Ranking Criteria for NRCS Programs – Fiscal Year 2024

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 Wisconsin.

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 2024, 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.

Wisconsin created a State-specific ranking pools within the above-described National Ranking Template parameters. The State ranking pool contains 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 Resource Concerns NRCS uses during the Conservation Planning process.

Category	NRCS Resource Concern
Soil	1. Sheet and rill erosion
Soil	2. Wind erosion
Soil	3. Ephemeral gully erosion
Soil	4. Classic gully erosion
Soil	5. Bank erosion from streams, shorelines, or water conveyance channels
Soil	6. Subsidence
Soil	7. Compaction
Soil	8. Organic matter depletion
Soil	9. Concentration of salts or other chemicals
Soil	10. Soil organism habitat loss or degradation
Soil	11. Aggregate instability
Water	12. Ponding and flooding
Water	13. Seasonal high-water table
Water	14. Seeps
Water	15. Drifted snow
Water	16. Surface water depletion
Water	17. Groundwater depletion
Water	18. Naturally available moisture use
Water	19. Inefficient irrigation water use
Water	20. Nutrients transported to surface water
Water	21. Nutrients transported to groundwater
Water	22. Pesticides transported to surface water
Water	23. Pesticides transported to groundwater
Water	24. Pathogens and chemicals from manure, biosolids, or compost applications transported to surface water
Water	25. Pathogens and chemicals from manure, biosolids, or compost applications transported to groundwater
Water	26. Salts transported to surface water
Water	27. Salts transported to groundwater
Water	28. Petroleum, heavy metals, and other pollutants transported to surface water
Water	29. Petroleum, heavy metals, and other pollutants transported to groundwater
Water	30. Sediment transported to surface water

Water	31. Elevated water temperature
Air	32. Emissions of particulate matter (PM) and PM precursors
Air	33. Emissions of greenhouse gasses (GHGs)
Air	34. Emissions of ozone precursors
Air	35. Objectionable odors
Air	36. Emissions of airborne reactive nitrogen
Plants	37. Plant productivity and health
Plants	38. Plant structure and composition
Plants	39. Plant pest pressure
Plants	40. Wildfire hazard from biomass accumulation
Animals	41. Terrestrial habitat for wildlife and invertebrates
Animals	42. Aquatic habitat for fish and other organisms
Animals	43. Feed and forage imbalance
Animals	44. Inadequate livestock shelter
Animals	45. Inadequate livestock water quantity, quality and distribution
Energy	46. Energy efficiency of equipment and facilities
Energy	47. Energy efficiency of farming/ranching practices and field operations

2024 Resource and Program Priorities

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

The following ACEP-ALE national ranking criteria are included in the ranking pools for ACEP-ALE:

1. Percent of prime, unique, and important soils in the parcel to be protected. 30 points
2. Percent of cropland, pastureland, grassland, and rangeland in parcel to be protected. 15 points
3. 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. 15 points
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. 10 points
5. Percent population growth in the county as documented by the U.S. Census. 5 points
6. Population density (population per square mile) as documented by the most recent U.S. Census. 10 points
7. Existence of a farm or ranch succession plan or similar plan established to address agricultural viability for future generations. 15 points
8. Proximity of the parcel to other protected land. 10 points
9. Proximity of the parcel to other agricultural operations and agricultural infrastructure. 20 points
10. Maximizing the protection of contiguous or proximal acres devoted to agricultural use. 10 points
11. Is land 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 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). 5 points
12. Land is grassland of special environmental significance that would benefit from protection under a long-term easement. 10 points
13. 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. 10 points

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. 35 points

The following ACEP-ALE State ranking criteria are weighted according to State-level priorities reviewed by the State Technical Committee:

1. The location of a parcel in an area zoned for agricultural use. 20 points
2. The eligible entity's performance in managing and enforcing easements. 20 points
3. Land evaluation and site assessment based on National Commodity Crop Productivity Index. 30 points
4. Parcel contains habitat for federally listed rare species, original prairie or savanna remnant, federal candidate species, Wisconsin threatened or endangered species, or Wisconsin species of greatest conservation need. 20 points
5. Parcel contains historical or archaeological resources that will be protected by easement area. 10 points