

Ranking Criteria for NRCS Programs – Fiscal Year 2023

Application Overview

Any applicant may submit an application for participation in ACEP, EQIP, CSP, or RCPP. The NRCS State Conservationist or Area Director, in consultation with stakeholders including the State Technical Committee, Tribal Conservation Advisory Councils, and Local Work Groups, has developed the following ranking criteria to prioritize and select applications that best address the applicable program purposes and priority natural resource concerns in Vermont.

The NRCS State Conservationist or Area Director will establish application batching periods and select the highest ranked applications for funding, based on applicant eligibility and the NRCS ranking process. In Fiscal Year 2023, NRCS will use its Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART) to assess and rank all eligible applications for NRCS conservation programs.

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 on a unit of land.

In CART, assessments of existing management and conservation efforts are compared against conservation planning criteria thresholds to determine the level of conservation effort needed to address identified natural resource concerns. The results are then used to inform NRCS 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 input and/or planner 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 tool or a list of inventory-like criteria. Due to variability in State tools, assessment questions and answers will be broad in nature to allow States to more carefully 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 being met or not 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. Supporting 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 multiple 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 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** - 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, that 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, which 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 which 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.

Vermont created State-specific ranking pools within the above-described National Ranking Template parameters. The State 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 States to focus funding on priority resource concerns and initiatives identified at the State level 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 farming/ranching practices and field operations

Program-Specific Information

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) Classic and Renewals Ranking Guidance

1) States must create ranking pools in CART based on the available National Ranking Templates and guidance in 440-CPM, part 530, subpart Q, section 530.301A.

2) At a minimum, States must establish separate ranking pools, using exhibit I, “CSP-General,” for each of the following—

- Agricultural land – Classic
- Agricultural land – Renewal
- Agricultural land – BFR
- Agricultural land – Renewal - BFR
- Agricultural land – SDFR
- Agricultural land – Renewal - SDFR
- Agricultural land – Organic (only one pool for both certified and transitioning)
- Agricultural land – Renewal - Organic (only one pool for both certified and transitioning)
- Nonindustrial private forest land (NIPF) – Classic

- NIPF – Renewal
- NIPF – BFR
- NIPF – Renewal - BFR
- NIPF – SDFR
- NIPF – Renewal – SDFR

Note: States must establish renewal ranking pools equivalent to their classic ranking pools; however, this does not mean that the renewal ranking pools must match the classic ranking pools in terms of weights, questions, or priority resource concern categories.

3) States have the option to establish separate organic fund pools for NIPF – Classic and NIPF – Renewal based on applicability in the State.

4) States must NOT select the “organic” modifier for any land use included in an organic ranking pool.

5) States must include the following land uses within any agricultural or NIPF ranking pool template—

- Agricultural land—crop, pasture, range, associated agricultural land, and farmstead
- NIPF—forest, associated agricultural land, and farmstead

6) Resource Concern Categories—

- States must establish the weights for applicable resource concern categories based on the following guidelines—

a. The eight State priority resource concern categories must have a weight between 5 percent and 30 percent

b. Non-priority resource concern categories must not exceed a weight of 5 percent

7) Applicability Question—

- States must use the following questions to determine applicability for specific ranking pools—

a. For the organic ranking pools, is 75 percent or more of the land in the operation certified or transitioning? (Yes = applicable; No = not applicable)

b. For the BFR ranking pools, did the applicant self-certify as a beginning farmer or rancher on the NRCS-CPA-1200, “Conservation Program Application?” (Yes = applicable; No = not applicable)

c. For the SDFR ranking pools, did the applicant self-certify as a socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher on the NRCS-CPA-1200, “Conservation

Program Application?” (Yes = applicable; No = not applicable)

- States may establish other text questions for the applicability question or select “User declined” under the “Ranking Status,” as determined by the State.

- For example—States may decide that it is acceptable for planners to select “User declined” to turn off the renewal ranking pools when the application is for a new CSP classic application or vice versa. Otherwise, States may add in an applicability question such as, “Is this a CSP classic application?” which will require the user to enter a justification for selecting “No.”

8) Ranking Questions—

- At a minimum, States must develop the program questions and resource questions using the following criteria—

- a. The natural resources conservation and environmental benefits that result from the conservation treatment on all State identified priority resource concern categories at the time of application (i.e., existing stewardship);
- b. The degree to which the proposed conservation activities increase natural resource conservation and environmental benefits (i.e., additional conservation); and
- c. Other consistent criteria the State establishes to ensure that State and local priority resource concern categories are effectively addressed.