pools for IRA ACEP-ALE, with the weighting of each question based on national-level priorities:

1. Percent of prime, unique, and important soils in the parcel to be protected.
2. Secured landowner water rights for lands that are prime if irrigated.
3. Percent of cropland, pastureland, grassland, and rangeland in parcel to be protected.
4. Ratio of the total acres of land in the parcel to be protected to average farm size in the county according to the most recent USDA Census of Agriculture.
5. Decrease in the percentage of acreage of farm and ranch land in the county in which the parcel is located between the last two USDA Censuses of Agriculture.
6. Percent population growth in the county as documented by the U.S. Census.
7. Population density (population per square mile) as documented by the most recent U.S. Census.
8. Existence of a farm or ranch succession plan or similar plan established to address agricultural viability for future generations.
9. Proximity of the parcel to other protected land.
10. Proximity of the parcel to other agricultural operations and agricultural infrastructure.
11. Maximizing the protection of contiguous or proximal acres devoted to agricultural use.
12. Is land currently enrolled in Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in a contract that is set to expire within one year and is grassland that would benefit from protection under a long-term easement or is land under a CRP contract that is in transition to a covered farmer or rancher pursuant to 16 U.S.C. 3835(f).
13. Is the applicant a covered producer participating in the CRP Transition Incentives Program (CRP-TIP) and NRCS is evaluating the assessment during the two-year period covered by the CRP-1R?
14. Land is grassland of special environmental significance that would benefit from protection under a long-term easement.
15. Decrease in the percentage of acreage of permanent grassland, pasture, and rangeland, other than cropland and woodland pasture, in the county in which the parcel is located between the last two years from the USDA Census of Agriculture.
16. Percent of the fair market value of the agricultural land easement that is the eligible entity’s own cash resources for payment of easement compensation to the landowner and comes from sources other than the landowner.

The following ACEP-ALE State ranking criteria are included in the “Resource Questions” section of

ranking pools for ACEP-ALE, with the weighting of each question based on State-level priorities:

1. Easement offered acres contains habitat for at-risk species.
2. Score in the land evaluation and site assessment system as identified in 7 CFR Part 658 or equivalent measure for grassland enrollments, to serve as a measure of agricultural viability (access to markets and infrastructure).
3. Land contains a site of cultural or historical significance.
4. The eligible entity's performance in managing and enforcing easements.
5. Closing efficiency over past five years.
6. Does the applicant meet the NRCS definition of a historically underserved participant.
7. The producer/landowner has executed and is currently implementing an NRCS contract that includes Climate Smart Agricultural and Forestry practices.
8. Proximity to designated local, state, or federal wildlife habitat/conservation area or forest area of significance.

Specific Resources Questions for grasslands under threat of conversion applications:

1. Index score for lands under threat of conversion where the majority of the parcel acreage (51 percent or more) is located.
2. Historical management and restoration of the proposed easement.
3. Threat of grassland conversion to cropland.
4. Percent of rangeland, pastureland, or land that contains forbs or shrublands to be protected that is currently devoted to grazing uses.
5. Property is a proximal extension of existing protected grasslands or connects existing protected grassland areas.

Specific Resource Questions for agricultural lands under threat of conversion applications:

1. Index score for lands under threat of conversion where the majority of the parcel acreage (51 percent or more) is located.
2. Property proximity to a micropolitan area or metropolitan area.
3. Property proximity to a major transportation corridor or warehousing complex.

Specific Resource Questions for active agricultural rice cultivation on subsiding highly organic soils applications:

1. Percentage of the proposed easement having rice cultivation on subsiding highly organic soils
2. Saturation during the non-growing season
3. Long-term management plan

Program-Specific Information

Inflation Reduction Act (IRA)

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Wetland Reserve Easement (ACEP-WRE)

The following IRA ACEP-WRE national ranking criteria are included in the “Applicability Question” section of ranking pools for IRA ACEP-WRE: Did the applicant apply for IRA ACEP-WRE enrollment?

The following IRA ACEP-WRE national ranking criteria are included in the “Category Question” section of ranking pools for IRA ACEP-WRE: The proposed easement most closely aligns with which of the following IRA ACEP-WRE priorities?

Answers:

1. Land that either meet one of the primary ACEP-WRE land categories or is eligible adjacent land and overlaps with the highly organic soils and high carbon mineral soils identified in FY 2023 for IRA ACEP-WRE
2. Land that either meets one of the primary ACEP-WRE land eligibility categories or is eligible adjacent land and that will be restored and managed as native forest under the Wetland Reserve Plan of Operations.
3. Land that either meets one of the primary ACEP-WRE land eligibility categories or is eligible adjacent land and contains existing native forest habitat that will be maintained as native forest habitat under the Wetland Reserve Plan of Operations.
4. A geographically specific priority, Agricultural Cranberry Bogs, that meet one of the primary ACEP-WRE land eligibility categories and is capable of being restored to native wetland habitat.
5. A geographically specific priority, drained or degraded montane wet meadows, that meet one of the primary ACEP-WRE land eligibility categories and is capable of being restored to native wetland habitat.
6. A geographically specific priority, ephemeral wetlands, that meet one of the primary ACEP-WRE land eligibility categories and is surrounded by existing native grasslands or by cropland that will be restored to native grassland habitat under the Wetland Reserve Plan of Operations.

The following IRA ACEP-WRE national ranking criteria are included in the “Program Questions” section of ranking pools for IRA ACEP-WRE, with the weighting of each question based on national-level priorities:

1. Location of the offered easement area in a national priority area.
2. Easement Duration
3. Comparison of estimated restoration costs to the fair market value of the land.
4. Contribution by landowner or conservation partner towards cost of easement and/or restoration.
5. Restoration of land to native vegetation.
6. Ratio of restorable wetland acreage to adjacent land in the enrollment area.
7. Describe existing forest habitat.
8. Current management activities that may create onsite or offsite negative impact that will be mitigated by restoration to native habitat.
9. Configuration of proposed easement to exclude inholdings or rights of way that may affect the proposed restoration and stewardship.
10. Does the applicant meet the NRCS definition of a historically underserved participant.

The following ACEP-WRE State ranking criteria are included in the “Resource Questions” section of ranking pools for ACEP-WRE, with the weighting of each question based on State-level priorities:

1. Proximity of proposed easement to other lands permanently protected for the purpose of wildlife and habitat conservation.
2. Restoration of adjacent land acreage within the proposed easement area.
3. Habitat restoration contains elements for the recovery of State or federally listed threatened or endangered species.
4. Hydrological restoration implemented for wetland dependent wildlife species.
5. Restoration of altered hydrology.
6. Land use change through restoration.
7. Reliability of hydrology restoration.
8. Types of wetlands restored.

9. Location of proposed easement area within 303d State listed watersheds.
10. Restoration provides surface water filtering from adjacent lands used for agricultural production.
11. Floodwater attenuation.

Specific Resource Questions for applications under priority soils high in organic carbon:

1. Percentage of proposed easement area that intersects Priority Area 1.
2. Percentage of proposed easement area that intersects Priority Area 2.
3. Percentage of proposed easement area that intersects with Priority Area 1 and/or Priority Area 2.
4. Percentage of the proposed easement area that will be restored to native forest as a planned practice under the Wetland Reserve Plan of Operations and/or is currently native forest habitat that will be maintained as native forest habitat.

Specific Resource Questions for applications that will have land restored to native forest habitat:

1. Percentage of proposed easement area that will be restored to native forest as a planned practice under the Wetland Reserve Plan of Operations.
2. Percentage of proposed easement area that is currently forested habitat and will be maintained as forested habitat.
3. Percentage of the proposed easement area that intersects the priority soils.

Specific Resource Questions for application that will maintain existing native forest habitat:

1. Existing forest habitat type.
2. Percentage of the proposed easement area that will be restored to native forest.
3. Percentage of the proposed easement area that is currently native forest habitat and will be maintained as forest habitat.
4. Percentage of the proposed easement area that intersects the priority soils.

Specific Resource Questions for applications under geographically specific priority, Agricultural Cranberry Bogs

1. Threat of conversion to a non-agricultural use
2. Percentage of the proposed easement that intersects the priority soils by 25% or more.

Specific Resource Questions for applications under geographically specific priority, montane wet meadows:

1. Extent of degraded hydrology.
2. Percentage of the proposed easement that intersects the priority soils by 25% or more.

Specific Resource Questions for applications under geographically specific priority, ephemeral wetlands:

1. Threat of conversion to more intensive agricultural or non-agricultural use.
2. Number of wetlands/potholes/playas/vernal pools to be protected and restored within the proposed easement area.
3. Percentage of the proposed easement that intersects the priority soils by 25% or more.