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 the State Technical Committee, Tribal Conservation Advisory Councils, Local Work Groups, and other stakeholders, has developed the following ranking criteria to prioritize and select applications that best address the applicable program purposes and priority natural resource concerns in New Hampshire.

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 2024, NRCS will use the 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 for a unit of land.

CART assessments of existing management and conservation efforts are compared against conservation planning criteria thresholds to determine the additional level of conservation efforts needed to address identified natural resource concerns. NRCS uses the results to identify 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's activities and the planner's 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 evaluation tool or a list of inventory-like criteria. Due to the variability in State tools, assessment questions and answers will be broad in nature to allow States to 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 outcomes 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. 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 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 the 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** – The resource condition that does not meet minimum acceptable condition levels as established by resource planning criteria. This implies 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, which 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 that 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 that 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.

New Hampshire 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 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 soils in the parcel to be protected.
2. Percent of cropland, pastureland, grassland, and rangeland 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 according to the most recent USDA Census of Agriculture.

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.
5. Percent population growth in the county as documented by the U.S. Census.
6. Population density (population per square mile) as documented by the most recent U.S. Census.
7. Existence of a farm or ranch succession plan or similar plan established to address agricultural viability for future generations.
8. Proximity of the parcel to other protected land.
9. Proximity of the parcel to other agricultural operations and agricultural infrastructure.
10. Maximizing the protection of contiguous or proximal acres devoted to agricultural use.
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).
12. Land is grassland of special environmental significance that would benefit from protection under a long-term easement.
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.
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.
15. Does the applicant meet the NRCS definition of a veteran farmer or rancher (VFR)?
16. Did the applicant participate in the CRP Transition Incentives Program (TIP), and has the land included in the ACEP-ALE application come out of CRP within the last two years?

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

1. The parcel contains a site of cultural or historical significance that is currently listed or was formally determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places OR currently listed on the NH Department of Historic Resources or is included in the State Historic Preservation Office Inventory.
2. Proximity of parcel to other permanently protected nonagricultural lands (such as forestlands and wetlands)
3. Percent of parcel that lies within any of the 4 Food Desert categories or within 5 miles of any of the 4 Food Desert categories.
4. Conservation practices are actively being applied or maintained to address identified resource concerns.
5. Eligible entity has elected to develop/periodically update an Agricultural Land Easement Plan (ALEP).
6. Within defined source water protection area.
7. Percent of offered area mapped as Highest Ranked Habitat in NH WAP (Tier 1 and/or Tier 2).
8. Applicant NRCS definition of a Beginning Farmer or Rancher, Limited-Resource Farmer or Rancher, or Socially Disadvantaged Farmer or Rancher.

Ranking Pool Report

Ranking Pool: NH FY24 ACEP-ALE General

Program: ACEP

Pool Status: Active

States: NH (Admin)

Template: ACEP-ALE General (Program Agreements)

Template Status: Active

Last Modified By: Tracey Boisvert

Last Modified: 10/19/2023

Land Uses and Modifiers

Land Use	Grazed	Wildlife	Irrigated	Hayed	Drained	Organic	Water Feature	Protected	Urban	Aquaculture
Associated Ag Land	--	--	--	--	N/A	--	--	--	--	--
Crop	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Developed Land	N/A	--	--	N/A	N/A	--	--	--	--	--
Farmstead	--	--	--	N/A	N/A	--	--	--	--	--
Forest	--	--	--	N/A	N/A	--	--	--	--	--
Other Rural Land	--	--	--	N/A	N/A	--	--	--	--	--
Pasture	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Range	--	--	N/A	--	N/A	--	--	--	--	--
Water	N/A	--	N/A	N/A	N/A	--	--	--	--	--

Resource Concern Categories

Categories			
Category	**Min %**	**Default %**	**Max %**
Concentrated erosion	0	5	30
Degraded plant condition	0	5	50
Field pesticide loss	0	5	20
Field sediment, nutrient and pathogen loss	0	5	50
Livestock production limitation	0	5	50
Long term protection of land	40	45	75
Pest pressure	0	5	20
Salt losses to water	0	5	20
Soil quality limitations	0	5	50
Source water depletion	0	5	40
Storage and handling of pollutants	0	5	40

Categories

Category	Min %	Default %	Max %
Wind and water erosion	0	5	40

Concentrated erosion

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Bank erosion from streams, shorelines or water conveyance channels	0	20	100
Classic gully erosion	0	40	100
Ephemeral gully erosion	0	40	100

Degraded plant condition

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Plant productivity and health	0	50	100
Plant structure and composition	0	50	100

Field pesticide loss

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Pesticides transported to groundwater	0	50	100
Pesticides transported to surface water	0	50	100

Field sediment, nutrient and pathogen loss

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Nutrients transported to groundwater	0	20	100
Nutrients transported to surface water	0	20	100
Pathogens and chemicals from manure, biosolids or compost applications transported to groundwater	0	20	100
Pathogens and chemicals from manure, biosolids or compost applications transported to surface water	0	20	100
Sediment transported to surface water	0	20	100

Livestock production limitation

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Feed and forage balance	0	40	100
Inadequate livestock shelter	0	15	100
Inadequate livestock water quantity, quality and distribution	0	45	100

Long term protection of land

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Threat of conversion	100	100	100

Pest pressure

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Plant pest pressure	0	100	100

Salt losses to water

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Salts transported to groundwater	0	50	100
Salts transported to surface water	0	50	100

Soil quality limitations

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Aggregate instability	0	15	100
Compaction	0	15	100
Concentration of salts or other chemicals	0	15	100
Organic matter depletion	0	20	100
Soil organism habitat loss or degradation	0	20	100
Subsidence	0	15	100

Source water depletion

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Groundwater depletion	0	35	100
Inefficient irrigation water use	0	35	100
Surface water depletion	0	30	100

Storage and handling of pollutants

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Nutrients transported to groundwater	0	25	100
Nutrients transported to surface water	0	25	100
Petroleum, heavy metals and other pollutants transported to groundwater	0	25	100
Petroleum, heavy metals and other pollutants transported to surface water	0	25	100

Wind and water erosion

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Sheet and rill erosion	0	50	100
Wind erosion	0	50	100

Practices

Practice Name	Practice Code	Practice Type
Acquisition Process - Buy-Protect-Sell Transfer	LTAPBPST	Easements
Acquisition Process - Environmental Database Records Search	LTAPERS	Easements
Acquisition Process - Environmental Database Records Search Update	LTAPERSU	Easements
Acquisition Process - Ingress Egress	LTAPIE	Easements
Acquisition Process - Appraisal Technical Review First Review	LTAPTR1	Easements
Acquisition Process - Appraisal Technical Review Second Review	LTAPTR2	Easements
Long-Term Protection of Land - Maximum Duration Allowed by State Law	LTPMAS	Easements
Long-Term Protection of Land - Permanent Easement	LTPPE	Easements

Ranking Weights

Factors	Algorithm	Allowable Min	Default	Allowable Max
Vulnerabilities	Default	5	10	20
Planned Practice Effects	Default	5	5	10
Resource Priorities	Default	35	40	50
Program Priorities	Default	40	45	50
Efficiencies	Default	0	0	0

Display Group: NH FY24 ACEP-ALE General (Active)

An asterisk will be displayed to show that it is a conditional section or conditional question.

Survey: Applicability Questions

Section: Applicability		
Question	**Answer Choices**	**Points**
Located in NH?	Yes	--
	Otherwise	--

Survey: Category Questions

Section: Categories		
Question	**Answer Choices**	**Points**
Located in NH?	YES	--
	NO	--

Survey: Program Questions

Section: Program Questions

Question	Answer Choices	Points
Percent of the offered parcel containing prime farmland soils, soils of statewide agricultural importance, or locally important agricultural land.	<10% PUS/L	0
	10-33% Prime, Unique, Statewide/Locally Important	25
	34%-66% PUS/L	45
	67%-100% PUS/L	60
Presence of cropland/hayland, pastureland, grassland, or nonindustrial private forest land in parcel to be protected.	Cropland/Hayland	10
	Pastureland	10
	Grassland	7
	Nonindustrial Private Forestland	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	Less than county average	0
	Equal to or greater than county average	5
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.	Decrease in agricultural land use	10
	Increase in agricultural land use	0
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.	Decrease in percentage of acreage	5
	Increase in percentage of acreage	0
Percent population growth in the county as documented by the U.S. Census	Above NH average	10
	Below NH average	0
Population density (population per square mile) as documented by the most recent U.S. Census.	Above state average	5
	Below state average	0
Existence of a farm or ranch succession plan or similar plan established to address agricultural viability for future generations.	YES	5
	NO	0
Proximity of the parcel to other permanently protected agricultural land.	Directly abuts protected agricultural land	20
	Is within 2.5 miles from protected agricultural land	15
	is between 2.6 and 5 miles from protected agricultural land	10
	Is greater than 5 miles from protected agricultural land	0
Proximity of the parcel to other agricultural operations and agricultural infrastructure.	Directly abuts other ag land OR is within 2 miles of ag infrastructure	10
	Is within 2 miles of other ag land OR between 2.1 and 5 miles from ag infrastructure	5
	is between 2.1 to 5 miles from other ag land OR between 5.1 and 10 miles from ag infrastructure	2
	Is greater than 5 miles from other ag land OR greater than 10 miles from ag infrastructure	0

Section: Program Questions		
Question	**Answer Choices**	**Points**
Does the parcel connect two or more protected parcels devoted to agricultural use?	YES	7
	NO	0
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.	<10%	0
	10-25%	5
	26-50%	15
	51% or more	20
Does the applicant meet the NRCS definition of a veteran farmer or rancher (VFR)?	YES	10
	NO	0
Did the applicant participate in the CRP Transition Incentives Program (TIP), and has the land included in the ACEP-ALE application come out of CRP within the last two years?	YES	1
	NO	0
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).	YES	1
	NO	0
Land is grassland of special environmental significance that would benefit from protection under a long-term easement.	YES	1
	NO	0

Survey: Resource Questions

Section: Resource Questions		
Question	**Answer Choices**	**Points**
The parcel contains a site of cultural or historical significance that is currently listed or was formally determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places OR currently listed on the NH Department of Historic Resources or is included in the State Historic Preservation Office Inventory.	YES	10
	NO	0
Proximity of parcel to other permanently protected nonagricultural lands (such as forestlands and wetlands).	Directly abuts protected nonagricultural land	30
	Is within 2.5 miles	20
	is between 2.6 and 5 miles	10
	is greater than 5 miles	0
Percent of parcel that lies within any of the 4 Food Desert categories OR lies within 5 miles of any of the 4 Food Desert categories.	0-50% of parcel is within a Food Desert category	20
	51-100% of parcel is within a Food Desert category	40
	Parcel lies within 5 miles of any Food Desert category	10
	Parcel is greater than 5 miles from a Food Desert Category	0

Section: Resource Questions

Question	Answer Choices	Points
Conservation practices are actively being applied or maintained to address identified resource concerns. Practices can include, but are not limited to: Riparian Forest Buffers, Soil Health Assessments (soil analysis, plantings to increase soil organic matter, crop rotations to minimize pest management, etc.), Nutrient/Grazing/Integrated Pest Management plans (being ACTIVELY applied), Storm Water Runoff (such as roof/ground gutters), Erosion Control (such as contour farming, no till seeding, cover crops, water bars, vegetated forest trails and log landings, etc.), Agricultural drainage systems have been maintained (grassed waterways, drainage ditches, etc.) allowing land to continue to be actively managed as cropland, hayland, or pastureland.	Riparian Forest Buffers	10
	Soil Health Assessments	10
	Nutrient/Grazing/Integrated Pest Management plans	10
	Storm Water Runoff	10
	Erosion Control	10
	Maintaining Agricultural drainage systems	10
	Other (including wildlife related practices)	10
	None	0
The eligible entity has elected to develop and periodically update an Agricultural Land Easement Plan (ALEP). NOTE: If the eligible entity agrees to develop an ALEP (including any component plans, except HEL plans) as a condition of selection and funding, the eligible entity is responsible for the development and maintenance of such plans.	YES	15
	NO	0
The project is located within a defined source water protection area.	In SWPA	20
	Otherwise	0
Majority of the offered area is mapped as the Highest Ranked Habitat in the NH Wildlife Action Plan (Greater than 50% Tier 1 Highest Ranked Habitat in NH WAP and/or Tier 2 Highest Ranked Habitat in Biological Region).	YES	20
	NO	0
Does the applicant meet the NRCS definition (see page 6 of form NRCS-CPA-41A) of a Beginning Farmer or Rancher, Limited-Resource Farmer or Rancher, or Socially Disadvantaged Farmer or Rancher?	YES	15
	NO	0