



United States Department of Agriculture



Conservation Innovation Grants

New Grantee Guide

October 2024 Edition



Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

nrcs.usda.gov/

Congratulations on your Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) Classic or On-Farm Conservation Innovation Trials (On-Farm Trials) award! Now that your organization has been selected for a CIG award, the hard part begins—delivering on all the wonderful things you proposed to do in your application! Rest assured, we at the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) are here to help.

CIG Classic and On-Farm Trials are co-administered by NRCS CIG programs staff and USDA Farm Production and Conservation Business Center (FPAC-BC) grants and agreements staff. Through the life of your project, you will interact with both groups to successfully carry out your project, and to successfully be paid for doing so. Federal grant administration can be daunting (especially for the uninitiated), so we developed this guide to help you navigate your responsibilities. The [CIG website](#) (in particular the page [established for grantees](#)) is a good source for program updates and the latest versions of forms and templates discussed in this guide. If you ever have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to us at nrcscig@usda.gov.

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

SIGNING YOUR AGREEMENT AND STARTING CIG PROJECTS.....	3
OFFICIAL GRANT PROJECT CONTACTS	4
REQUESTS FOR ADVANCES AND REIMBURSEMENTS	5
DOCUMENTATION OF GRANT AND MATCHING FUND EXPENDITURES.....	6
REPORTING REQUIREMENTS.....	6
SOIL HEALTH DEMO TRIALS EVALUATIONS	8
AGREEMENT MODIFICATIONS AND PRIOR APPROVALS	9
ENVIRONMENTAL COMPLIANCE AND CULTURAL RESOURCES	10
ON-FARM TRIALS ONLY: DETERMINING PARTICIPATING PRODUCER ELIGIBILITY	11
PROJECT COMMUNICATIONS.....	11
TRAVEL COSTS	12
PROGRAM CONTACTS	13

[Appendices](#)

The latest versions of the appendices listed below are found on the [CIG webpage for grantees](#) under “CIG Grantee Templates and Forms”.

- Appendix A. Sample SF270
- Appendix B. Claim Submission Job Aid
- Appendix C. SF270 Supporting Documentation Explanation
- Appendix D. SF425 Sample and Instructions
- Appendix E. Semi-Annual Progress Report Template
- Appendix F. Final Report Template
- Appendix G. Report Submission Job Aid

Signing your Agreement and Starting CIG Projects

After NRCS announces the slate of CIG awardees, a Grants Management Specialist (GMS) will contact each awardee and send along the grant award package. At a minimum, your award package will include an **NRCS-ADS-093 (Notice of Grant and Agreement Award)** form, **Statement of Work** (taken from the project proposal), and a link to the [General Terms and Conditions](#).

Please review the award package for accuracy. Contact the Grants Management Specialist (GMS) immediately if you have questions or find any errors in your package. Once satisfied with the documents, please sign and send the NRCS-ADS-093 form back to the GMS. The GMS will then work internally at NRCS to finalize the package, execute the agreement and send you a copy signed by USDA.

IMPORTANT NOTE—CIG awards are not fully executed until NRCS leadership signs the NRCS-ADS-093 and sends the fully signed document back to the awardee. **Do not begin work until you receive a fully executed agreement.** NRCS is unable to reimburse for project charges accrued before the date on the fully executed agreement. We encourage awardees to review the award package and send the signed ADS-093 back to the GMS as quickly as possible to avoid any delays in starting your project.

If it appears the agency will be delayed in completing the CIG grant agreements, NRCS may offer grantees the option of requesting a pre-award letter authorizing project expenditures for a given period of time prior to completion of the grant agreement.

Again—without a fully executed grant agreement, do not begin work on your project. When in doubt, please ask!

Official Grant Project Contacts

NRCS Technical Contact

NRCS assigns a technical contact to each CIG project. NRCS makes assignments based on technical specialty and geographic proximity to the project.

The following are the roles and responsibilities of NRCS technical contacts:

- Technical oversight
 - Review and approval of semi-annual progress reports.
 - Approval for any technical changes to projects.
 - Approval of any changes to project deliverables or objectives.
- Serving as the technical liaison to NRCS. Additional NRCS technical staff may be called on to engage in a CIG project. The technical contact serves to connect project staff with other NRCS staff.
- Project evaluation-at the conclusion of a project, technical contacts complete a project evaluation and make recommendations for any future actions.

Technical contacts are encouraged to make at least one site visit to each of their assigned projects during the project's life. Technical contacts will coordinate site visits with grantees.

NRCS Program Contact

The agreement lists an NRCS Program Contact. This is a NRCS CIG staff member that ensures all the administrative and technical procedures are followed. In addition, they review reports, invoices, and amendments for program compliance. Any questions you may have on process or agreement requirements can be directed to this person. While they are listed with their email address on the agreement, you can also reach them at nrcscig@usda.gov.

CIG Financial Staff

The CIG Team has a support staff who are the first level of review for all project administration. This team is responsible to review all claims, amendments, prior approvals, and reports. They are reachable through the CIG Inbox (nrcscig@usda.gov) and support the CIG program managers with daily operations.

FPAC-BC Administrative Contact

The USDA Farm Production and Conservation Business Center (FPAC-BC) Grants and Agreements (GAD) staff assigns an administrative point of contact to monitor your project for administrative compliance. GAD staff are considered the second level of review of all submitted materials (claims, amendments, prior approvals and reports.) The assigned Grants Management Specialist is listed on the NRCS-ADS-093 form in block 8 as the FPAC- BC administrative contact.

In general, GAD is not a recommended first point of contact for the awardee as they are not always knowledgeable about specific program requirements. We always recommend reaching out to the CIG Inbox if you have a question (nrcscig@usda.gov) on any process or need assistance with an administrative task.

Requests for Advances and Reimbursements

Payment requests are submitted by grantees each quarter on a reimbursable basis. In cases of hardship, grantees may request monthly reimbursements, but such a change must be requested by the grantee and approved by CIG program staff. Advances also may be requested in cases of hardship, at the request of the grantee and approval of program staff. Advances may only be requested for an amount that can be spent within the next 30-90 days from when the advance is processed. All advances must be liquidated (e.g., documentation showing expenditures) immediately after the end of the 30-day period. If a grantee is provided an advance, NRCS will not process additional project payments until the advance is liquidated.

Reimbursement requests are submitted using the SF270 form (Appendix A) through ezFedGrants, an online USDA grants and agreements management system. (Note that within ezFedGrants, this form appears slightly different, but has the same line items.) Each request must be accompanied by documentation supporting the amount requested (see Appendix C for further information on supporting documentation). All CIG project funds must be expended within 120 days after the award expiration date. Refer to the NRCS General Terms and Conditions, Part V (attached to your grant agreement) for additional information regarding payments.

If you are having issues submitting an invoice in ezFedGrants, contact the ezFedGrants help desk: ezFedGrants-cfo@usda.gov.

Here is a job aid link that will help when submitting claims: [ezFedGrants Reimbursement Claim Submission Job Aid \(usda.gov\)](#) (Appendix B)

If you have questions on how to fill in an SF270 claim form, email the CIG inbox: nrcscig@usda.gov

NRCS generally completes payment requests within 14 days of receipt, but 30 days is the allowable process time. GAD staff process all requests before sending them to CIG program staff for certification and payment approval. Once a payment is approved, the funds may take an additional 3-4 business days to reach your bank account.

Documentation of Grant and Matching Fund Expenditures

CIG Classic and On-Farm Trials grantees must maintain detailed, auditable documentation of all federal funding and matching fund expenditures throughout the life of the grant, and for three years following the grant agreement's end date. This documentation must be available whenever requested by USDA. Annually, 5% of awards are audited, and this will include a review to ensure matching funds are being properly expended and recorded.

Reporting Requirements

Grantees are responsible for submitting regular progress and financial reports, as outlined in the [general terms and conditions](#) attached to your grant agreement. When reporting is not submitted on time, NRCS may require additional oversight, such as more detailed financial reports, additional project monitoring, or the withholding of payments until delinquent reports are submitted. An overview of grantee reporting requirements is below.

Project Progress Reports

Following execution of the grant agreement, grantees are required to submit progress reports every six months using the CIG progress report template (Appendix E). These semi-annual reports record progress toward completing deliverables, challenges or delays, goals (met and unmet), and any other pertinent information (analysis, explanation of cost overruns). Progress reports should also include any preliminary results related to practice standard revisions, completed or promising products, press releases for interim successes, and news articles highlighting the project. In addition, semi-annual reports must include a list of EQIP-eligible producers (names only) involved in the project.

Progress reports have to reflect the work that is being completed with the project funding clearly enough so the federal employee doing the oversight can understand that the team is meeting the described objectives, milestones and working towards the required deliverables. If reports do not reflect the work, funding can be frozen until documentation is provided that does show how the funding is being spent.

Progress reports are submitted through ezFedGrants every six months, with the first report due seven months after the project start date. ezFedGrants notifies grantees when a report is due.

Appendix E contains the semi-annual progress report template for use by grantees.

The ezFedGrants site contains job aids, including the following one for submitting reports: [Submit Financial or Performance Reports in ezFedGrants Job Aid \(usda.gov\) \(Appendix G\)](#)

Financial Reports

Grantees must submit to ezFedGrants an annual Federal Financial Report (SF425). Instructions for completing a SF425 are found in Appendix D. The due date for SF425 reports is 30 days after the anniversary of your start date.

Final Reporting

The final report uses a different template (Appendix F) from the progress report because the final report is publicly posted and the only publicly posted document from the project. The final programmatic report submitted by CIG grantees should encompass the entire project, including successes, challenges, and next steps. As NRCS intends to post all final reports on its website, final reports should be concise and written in plain language. In addition, final reports must not include any Personal Identifiable Information (PII--such as names of agricultural producers, addresses, financial information, propriety business information, etc.).

Following are some guidelines grantees should consider when developing final reports:

- The report should detail the project results and respond to all deliverables of the agreement. Public-friendly graphics and explanatory graphs/infographics are encouraged.
- Final reports should be written in plain language and include background/rationale for the project, a brief summary of methods, results, challenges, a summary of the project's impact on conservation, a list of project outputs, and potential next steps. Final reports must address all objectives and deliverables.

NRCS may request additional detailed information if when specific questions are not covered in detail.

All final reports are reviewed by the project technical contact and other appropriate NRCS technical experts. Incomplete or insufficient final reports will be returned to the grantee for additional information. Given the final technical report is the only part of the project shared with the public, it is important the report is complete and uses plain language so anyone can understand it.

Many final reports can be viewed on the CIG's [Project Page](#).

Both CIG Classic and On-Farm Trials must complete final reports following the above format. For On- Farm Trials projects, the evaluations described below must be synthesized and summarized into the final report format.

Soil Health Demo Trials Evaluations

Projects funded under the Soil Health Demo Trial (SHD) priority must meet additional evaluation requirements. Similar to the broader On-Farm Trials program, SHD projects must include a robust evaluation of the environmental, financial and social (to the extent possible) effects of implementing soil health management systems and practices.

Unique to SHD is the necessity of using common evaluation protocols and methods for assessing soil carbon changes and other soil health outcomes. Eligible entities must—

- Use NRCS standards in field and laboratory methods for soil carbon and other soil health indicator measurements. This does not preclude inclusion of additional measurements, beyond the identified NRCS data collection requirements. Awardees will collaborate with NRCS soil health experts to ensure consistency in field and laboratory methods.
- Work with NRCS Soil and Plant Science Division (SPSD) staff to verify the soil series on which the trial sites(s) is located.
- Collect current and historic management information from participating producers (tillage, crop rotation, nutrient and other input applications).
- Collect environmental and financial outcome data to include profitability (cost of production, current yield and historic yield where available) and other data as available such as effects of systems on infiltration rates, ground water recharge, plant available water, runoff, water quality, flooding, pest resilience, weather resilience, air quality, etc.).
- Develop summary information on social outcomes and profiles of participating producers with information about why management changes were adopted, and challenges and benefits of the changes.
- Provide details on how the information will be shared with producer communities, such as on-farm field days and other activities, to facilitate broader adoption.
- Develop production and climate specific Soil Health Management Systems (SHMS) templates, that will be regionally relevant to future adopting producers, from On-Farm Trials that successfully implement a SHMS, especially in cases where a novel approach is used to address specific resource concerns or challenging conditions.

The standard SHD dataset requirements and methods are available on the [CIG website](#). Entities receiving an On-Farm Trials SHD award are required to submit their full data set through a data system that will be provided by NRCS.

In addition, eligible entities are required to provide their evaluation to NRCS as part of a SHD study to be submitted to Congress, as required by the SHD statute. It is incumbent upon SHD partners to inform participating producers that geospatial, soil, conservation practice, and other information will be provided to NRCS and maintained in a confidential Federal database. None of this database information will be shared with the public (e.g., through public affairs or other communications materials) without a producer's consent. Names of participating

producers and any incentive payments received are subject to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests.

Agreement Modifications and Prior Approvals

Grantees sometimes find it necessary to request modifications to their grant agreement. A formal modification requires execution of an agreement amendment that is signed again by the NRCS Chief's office. Informal changes or prior approvals also have a process, but they are much faster. Examples of modifications include:

- No-Cost Extensions – (Form – GADSUM3) – Formal Agreement Modification required - Grantees may request a no-cost extension to allow additional time beyond the established expiration date. Extensions may be provided to ensure completion of the approved project deliverables. No additional funding is added to the award to allow for completing the project during the extension. The fact that funds remain at the expiration of the grant is not in itself sufficient justification for a no-cost extension. Twelve months is the maximum length of an extension. With acceptable justification, a second no-cost extension can be granted. **Be aware: Extensions cannot be granted if requested after the agreement termination date.**
- Budget Changes – (Form – GADSUM2) In general, CIG grantees are allowed a certain degree of latitude to re-budget within and between major budget categories (found on the SF424A budget form). Budget changes may be made at the recipient's discretion as it impacts less than 10% of the total project funding (NRCS + matching funds). For budget changes less than 10%, please email the technical contact and the NRCS_CIG@usda.gov email box for notification of the change. In addition, budget changes should be noted in semi-annual progress reports.

Budget changes 10% or greater between budget categories requires a prior approval and the GADSUM2 form should be completed along with a revised budget narrative.

Change can happen over time to a budget, so the project team should track the % change so they know when they reach 10% and need to seek prior approval.

Example: a grantee with a \$450,000 project (\$225k federal funding and \$225k in matching funds) wants to move \$15,000 from the personnel budget category to supplies. This change can be made without a prior approval and can be enacted after the grantee emails its technical contact and the NRCS CIG inbox. The change should also be documented in the next progress report. If this project team moves an additional \$30,000 or more, at that point they will need to submit a request for a budget amendment since they have cumulatively reached 10% of the project funding.

Please be aware changes to the amount of match are not allowed below the level stated as required in the NFO. Depending on the CIG competition, this could be 50% 33%, or 0% depending on the award type.

- Change in Scope of Work (Goals, Objectives, and Deliverables) – (Form – GADSUM2) Please coordinate any changes in project scope of work or deliverables with the NRCS technical contact assigned to the project. Major changes must be enacted through an agreement amendment.
- Change in Project Director/Key Personnel – (Form – GADSUM7) Change in key personnel requires notification. For permanent changes to project personnel that are on the agreement, or for an extended absence (3 straight months or 25% reduction in project time) the required form should be completed and submitted for approval. When a project director changes, a new curriculum vitae or resume is required with the submission so we can confirm the individual's qualifications.

All modification requests must be submitted no less than 30 days before the grantee would like to see the modification take effect. All modifications must include the appropriate form and any relevant supporting documentation. Forms can be found on the [CIG grantees' page](#). Submit forms to nrcscig@usda.gov.

Environmental Compliance and Cultural Resources

Every NRCS funded conservation project is subject to the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), and Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act. As part of NRCS's effort to comply with NEPA, NHPA, and Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, each CIG project must undergo an Environmental Evaluation (EE) before commencing. CIG EEs are completed by NRCS state office staff in the relevant project states. After the grant agreement (NRCS signed AD-093) is fully executed but BEFORE implementation begins, the NRCS state office(s) will contact the grantee to confirm the project site(s). State office staff will conduct an EE and prepare the NRCS-CPA-52, EE Worksheet, if required. The state office staff may, in rare cases, request that the grantee prepare an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement at the grantee's expense. The state office will inform the grantee when compliance efforts are complete and project work may begin.

If you are NOT contacted by the relevant state office(s) and would like to begin your project, please send an email to nrcscig@usda.gov.

Cultural Resources Procedures

All CIG Classic and On-Farm Trials projects must comply with the National Historic Preservation Act. The relevant NRCS state office(s) will, after the grant agreement is fully executed and BEFORE implementation begins, determine if any proposed activities have the potential to

cause effects on cultural resources, conduct field reviews or inspections as needed, and determine project effects. For any questions about cultural resources procedures, please email nrcscig@usda.gov.

On-Farm Trials only: Determining Participating Producer Eligibility

All producers receiving funding through an On-Farm Trials project must be registered in the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) system, be an EQIP producer who NRCS determines is engaged in agricultural production or forestry management on the agricultural operation, be in compliance with the highly erodible land and wetland conservation provisions, have control of the land involved for the term of the proposed contract period, and must meet the adjusted gross income (AGI) requirements. On-Farm Trials grantees must ensure this is the case for all participating producers prior to initiating technical assistance or conservation implementation with those producers. If the participating producer is not in the FSA system, that producer is required to visit the local USDA office and work with FSA to establish farm records. On-Farm Trials awardees will be directed to work with NRCS points of contact in the relevant state(s) to help NRCS make EQIP producer eligibility determinations.

If you are NOT contacted by the relevant state office(s) with instructions for coordinating producer eligibility, please send an email to nrcscig@usda.gov.

Project Communications

Taking advantage of opportunities to communicate about your project is a critical part of being a CIG grantee for two main reasons: 1) to spread the word about CIG project accomplishments so more people are aware of the innovation and 2) connecting accomplishments to the correct funding source so more people understand what the CIG program does.

The CIG webpages house basic information about your project. CIG program staff, working with USDA external affairs staff, may contact grantees to develop blog postings, feature stories, news releases, social media posts, and more communications products to highlight project successes.

CIG Classic and On-Farm Trials grantees should make every effort to coordinate with the CIG staff and USDA external affairs staff on announcements and any press related to the USDA grants. NRCS can provide official logos and photos, program descriptions and other relevant agency information. NRCS and CIG grantees can collaboratively promote CIG project milestones to leverage communication resources and reach a wider and more diverse audience.

Grantees must acknowledge USDA on any information dissemination products produced with the federal funding. In addition, projects should give credit specifically to the Conservation Innovation Grants program when possible. This includes all public presentations and media, including conference/meeting posters, presentations, papers, news releases or other public information about your project. Use one of the following statement below:

“This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, under agreement number [recipient should enter the applicable award number here].”

“This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resource Conservation Service’s Conservation Innovation Grants program, under agreement number [recipient should enter the applicable award number here].”

For publication in a scientific research journal, at the very least credit should be given to USDA and the award number should appear.

In addition, all public presentations and media pieces produced by the project should include the following statement:

“Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In addition, any reference to specific brands or types of products or services does not constitute or imply an endorsement by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for those products or services.”

Use the official USDA-NRCS logo for communications products. It can be found here:

<https://www.usda.gov/style-guide/logo>

Please submit to technical contacts and CIG program staff any news releases, videos, photos and other media about CIG Classic and On-Farm Trials projects through the NRCSIG@usda.gov email box. Put in the subject line “Communication” followed by your award number.

Travel Costs

The CIG Classic and On-Farm Trials funding announcements require each proposal to include \$3,000 for travel “designated by NRCS.” These funds are to be used to travel to conferences or meetings where grantees can share project progress or results with a wide audience. Examples include the annual Soil and Water Conservation Society meeting (where NRCS often has a CIG Showcase event) and the Conservation Finance Roundtable or other specific events selected for awardee attendance.

Grantees should work with their NRCS technical contacts to identify and discuss travel opportunities. Each awardee is required to participate in at least one event. Event participation should be reported on in progress reports.

Program Contacts

CIG Inbox:

nrcsig@usda.gov

ezFedGrants help desk: ezFedGrants-cfo@usda.gov

CIG website:

[Conservation Innovation Grants | Natural Resources Conservation Service \(usda.gov\)](https://www.usda.gov/conservation-innovation-grants)



USDA is an equal opportunity



provider, employer, and lender.

