

**NRCS Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)**  
**FY 2015 Frequently Asked Questions**  
*Draft 2-6-15*

**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](http://www.grants.gov).

**5. What is the funding opportunity number?**

USDA-NRCS-CIG-15-01

**6. Where can I find the application package on grants.gov?**

<http://www.grants.gov/web/grants/view-opportunity.html?oppId=272028>

**7. Who should I contact for additional information?**

For programmatic information, please contact the National CIG Program Analyst at (202) 720-1895 [stacy.swartwood@wdc.usda.gov](mailto:stacy.swartwood@wdc.usda.gov). For budget and administrative information, please contact the Grants and Agreements Team at USDA-NRCS (202) 720-0242 or [frankie.comfort@wdc.usda.gov](mailto:frankie.comfort@wdc.usda.gov)

**8. Is it recommended that the pre-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. How many years can a project last?**

CIG projects are limited to three years.

**10. Who is eligible to apply?**

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

**11. 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.

**12. 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.

**13. 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 from cash and/or in-kind contributions.

**14. How do I qualify for the Historically Underserved Producers and Veteran Farmers or Ranchers, 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 III.E. on page 14, and definitions of Historically Underserved Producers and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers can be found on page 14 of the 2015 CIG announcement.

**15. What if the producer that you are working with is a Historically Underserved Producer or Veteran Farmer or Rancher, or Native American?**

The applicant entity itself must be a Historically Underserved Producer or Veteran Farmer or Rancher, or community-based organization comprised of or representing these entities in order to qualify for the 10% set-aside funding pool during the full proposal phase.

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

The 10% set-aside funding pool is intended to encourage Historically Underserved Producers, Veteran Farmers and 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 in their full proposal, 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.

**17. 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.

**18. Will you please go over the definition of Historically Underserved Producers?**

Per the 2015 CIG announcement, page 3, section III.E., “Historically underserved producer means a person, joint operation, legal entity, or Indian Tribe who is a beginning farmer or rancher, socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher, or limited resource farmer or rancher..”

**19. Are women farmers still considered “Historically Underserved” (socially disadvantaged)?**

For the purposes of CIG, special consideration is extended to Historically Underserved Producers and Veteran Farmers or Ranchers, 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](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/financial/eqip/?cid=nrcs142p2_044211))

**20. Can you explain a bit more on the transferability requirement for the full proposal?**

Per the 2015 CIG announcement, page 19, 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.”

**21. What other requirements do I need to meet?**

CIG projects must involve EQIP-eligible producers. Applicants must describe the type and extent of producer involvement in the application narrative.

**22. Please expand on the project eligibility regarding Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) producers. 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 producers who meet the EQIP eligibility requirements as set forth in 16 USC 3839aa-1. At the discretion of the applicant and project needs, a producer can be a matching funds partner, a participant, or both. However, the producer’s costs associated with implementation of conservation practices or activities under EQIP contracts during the period of performance of a grant cannot be counted towards the grant’s matching requirements.

**23. Is it necessary to involve EQIP eligible producers 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 producers who meet the EQIP eligibility requirements as set forth in 16 USC 3839aa-1.

**24. Do the EQIP eligibility income restrictions (\$900,000 AGI) apply to Tribes (or Tribal entities, like Tribal rangeland management programs) as they do for individual producers under the EQIP guidelines?**

No. Federally recognized Indian Tribe applicants are exempt from adjusted gross income requirements. However, individual Indian applicants are subject to all EQIP eligibility requirements.

**25. If the applicant conducts a project that involves cost sharing with producers, do the producers 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.

**26. 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 do not count towards the \$450,000 payment limitation for the 2014 Farm Bill.

**27. If we have received previous EQIP financial assistance, are we eligible to receive payments for CIG project activities?**

Yes. However, direct or indirect payments cannot be made for a conservation practice for which an individual or legal entity has already received funds, or is contracted to receive funds through any USDA conservation program.

**28. 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.

**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. What constitutes eligible lands for EQIP?**

To be eligible, the land must be in crop or livestock production, Non Industrial Private Forest, or be Indian Tribal land. Details are available in [440 CPM Part 515, subpart F](#).

**31. Can public lands be eligible for EQIP?**

The EQIP Rule provides the specific criteria for public land eligibility:

(2) Publicly owned land where:

(i) The land is a working component of the participant's agricultural and forestry operation,

(ii) The participant has control of the land for the term of the contract, and

(iii) The conservation practices to be implemented on the public land are necessary and will contribute to an improvement in the identified resource concern;

Consideration of EQIP eligibility for public land would require that an eligible producer is leasing the public land for the proposed contract period and that all other eligibility requirements are met.

**32. What constitutes a Natural Resource Concern?**

The [EQIP Rule](#) is specific in 1466.1 that EQIP funding is to be used for the purpose of implementing conservation practices that address a natural resource concern(s). By General Manual policy at least one resource concern is to be included/addressed in the purpose statement of each practice standard. Agency approved natural resource concerns have been approved as documented and used in business tools (ProTracts, CPPE, Toolkit, FOTG).

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

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

**34. 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.

**35. 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.

**36. Must all funds be expended with the US, or only the funds provided by CIG, or is there no restriction?**

NRCS does not have authority to enter into awards with international entities. Therefore, the Federal funds associated with the CIG award must be expended in the United States. If the entity wishes to enter into a separate award to utilize services of an international organization, then they should utilize their own funds.

**37. I am graduate student. Can you please tell me if internationals can be part of this grant? Not as a PI but as collaborators?**

NRCS does not have authority to enter into awards with international entities. If your university wishes to enter into a separate award to utilize internationals as collaborators, then they should utilize their own funds.

**38. 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.

**39. Must the matching funds be secured at the time of pre-proposal application, or can they be pending?**

No, they do not need to be secured at the pre-proposal application time. 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.

**40. What time period can matching funds be used in to count towards the applicant's required contribution to the project?**

Matching funds (including both cash and in-kind) must be utilized during the period of performance of the grant in order to count towards the applicant's contribution.

**41. How do applicants show matching commitments?**

At the time of pre-proposal application, applicants must document match in the SF-424A budget sheet and narrative p. 15, section IV.B.3.a. and b. At the time of full proposal application, applicants must also include written verification of commitments of matching support (including both cash and in-kind contributions) from non-federal third parties.

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

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

**43. Can you specify what 'cash' match includes?**

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

**44. 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.

**45. The 2014 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).

**46. About a year ago we were told that Land Grant Universities would be exempt from matching funds for USDA grants beginning in 2015. Was I mistaken and that this waiver was for only certain types such as AFRI?**

The above statement is not correct. Land Grant Universities are still required to meet matching requirements, there is no exemption due to their affiliation as a LGU.

**47. 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.

**48. 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 2015 CIG announcement, page 20, 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.

**49. 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 2015 CIG program, no limit has been set on IDC rates. The appropriate type IDC rate will be accepted as documented.

**50. 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.

**51. 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.

**52. 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.

**53. 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.

**54. 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.

**55. How many pages are allowed/expected for the Environmental Impact sections in the full proposal**

The length of the analysis should be commensurate with the complexity of the project proposed and the natural environmental resources impacted directly, indirectly, or cumulatively. You can find this on page 19 of the Announcement for Program Funding.

**56. 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 19 of the announcement regarding the requirement for Assessment of Environmental Impacts in the full proposal. 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. <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/technical/nra/ec/>

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

Even though CIG cannot fund research projects, with the exception of on-farm conservation research, 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.

**58. While CIG does not fund research, with the exception of on-farm conservation 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.

**59. While CIG does not fund research, with the exception of on-farm conservation 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.

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

No, eLab certification is not required.

**61. Can an applicant submit several applications?**

Yes. Page 15, Section IV.B, last paragraph, 2nd sentence states “If submitting applications for more than one project, submit a separate pre-proposal for each project.”

**62. If you are a current grantee can you apply for the current CIG competition?**

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 for full proposals found on page 21 of the APF: “9. Declaration of Previous CIG Projects Involvement and Past Performance: Identify any previously awarded National or State CIG projects related to this proposal and any of their principal investigators and please respond to item 9.a below.”

**63. 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.

**64. 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.

**65. 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.

**66. At the time of full proposal development, our pre-proposal contact PI may need to 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.

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

Yes. Please refer to page 16 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.”

**68. What is the required \$3,000 travel fund? Can that be in-kind? Who will be traveling and with what objective in relation to this grant?**

The \$3,000 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.

**69. For #8 List of Letters of Support for the full proposal: 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.

**70. Where do the required letters of support (written verification of commitments of matching support) for full proposals get attached, under #7? Is the “separate pledge agreement” described under #7 different than a letter of support?**

The Written Verification of Commitments of Matching Support should be attached under #7. The Pledge Agreement is only different from a Letter of Support if the organization is not pledging cash or in-kind match.

**71. Do the letters of support count against the full proposal page count?**

No.

**72. Can you please provide clarification on the Letters of Support and Written Verification of Commitments for the full proposal? 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.

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

Only the applicant entity.

**74. 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 for the full proposal is linked to the applicant entity.

**75. Which state conservationists should we inform about our full proposal 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.

**76. What email address should be cc'd when emailing the full proposal to state conservationist(s) for verification?**

[nrcscig@wdc.usda.gov](mailto:nrcscig@wdc.usda.gov)

**77. It seems like there is no difference between the pre-proposal SF-424 forms and the proposal form set. 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.

**78. 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 for full proposals?**

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

**79. 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.