

# Ranking Criteria for NRCS Programs- Fiscal Year 2025

## 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 Ohio.

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 2025, 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.

Ohio 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.

## **2025 Resource and Program Priorities**

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

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

1. Percent of prime, unique, and important soils in the proposed easement area to be protected?
2. Percent of cropland, pastureland, grassland, and rangeland in the proposed easement area to be protected.
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).
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).
5. Percent of population growth in the county as documented by the most recent United States Census.
6. Population density (population per square mile) as documented by the most recent United States Census.
7. Existence of a farm or ranch succession plan or similar plan established to address farm viability for future generations.
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.
9. Proximity of the proposed easement area to other agricultural operations and agricultural infrastructure.
10. Proposed easement area ability to maximize the protection of contiguous or proximal acres devoted to agricultural use.
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?
12. The proposed easement area is a grassland of special environmental significance that will benefit from the protection under the 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 proposed easement area is located between the last two USDA Censuses of Agriculture (USDA - NASS - Census of Agriculture).
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.

15. Does the landowner have water rights secured for lands that are prime if irrigated only?

16. The proposed easement is in an area with a high threat of conversion.

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.

The following Ohio IRA ACEP-ALE ranking criteria are weighted according to State-level priorities:

1. Proposed easement area contains habitat for at-risk species, as shown by best available records or data search (select highest category).

2. Proposed easement area acres contain 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.

3. Lead Eligible Entity has demonstrated performance in managing and enforcing easements by monitoring 100 percent of its NRCS easements each year AND entity has provided information on any change in ownership to NRCS over the last five (5) fiscal years.

4. In the previous five (5) fiscal years, the Lead Eligible Entity has demonstrated efficiency in completing NRCS easement transactions by closing enrollments within the initial term of the Parcel Contract or ALE-Agreement attachment.

5. The producer/landowner has executed and is currently implementing an NRCS contract that includes agricultural and forestry Climate Smart Practices?

6. Proximity to designated local, state, or federal wildlife habitat/conservation area, or forest area of significance

Agricultural Lands 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.

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

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

1. Percent of prime, unique, and important soils that would be protected on the parcel.

2. Percentage of cropland, rangeland, grassland, pastureland on the parcel.

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 farmland 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 United States Census.

6. Population density of the county where the proposed easement area is located (population per square mile) as documented by the most recent United States Census

7. Proximity of the parcel to other protected land, including military installations within one mile of the parcel boundary

8. Proximity of the parcel to other agriculture operations & infrastructure within 1 mile of the parcel boundary

9. Parcel ability to maximize the protection of contiguous acres devoted to agricultural use

10. Parcel is currently enrolled in a CRP contract that is set to expire within a year and is a grassland that would be protected by the easement.

11. The grassland in the parcel will benefit from the protection under a long – term easement

12. Existence of a farm or ranch succession plan or similar plan established to address farm viability for future generations

13. Decrease in the percentage of acreage of permanent grassland, pasture, and rangeland, other than cropland and woodland pasture, in the county between last two USDA censuses of Agriculture.
14. Percentage of the Fair Market Value (FMV) of the ALE easement that is the eligible entity's own cash resources contribution for easement acquisition and comes from a source other than the landowner.

The following Ohio ACEP-ALE ranking criteria are weighted according to State-level priorities:

1. Additional Conservation Value: Length of public road frontage
2. Additional Conservation Value: Parcel is identified as a Historically Significant
3. Length of blue line stream within easement area according to USGS 7.5-minute topographic quadrangle map
4. If a blue line stream is within the easement area, is there a buffer maintained of at least 20 feet.
5. The property has one of the following contiguous land uses
6. Is the proposed property located within a designated source water protection area
7. Is the proposed property using an approved conservation plan with smart climate agricultural practices?

### **Inflation Reduction Act Agricultural Conservation Easement Program Wetland Reserve Easements (IRA ACEP-WRE)**

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

1. Describe the self-certification of the applicants from the NRCS-CPA-1200?

The following ranking criteria only apply to applications on Priority Soils:

1. What percentage of the proposed easement area intersects with Priority Area 1 (red on the map)
2. What percentage of the proposed easement area intersects with Priority Area 2 (yellow on the map)
3. What percentage of the proposed easement area intersects with either Priority Area 1 and/or Priority Area 2?
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?

The following ranking criteria only apply to applications on reforestation:

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?
2. What percentage of the proposed easement area is currently forested habitat that will be maintained as forested habitat?
3. Does the proposed easement area intersect with the highly organic soils priority area 1 and/or priority area 2 by 25% or more?

The following ranking criteria only apply to applications on maintained native forest habitat's:

1. The majority of the existing forest habitat is:
2. What percentage of the proposed easement area will be restored to native forest?
3. What percentage of the proposed easement area is currently forested habitat that will be maintained as forested habitat?
4. Does the proposed easement area intersect with the highly organic soils priority area 1 and/or priority area 2 by 25% or more?

The following ranking criteria only apply to applications on ephemeral wetlands surrounded by grass:

1. The proposed easement is in an area with a threat of conversion:

2. Select the number of wetlands/potholes/playas/vernal pools to be protected and restored within the proposed easement area:
3. Does the proposed easement area intersect with the highly organic soils priority area 1 and/or priority area 2 by 25% or more?

The following Ohio 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?
2. What is the easement duration?
3. Will the landowner or other conservation partner contribute towards the cost of the easement and/or restoration?
4. Percentage of the proposed easement area under annual row crop production that will be restored to native vegetation?
5. 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?
6. What is the majority of the existing forested habitat?
7. 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?
8. Proximity of other lands permanently protected for the purpose of wildlife and habitat conservation in relation to the proposed easement area?
9. Where wetland restoration is planned, will the restoration result in significant land-use change (choose the most appropriate)?
10. Is the proposed easement area included in States 303d list for impaired water?

**Agricultural Conservation Easement Program Wetland Reserve Easements (ACEP-WRE)**

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

1. What is the size of the offered area?
2. What is the Easement Configuration?
3. Water Quality Benefits?
4. Type of Application?
5. Voluntary Easement Payment Reduction?
6. Easement Value Per-Acre (Based on GARC)?
7. Restoration Costs Per-Acre?
8. Operation & Maintenance Costs?

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

9. What percentage of eligible hydric soils will have the hydrology restored by WRE restoration practices?
10. What is the easement area (in acres) that meet program Land Eligibility Criteria?
11. Proximity of other lands permanently protected for the purpose of wildlife and habitat conservation in relation to the proposed easement area?
12. Proximity to wetlands, streams or other waterbodies over 5 acres?
13. Will Greater than (>) or Equal to (=) 50% of the easement area be restored to a native, permanent plant community?
14. Planned wetland community type at restoration: What is the dominate community at restoration?
15. Are there direct habitat benefits to Copperbelly Watersnake or Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake?

16. The offered acres have invasive species?