Ranking Criteria for NRCS Programs – Fiscal Year 2025

Application Overview

Any applicant may submit an application for participation in EQIP. The NRCS State Conservationist, 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 Oklahoma.

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. 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.

Oklahoma 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 for Oklahoma

Oklahoma's EQIP Priority Resource Concerns for FY2025:

Degraded Plant Condition
Soil Quality Limitations
Pest Pressure
Wind and Water Erosion
Field Sediment, Nutrient, and Pathogen Loss

The following ranking pools will utilize Farm Bill Funds:

Organic Transition
On-Farm Energy
Beginning Farmer or Rancher
SDA Farmer or Rancher
AFO CAFO Animal Waste Management
Urban Ag
Northern Bobwhite, Grasslands and Savannas
Forestry Initiative

Great Plains Grassland Initiative
ACT NOW High Tunnel System
Irrigation Water Conservation Initiative
Lagoon Closure Set Aside
Monarch Butterfly Project
Tribal Strike Force Initiative
WaterSMART Initiative
NWQI Little Beaver Creek
East Zone Cropland
OTI
Team Fund Pools for All 21 Teams in OK

The following ranking pools will utilize Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) Funds:

ACT NOW IRA Soil Health
ACT NOW IRA Grass Planting
EQIP-IRA FY25 Central Zone
EQIP-IRA FY25 East Zone
EQIP-IRA FY25 West Zone
IRA CIC Crop
IRA CIC Pasture
IRA CIC Range

Ranking Questions will be developed using priorities established at the local, state, and national levels.

Applicability Questions –

a. Oklahoma must use the following questions to determine applicability for specific ranking pools:
i. For the BFR ranking pools, did the applicant self-certify as a beginning farmer or rancher on the NRCS-CPA-1200, "Conservation Program Application"? (Yes = applicable; No = not applicable)
ii. For the SDFR ranking pools, did the applicant self-certify as a socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher on the NRCS-CPA-1200, "Conservation Program Application"? (Yes = applicable; No = not applicable)

Ranking Questions –

a. Oklahoma must include the following ranking questions under the "program questions" for both the BFR and SDFR ranking pools. These questions do not apply to any other ranking pool.
i. Does the applicant meet the NRCS definition of a veteran farmer or rancher (VFR)? (Yes/No)
ii. Did the applicant participate in the CRP Transition Incentives Program (TIP), and land included in the CSP application has come out of CRP within the last two years? (Yes/No)

At a minimum, Oklahoma will develop the program questions and resource questions using the following criteria:
i. How effectively and comprehensively the planned conservation practices or activities address the identified natural resource concerns.
ii. The magnitude of the expected conservation benefits resulting from the conservation practices or activities and the priority of the natural resource concerns.
iii. Use of approved conservation practices or activities that provide long-term conservation benefit.

Oklahoma will not exceed 200 total points total for each category—Resource and Program Questions.

In the event of a ranking score tie:

a. If two or more EQIP applications have the same point totals, Oklahoma will use the efficiency score calculated in the CART ranking as a tie breaker. The application with the highest efficiency score will be selected first.
b. In the event the efficiency scores are tied, Oklahoma will fund all tied assessments or none of the tied assessments.

The 3 ranking pools that will utilize ACT NOW will be:

ACT NOW IRA Soil Health- Threshold Ranking Score = 120
ACT NOW IRA Grass Planting- Threshold Ranking Score = 120
ACT NOW High Tunnel System (Non-IRA Pool)- Threshold Ranking Score = 120

Reach out to your local NRCS office for specific information related to ACT NOW.

All applications must be received by November 1, 2024, to be considered for funding in FY2025.

An extended deadline is established for the ACT NOW IRA Grass Planting ranking pool and is set for August 1, 2025. This is the only ranking pool in Oklahoma that will follow the August 1, 2025, deadline.