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, in consultation with stakeholders including the State Technical Committee 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 Idaho.

The NRCS State Conservationist 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, 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).

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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
- 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.

Idaho 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

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

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

1. Percent of prime, unique, and important farmland soil in the parcel to be protected.
2. Percent of cropland, range land, grassland, historic grassland, pastureland, or nonindustrial private forest land in parcel to be protected.
3. Ratio of the total acres of land in the parcel to be protected to average farm size in the county based on USDA Census of Agriculture (USDA-NASS).
4. 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 (USDA-NASS).
5. 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 USDA Censuses of Agriculture (USDA-NASS).
6. Ratio of population growth in the county vs. statewide population growth as documented by the U.S. Census (Census Bureau).
7. Ratio of County population density vs Statewide population density as documented by the most recent U.S. Census (Census Bureau).
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 that limits the conversion of the land to nonagricultural use or protects grazing uses and related conservation values.

10. Proximity of the parcel to other agricultural operations and agricultural infrastructure.
11. Parcel ability to maximize the protection of contiguous or proximal acres devoted to agricultural use.
12. The land is currently enrolled in 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.
13. Land is grassland of special environmental significance that would benefit from protection under a long-term easement.
14. 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 GENERAL State ranking criteria are included in the "Resource Questions" section of ranking pools for ACEP-ALE GENERAL, with the weighting of each question based on State-level priorities:

1. 50% or more of the offered parcel is located within an Idaho NRCS designated Priority Area.
2. 50% of the parcel to be protected is located within an area zoned for agricultural use, or a zoning classification consistent with agriculture, or a similar classification if located in government units without classification.
3. Offered parcel includes environmentally sensitive features such as wetlands, riparian corridors, natural water bodies, or unique scenic views.
4. Land parcel is enrolled and participates in a carbon sequestration program.
5. Land parcel contributes products to local markets and restaurants in Idaho.
6. Offered parcel includes maintaining habitat for Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) per IDFG identified species on SWAP Slicer tool, or listed species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) per USFWS identified within IPaC.
7. Parcel contains historical or archeological resources that will be protected by the easement. (Cultural resource must be recognized by SHPO, National or State Historic Register.)
8. Eligible Entity has a strategic farmland protection plan with specific agricultural focal areas identified. Proposed ALE parcel must be included within the focal area.
9. Eligible Entity's average efficiency closing NRCS easements. If no NRCS easements are held, entity must provide evidence of closing efficiency for other easements.
10. How an eligible entity will address the NRCS ACEP-ALE minimum deed terms (MDT's).
11. Entity intends to develop an Agriculture Land Easement Plan for the parcel.
12. Parcel is within the boundary of a state Source Water Protection Priority Area (SWPPA).

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

1. 50% or more of the offered parcel is located within an Idaho NRCS designated Priority Area.
2. 50% or more of the offered parcel is located within a Idaho State Sage-grouse management area for grasslands of special significance.
3. 50% or more of the offered parcel located in a IDFG Big Game Priority Area, according to IDFG map.
4. Offered parcel falls within an IDFG Mapped Migration Route.

5. Non-rangeland type parcel contains Mesic Habitat features such as riparian areas, wetlands, and/or mesic wildlife habitat such as streamside, wet meadows, springs and seeps, or irrigated pastures.
6. Rangeland type parcel contains a source of perennial or intermittent streams, lakes, or ponds within the easement area.
7. Composition of native vegetation is offered in the parcel area.
8. Percentage of total area on the offered parcel that is less than 30% slopes.
9. Number of sides the offered parcel borders sagebrush or rangeland habitat.
10. Offered acres are part of an active livestock grazing operation.
11. Offered parcel includes maintaining habitat for a Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) per IDFG identified species on SWAP Slicer tool, or Endangered Species Act (ESA) listed species per USFWS identified in IPaC.
12. During the past 5 years, NEW residential, commercial, or industrial development has occurred near the easement offer area.
13. Based on IDFG predictive models, parcel provides one or more of the sage grouse annual habitat requirements. (Winter, Nesting, Early Brood, Late Brood Rearing)
14. According to the Rangeland Analysis Platform, a majority 51% or more of the offered parcel acres are within a Resilience and Resistance class.
15. Parcel is within the boundary of a state Source Water Protection Priority Area (SWPPA).