

Vermont Bulletin: SB_VT_440-24-07

Date: October 13, 2023

Subject: Announcement of Fiscal Year 2025 Financial Assistance Working Groups

Purpose. This bulletin announces various working groups and subcommittees that will be used to assist NRCS with implementing conservation on working lands through financial assistance programs authorized under the Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018. These working groups and subcommittees will identify priority resource concerns, suggest funding levels, establish funding cycles, suggest ranking pools and categories, establish other ranking priorities, and refine the use of the Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART) for Fiscal Year 2025.

Action Due by: Numerous deadlines, see dates below.

Background: NRCS has overall leadership for conservation programs to deliver financial assistance to eligible producers. NRCS is responsible for establishing State policies, guidelines, and priorities for financial and technical assistance. When establishing State policies, NRCS will consider stakeholder input from various groups to include, but not limited to, the State Technical Committee and Local Working Groups.

Instructions: NRCS has established a schedule of working groups and subcommittees to collect stakeholder input on how to prioritize NRCS financial assistance during Fiscal Year 2025. POCs will have a facilitator and note taker for each meeting. NRCS staff will host these subcommittees and collect input on the following:

- Identify subcommittee priority resource concerns
- Identify subcommittee priority conservation practices
- Identify subcommittee priority geographic areas
- Identify other subcommittee priorities
- Recommend any funding pools or CART categories to address subcommittee priorities
- Recommend funding levels to address subcommittee priorities
- Recommend any prioritization /screening/workload management criteria
- Advise on coordination of technical assistance resources to support subcommittee priorities
- Document any other input from the subcommittee regarding financial assistance delivery, to include how to best provide equity to all customers and minimize barriers to entry

Attendees should review all Fiscal Year 2024 financial assistance guidance prior to attending. Previous year materials include:

- [Fiscal Year 2024 Ranking Pool and Spending Plan](#)
- [ACT NOW policy](#) (scroll down to 530.37 after clicking link)
- [Resource Concerns and Planning Criteria](#) (Vermont eFOTG Section 3)
- [Conservation Practice Standards and Support Documentation](#) (Vermont eFOTG Section 4)

Upon completion of each subcommittee, the information collected should be submitted to the Assistant State Conservationist for Programs by July 1, 2024. The information collected will be used to guide development of Fiscal Year 2025 State Ranking Pool and Spending Plan.

Scheduling: Under current conditions all subcommittees are anticipated to be hosted virtually via Microsoft Teams with all meetings being recorded. Partner and public notification will occur via

GovDelivery along with an announcement on the [VT NRCS State Technical Committee website](#). Although most working groups are partner-oriented, a small number of NRCS employees may participate. Any NRCS employees should obtain supervisory concurrence for participation in any working group.

- **November 29, 2023, and May 1, 2024 (1pm-2:30pm) Soils Subcommittee:** The Soils Subcommittee will host two partner-oriented working groups to provide information, analysis, and recommendations to NRCS on conservation priorities and criteria for natural resources conservation activities that address soil health through financial assistance programs. POC for this workgroup is joe.buford@usda.gov.
- **February 1, 2024, April 11, 2024, and June 6, 2024 (1pm- 2:30pm) Water Quality Subcommittee:** The Water Quality Subcommittee will host three partner-oriented working groups to provide recommendations to NRCS for addressing water quality related resource concerns in the State. POCs for this workgroup are joe.buford@usda.gov and/or bob.thompson@usda.gov.
- **October 13, 2023, November 9, 2023, December 8, 2023, January 12, 2024, February 9, 2024, March 8, 2024, April 12, 2024, May 10, 2024, and June 14, 2024 (9am-11am) Climate Subcommittee:** The Climate Subcommittee will host a series of partner-oriented working group to provide recommendations to NRCS for addressing resource concerns on agricultural operations and non-industrial private forestland relating to climate change. POC for this workgroup is John.VanHoesen@usda.gov.
- **January 23, 2024, March 5, 2024 (1pm-2:30pm) Urban and Small Agriculture Subcommittee:** The Urban Agriculture Subcommittee will host two partner-oriented workgroups to provide recommendations to NRCS on how to best support urban and small farm agriculture in the State through financial assistance programs. POC for this subcommittee is joe.buford@usda.gov.
- **February 6, 2024, and April 9, 2024 (10am-11:30am) Forest and Wildlife Subcommittee:** The Forest and Wildlife Subcommittee will host a partner-oriented working group to provide recommendations to NRCS for addressing forestry and wildlife related resource concerns in the State. POC for this workgroup is toby.alexander@usda.gov.
- **March 25, 2024 (10:00am-11:30am) Wetland Reserve Easement subcommittee:** The State Office will host a focused, partner-oriented workgroup to solicit input on implementing the ACEP-WRE program during Fiscal Year 2025. Information will be collected regarding priority geographic areas, ranking criteria, valuation methodology, and Wetland Restoration Criteria Guidelines. POCs for this workgroup are james.eikenberry@usda.gov and/or julia.grey@usda.gov.
- **April 19, 2024 (Close of Business, 5:00pm) Locally Led Funding Pool:** Locally Led Funding Pool proposals are due to the NRCS State office, see SB_VT_440-24-06.
- **May 3, 2024 (close of business, 5:00pm) District Conservationists** to provide any additional Fiscal Year 2025 priorities from Local Working Groups to the State Office. This information is in addition to the Locally Led Funding Pool process. (See **Continuous Feedback** below for more information)

- **May 9, 2024 (9:30am - 12:00pm) Subject Matter Experts** to convene and share notes collected during Fiscal Year 2024 for improvement of program delivery, with an emphasis on CART and consideration of State required resource concerns to assess for specific practices or ranking pools. POC for this effort is the Assistant State Conservationist for Programs.
- **May 16, 2024 (9:30am-12:00pm) Working Lands (EQIP/CSP) Subcommittee:** The State Office will host a partner-oriented workgroup to solicit input utilizing NRCS financial assistance programs in Fiscal Year 2025. This subcommittee covers a broad array of topics, to include grazing, cropland, specialty crop, farmstead, and irrigation. POC for this subcommittee is the Assistant State Conservationist for Programs.
- **TBD:** Any other subcommittees determined to be needed will be added. POC for this meeting is the Assistant State Conservationist for Programs.
- **July 01, 2024 (Close of Business, 5:00pm):** All working group feedback and recommendations due to the Assistant State Conservationist for Programs.
- **July 17, 2024 (9:30am – 11:00am):** NRCS to present Fiscal Year 2025 programs schedule to the **State Technical Committee**. For information on the State Technical Committee contact angela.hyldburg@usda.gov.

Continuous Feedback: NRCS employees and stakeholders should continuously monitor performance of NRCS financial assistance programs for changes or improvement in the next Fiscal Year cycle. Activities which should be occurring on a regular basis include:

- **Local Working Groups:** District Conservationists should convene local working groups once a year to collect feedback on local priorities. Policy for Local Working Groups is contained in [Part 500, Locally Led Conservation](#). DCs will submit feedback from Local Working Groups to the Assistant State Conservationist for Programs at any time, but no later than June 07, 2024, for consideration in Fiscal Year 2025. For convenience, DCs may use the [Locally Led Conservation Customer Feedback Questionnaire](#), for documenting the needs of the Local Working Group.
- **Submit suggestions** for improvements to NRCS Programs through the [Programs Support Application](#) throughout the year.

Specific questions or volunteers for each workgroup should be submitted to the contact listed above. General questions related to this bulletin can be directed to the Assistant State Conservationist for Programs.

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