

Ranking Criteria for NRCS Programs – Fiscal Year 2025

Application Overview

Any applicant may apply for participation in ACEP or RCPP. The NRCS State Conservationist, 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. NRCS uses 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 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.

2025 Resource and Program Priorities

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

The following 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. 10 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) in the county 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 Wisconsin ACEP-ALE 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

Inflation Reduction Act Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Agricultural Land Easement (IRA-ACEP-ALE)

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

1. Percent of prime, unique, and important soils in the proposed easement area to be protected? 36 points.
2. Percent of cropland, pastureland, grassland, and rangeland in the proposed easement area to be protected. 25 points.
3. Ratio of the total acres of land in the proposed easement area to be protected to average farm size in the county according to the most recent USDA Census of Agriculture (USDA - NASS - Census of Agriculture) 12 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 (USDA - NASS - Census of Agriculture). 16 points.
5. 5. Percent of population growth in the county as documented by the most recent United States Census. 16 points.
6. Population density (population per square mile) as documented by the most recent United States Census. 18 points.
7. Existence of a farm or ranch succession plan or similar plan established to address farm viability for future generations. 5 points.
8. Proximity of the proposed easement area to other protected land, such as land owned in fee title by the United States or an Indian Tribe, State or local government, or by a nongovernmental organization whose purpose is to protect agricultural use and related conservation values; or land that is already subject to an easement or deed restriction that limits the conversion of the land to nonagricultural use or protects grazing uses and related conservation values; or lands adjacent to easements held by United States. 18 points.
9. Proximity of the proposed easement area to other agricultural operations and agricultural infrastructure. 11 points.
10. Proposed easement area ability to maximize the protection of contiguous or proximal acres devoted to agricultural use. 7 points.
11. Is the proposed easement area currently enrolled in CRP in a contract that is set to expire within a year, AND is the applicant a covered producer participating in the CRP Transition Incentives Program (CRP-TIP) and NRCS is evaluating the assessment during the two-year period covered by the CRP-1R? 2 points.
12. The proposed easement area is a grassland of special environmental significance that will benefit from the protection under the long-term easement. 7 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 proposed easement area is located

between the last two USDA Censuses of Agriculture (USDA - NASS - Census of Agriculture).
12 points.

14. Eligible entity contributes at least 10% percent of the fair market value of the agricultural land easement from its own cash resources for payment of easement compensation to the landowner and comes from sources other than the landowner. 9 points.
15. Does the landowner have water rights secured for lands that are prime if irrigated only? 6 points.
16. The proposed easement is in an area with a high threat of conversion. 50 points.
17. Landowner of proposed easement area is a historically underserved participant by NRCS defined criteria and self-certified on the NRCS-CPA-41A parcel application as a: limited resource farmer or rancher, socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher, or veteran farmer or rancher. 25 points

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

1. Offered land contains habitat for rare and declining native species. Choose the highest scoring category for the rarest species documented on site. 8 points.
2. National crop productivity index from Web Soil Survey. 15 points.
3. Lead eligible entity has timely submitted monitoring reports on 100% of the NRCS-supported easements under its monitoring responsibility in the last 3 years. 5 points.
4. Is the producer/landowner implementing an agricultural or forestry Climate Smart Practice on the offered land? 10 points.

These criteria apply only to grasslands under threat of conversion.

1. Is the majority of the land (more than 50%) unbroken sod, planted native grassland, or non-native grassland? 30 points.
2. Based on the soil classification in Web Soil Survey, what is the threat of grassland conversion to cropland? 10 points.
3. Percentage of proposed easement area that is grassland or pastureland currently devoted to grazing uses. 20 points.
4. Is the proposed easement area directly adjacent (touching along a shared boundary) to an existing protected grassland area? 20 points.

These criteria apply only to agricultural land under threat of conversion.

1. Proposed easement boundary is located within 1 mile of an Urban Area or intersects a metropolitan statistical area or intersects a micropolitan statistical area. 50 points.
2. Proposed easement area proximity to a major transportation corridor or warehousing complex. 30 points.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Wetland Reserve Easement (ACEP-WRE)

1. Restoration costs per acre. 26 points.
2. How many dollars per acre will NRCS pay for the offered land? 14 points.
3. Does the restoration plan include a berm, pipe or other built feature? 24 points.
4. Easement length. 34 points.
5. Is the offered land adjacent to protected wildlife habitat? 16 points.

6. Has NRCS studied the title commitment and environmental record report and determined that they don't include records that make the land ineligible? 24 points.
7. Acreage of eligible land types in offered area. 34 points.
8. Acres of hydrologic restoration in plan. 28 points.
9. Completeness of hydrologic restoration. 70 points.
10. Will at least 5% of the easement (or at least 2 acres of easements less than 40 acres) hold water at least 2 feet deep? 20 points.
11. Does the offered land include a healthy fen, prairie remnant, glade or other native community in dire conservation need? 8 points.
12. Restoration practices will focus on recovery of Wisconsin special concern species or eagles. 10 points. 16 points.
13. protection and restoration activities specifically focus on the recovery of Wisconsin threatened or endangered species.
14. Restoration activities specifically focus on the recovery of one or more federally threatened, endangered or candidate species. 11 points
15. Wisconsin waterfowl habitat conservation strategy priority watersheds. 18 points.
16. Is the offered land within a mile of a wetland larger than 10 acres? 17 points.
17. acreage of wetlands within half a mile. 16 points.
18. majority of offered land is in a watershed of a water body that WDNR designated impaired by excessive Phosphorus or sediment. 8 points.
19. more than 10 acres of active cropland outside of the restoration area drain directly into the restoration site. 8 points.

Inflation Reduction Act Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Wetland Reserve Easement (IRA-ACEP-WRE)

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

Describe the self-certification of the applicants from the NRCS-CPA-1200. 25 points.

These ranking criteria apply only to the applications on highly organic soils or high carbon mineral soils.

1. What percentage of the proposed easement area intersects with Priority Area 1 (red on the map)? 40 points.
2. What percentage of the proposed easement area intersects with Priority Area 2 (yellow on the map)? 15 points.
3. What percentage of the proposed easement area intersects with either Priority Area 1 and/or Priority Area 2? 5 points.
4. What percentage of the proposed easement area will be restored to native forest as a planned practice under the Wetland Reserve Plan of Operations and/or is currently native forested habitat that will be maintained as native forest habitat? 10 points.

These ranking criteria apply only to the applications where NRCS will restore and manage native forest.

1. What percentage of the proposed easement area will be restored to native forest as a planned practice under the Wetland Reserve Plan of Operations? 40 points.
2. What percentage of the proposed easement area is currently forested habitat that will be maintained as forested habitat? 40 points.
3. Does the proposed easement area intersect with the highly organic soils priority area 1 and/or priority area 2 by 25% or more? 10 points.

These ranking criteria apply only to the applications where native forest is growing and will be maintained.

1. The majority of the existing forest habitat is bottomland forest / forested wetland, upland forest, or CRP planted to trees. 40 points.
2. What percentage of the proposed easement area will be restored to native forest? 20 points
3. What percentage of the proposed easement area is currently forested habitat that will be maintained as forested habitat? 40 points.
4. Does the proposed easement area intersect with the highly organic soils priority area 1 and/or priority area 2 by 25% or more? 10 points.

These ranking criteria apply only to restorable cranberry bogs

1. The proposed easement is in an area with a threat of conversion according to American Farmland Trusts index. 50 points.
2. Does the proposed easement area intersect with the highly organic soils priority area 1 and/or priority area 2 by 25% or more? 20 points.

These ranking criteria apply only to ephemeral wetlands surrounded by grass.

1. The proposed easement is in an area with a threat of conversion according to American Farmland Trust's index. 30 points.
2. Select the number of wetlands/potholes/playas/vernal pools to be protected and restored within the proposed easement area. 20 points.
3. Does the proposed easement area intersect with the highly organic soils priority area 1 and/or priority area 2 by 25% or more? 20 points.

The following Wisconsin ranking criteria are included in the ranking pools for IRA-ACEP-WRE

1. Does the proposed easement area intersect one of the following national priority areas: Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative; Mississippi River Basin Initiative (MRBI) Focus Area Watersheds; National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) Watershed Implementation Priority Areas; Source Water Protection High Priority Areas. 5 points.
2. What is the easement duration? 30 points.
3. Preliminary restoration cost estimate including construction and Vegetation. Subtract contributions toward restoration from non-NRCS entity. 18 points.
4. Will the landowner or other conservation partner contribute towards the cost of the easement and/or restoration? 18 points.
5. a. Percentage of the proposed easement area under annual row crop production that will be restored to native vegetation? (Applies to all categories except maintain native forest). 30 points.
b. Percentage of the proposed easement area under annual row crop production or pasture that will be restored to native vegetation as a planned practice under the Wetland Reserve Plan of Operations? (Applies only to maintain native forest category). 5 points.
c. What is the majority of the existing forested habitat? (Applies only to maintain native forest category) 25 points.
6. What is the closest restorable wetland to adjacent land ratio for the proposed easement area? 10 points.
7. Are current land management practices on the offered land creating on-site or off-site negative impacts (e.g. sedimentation/top-soil loss, water quality impacts, existing easements and/or encumbrances that will restrict or inhibit easement restoration) that could be mitigated by easement acquisition and restoration to native habitat? 10 points.
8. Is the proposed easement area a single contiguous parcel without inholdings or recognized rights-

- of-way that may affect the proposed restoration and future easement stewardship? 15 points.
9. Proximity of other lands permanently protected for the purpose of wildlife and habitat conservation in relation to the proposed easement area. 15 points.
 10. How will the majority of *adjacent lands* included in the proposed easement area be restored? 20 points.
 11. . Habitat restoration will address elements of the recovery plan of how many State- or Federally Threatened or Endangered, Special Concern Species or Species of Concern? 10 points.
 12. What percent of drained acreage is hydrologically restorable? 25 points.
 13. Where wetland restoration is planned, will the restoration result in significant land-use change (choose the most appropriate). Will the wetland restoration result in significant land-use change (choose the most appropriate)? 25 points.
 14. . How many different Cowardin types of wetlands will exist after restoration? [open water, emergent, shrub, swamp] 10 points.
 15. Is the proposed easement area included in States 303d list for impaired waters? 10 points.
 16. Will the restored or enhanced wetlands of the proposed easement area provide surface water filtering to remove sediments and associated pollutants from runoff of adjacent non-easement land in agricultural production? 5 points.
 17. According to web soil survey, what percentage of the restorable land will provide flood water attenuation? 10 points.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program Entity-held easements

1854 Milwaukee River Watershed Conservation Partnership

1. Application addresses one or more resource concerns. 40 points.
2. Landowner will donate a portion of the appraised value of the easement. 40 points.
3. Easement will benefit a historically underserved producer. 20 points
4. Someone designed this project to increase land access for historically underserved producers. 20 points.
5. What portion of the land is hydric soil? 100 points.
6. Located within SEWRPC priority environmental corridor. 100 points.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program Entity-held easements

2329 Wisconsin Farmland Protection Partnership

1. Application addresses one or more resource concerns. 40 points
2. Easement will benefit a historically underserved producer. 40 points
3. Eligible entity is entering buy-protect-sell agreement to provide farmland to historically underserved producer. 40 points.
4. Offered land lies within a DATCP-designated agricultural enterprise area. 40 points.
5. Producer uses crop rotation, cover crop, nutrient management, prescribed grazing, and/or no-till on the offered land. 30 points.
6. Producer plans to use crop rotation, cover crop, nutrient management, prescribed grazing, and/or no-till on the offered land. 30 points.