

Exhibit A – Program Ranking Criteria for NRCS Publication

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 Nevada.

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.

Nevada 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 |

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| | 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 – Wetland Reserve Easement (ACEP-WRE)

These State-developed ranking questions must be included in the program priority or resource priority sections as identified below.

(i) The following ranking criteria must be addressed in State-developed ranking questions included in the program priorities section of the ranking pool display group for every ACEP-WRE ranking pool:

- Cost effectiveness of enrolling the land to maximize the environmental benefits per dollar expended, applications that have a lower cost per environmental benefit ratio will receive higher rankings.
- Whether the landowner or another person or entity is offering to contribute financially to the cost of the easement or other interest in the land to leverage Federal funds.
- Extent to which ACEP-WRE purposes would be achieved on the offered land.
- The productivity of the offered land.
- The on-farm and off-farm environmental threats if the land is used for the production of agricultural commodities.

(ii) The following ranking criteria must be addressed in State-developed ranking questions included in the resource priorities section of the ranking pool display group for every ACEP-WRE ranking pool:

- The conservation and environmental benefits of obtaining an easement or other interest in the land, including but not limited to—
 - Habitat that will be restored for the benefit of migratory birds and wetland-dependent wildlife, including diversity of wildlife that will be benefitted or life-cycle needs that will be addressed;
 - Extent and use of habitat that will be restored for threatened, endangered, or other at-risk species or number of different at-risk species benefitted;
 - Protection or restoration of native vegetative communities;
 - Habitat diversity and complexity to be restored;
 - Proximity and connectivity to other protected habitats;
 - Extent of beneficial adjacent land uses;
 - Extent of wetland losses within a geographic area, including wetlands generally or specific wetland types;
 - Capacity of the wetland to improve water quality;
 - Water quantity benefits through increased water storage in the soil profile or through groundwater recharge
- Attenuation of floodwater flows;
 - Proximity to impaired water bodies;
 - Carbon sequestration;
 - Improving climate change resiliency.
- Hydrology restoration potential, which must comprise at least 50 percent of the points for conservation benefits, should take into consideration:
 - The extent to which the original hydrology can be restored;
 - The extent to which the potential hydrology restoration or enhancement practices will successfully provide hydrologic conditions that are suitable for the needs of the native wetland-dependent wildlife species that occurred in the area and are appropriate to support the wetland functions and values being restored or enhanced on the site;
 - Physical site characteristics that affect hydrology restoration potential, including but not limited to—
 - o Soil properties, such as soil texture, soil structure, and soil drainage classes;
 - o Landscape features, such as geomorphic position, slope, and water table depths;
 - o Flooding characteristics, including frequency, timing, duration, depth, and sources;
 - o The source of the hydrology, the degree and type of hydrologic manipulation, existing connectivity and barriers to connectivity with hydrology sources;
 - o As applicable, the reliability and availability of the water delivered through water rights, and the degree of reliance on such water rights to successfully restore hydrology.
- (iii) States may also include ranking questions that prioritize, in the program priorities section:
 - Certain land types or geographic regions of the State where restoration of wetlands may better achieve State and regional goals and objectives.
 - Land that is currently enrolled in CRP in a contract that is set to expire within 1 year from the date of application or land under a CRP contract that is in transition to a covered farmer or rancher pursuant to 16 U.S.C. 3835(f) and such land is farmed wetland and adjoining land that has the highest wetland functions and values and is likely to return to production after the land leaves CRP