Ranking Criteria for NRCS Programs – Fiscal Year 2026 – Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) – National Sign-Up

Application Overview

Any applicant may submit an application for participation in ACEP-ALE. NRCS has developed the following ranking criteria to prioritize and select applications that best address the applicable program purposes and priority natural resource concerns nationally.

The Chief of NRCS established a national application batching period from April 29 to May 29, 2026. The Easement Programs Division will select the highest ranked applications for funding, based on applicant eligibility and the NRCS ranking process. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2026, NRCS will use the Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART) to assess and rank all eligible applications for ACEP-ALE for the above batching period.

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.

Easement Programs Division created the FY 2026 national ACEP ALE ranking pool within the above-described National Ranking Template parameters. The national ACEP ALE 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 NRCS to focus funding on priority resource concerns and initiatives identified nationally with input from NRCS stakeholders. Each eligible application may be considered for funding in all applicable ranking pools by program.

NRCS Resource Concerns

Resource Concern Category	Resource Concern	Resource Concern Component
Air (Air quality emissions)	Air Quality (Emissions of airborne reactive nitrogen)	• Reactive nitrogen – confined animal activities • Reactive nitrogen – diesel engines • Reactive nitrogen – nitrogen fertilizer • Reactive nitrogen – non-diesel engine combustion equipment • Reactive nitrogen – open burning

Resource Concern Category	Resource Concern	Resource Concern Component
	Air Quality (Emissions of greenhouse gases-GHGs)	• GHGs – carbon stock • GHGs – confined animal activities • GHGs – nitrogen fertilizer
	Air Quality (Emissions of ozone precursors)	• Ozone – confined animal activities • Ozone – diesel engines • Ozone – non-diesel engine combustion equipment • Ozone – open burning • Ozone – pesticides - Volatile Organic Compounds (OCs)
	Air Quality (Emissions of particulate matter (PM) and PM precursors)	• PM – confined animal activities • PM – diesel engines • PM – dust from field operations • PM – dust from unpaved roads • PM – nitrogen fertilizer • PM – non-diesel engine combustion equipment • PM – open burning • PM – pesticide drift • PM – windblown dust
	Air Quality (Objectionable odor)	• Odor – confined animal activities • Odor – nitrogen fertilizer
Animals (Aquatic habitat)	Aquatic Habitat (Aquatic habitat for fish and other organisms)	• Aquatic habitat for fish and other organisms
	Aquatic Habitat (Elevated water temperature)	• Water temperature effects on aquatic habitat
Soil (Concentrated erosion)	Soil Erosion (Bank erosion from streams, shorelines, or water conveyance channels)	• Bank erosion from streams, shorelines, or water conveyance channels
	Soil Erosion (Classic gully erosion)	• Classic gully erosion
	Soil Erosion (Ephemeral gully erosion)	• Ephemeral gully erosion
Plants (Degraded plant condition)	Plant Health (Plant productivity and health)	• Plant productivity and health
	Plant Health (Plant structure and composition)	• Plant structure and composition

Resource Concern Category	Resource Concern	Resource Concern Component
Water (Field pesticide loss)	Water Quality (Pesticides transported to groundwater)	• Nonpoint pesticide leaching loss
	Water Quality (Pesticides transported to surface water)	• Nonpoint pesticide drift to surface water • Nonpoint pesticide surface loss
Water (Field sediment, nutrient and pathogen loss)	Water Quality (Nutrients transported to groundwater)	• Nonpoint nitrogen leaching loss • Nonpoint phosphorus leaching loss
	Water Quality (Nutrients transported to surface water)	• Nonpoint nitrogen surface loss • Nonpoint phosphorus surface loss
	Water Quality (Pathogens and chemicals from manure, biosolids, or compost applications transported to groundwater)	• Nonpoint pathogen loss to groundwater
	Water Quality (Pathogens and chemicals from manure, biosolids, or compost applications transported to surface water)	• Nonpoint pathogen surface loss
	Water Quality (Sediment transported to surface water)	• Sediment from erosion sources
Plants (Fire management)	Wildfire Hazard (Wildfire hazard from biomass accumulation)	• Wildfire hazard from biomass accumulation
Energy (Inefficient energy use)	Energy Use (Energy efficiency of equipment and facilities)	• Energy efficiency of equipment and facilities
	Energy Use (Energy efficiency of farming/ranching practices and field operations)	• Energy efficiency of field operations
Animals (Livestock production limitation)	Livestock Health (Feed and forage balance)	• Feed and forage balance
	Livestock Health (Inadequate livestock shelter)	• Inadequate livestock shelter

Resource Concern Category	Resource Concern	Resource Concern Component
	Livestock Health (Inadequate livestock water quantity, quality, and distribution)	• Inadequate livestock water quantity, quality, and distribution
Plants (Pest pressure)	Plant Health (Plant pest pressure)	• Chemical resistance • Invasive species • Plant pest pressure
Water (Salt losses to water)	Water Quality (Salts transported to groundwater)	• Salt loss to groundwater
	Water Quality (Salts transported to surface water)	• Salt loss to surface water
Soil (Soil quality limitations)	Soil Health (Aggregate instability)	• Aggregate instability
	Soil Health (Compaction)	• Compaction
	Soil Health (Concentration of salts or other chemicals)	• Concentration of salts or other chemicals
	Soil Health (Organic matter depletion)	• Organic matter depletion
	Soil Health (Soil organism habitat loss or degradation)	• Soil organism habitat loss or degradation
	Soil Health (Subsidence)	• Subsidence
Water (Source water depletion)	Water Quantity (Groundwater depletion)	• Groundwater depletion
	Water Quantity (Inefficient irrigation water use)	• Inefficient irrigation water use
	Water Quantity (Surface water depletion)	• Surface water depletion
Water (Storage and handling of pollutants)	Water Quality (Nutrients transported to groundwater)	• Concentrated nutrient and pathogen leaching loss from domestic animal confinement, including milkhouse waste and silage leachate • Concentrated nutrient and pathogen leaching loss from storage and handling of manure, compost, biosolids, or non-ag food waste

Resource Concern Category	Resource Concern	Resource Concern Component
	Water Quality (Nutrients transported to surface water)	• Concentrated nutrient and pathogen effluent from domestic animal confinement, including milkhouse waste and silage leachate • Concentrated nutrient and pathogen surface loss from domestic animals standing in surface water • Concentrated nutrient and pathogen surface loss from storage and handling of manure, compost, biosolids, or non-ag food waste
	Water Quality (Petroleum, heavy metals, and other pollutants transported to groundwater)	• Concentrated agrichemical leaching loss from storage and handling of fertilizer and pesticides • Mine waste remediation and containment – groundwater • Petroleum and other pollutant containment to groundwater
	Water Quality (Petroleum, heavy metals, and other pollutants transported to surface water)	• Concentrated agrichemical runoff loss from storage and handling of fertilizer and pesticides • Mine waste remediation and containment – surface water • Petroleum and other pollutant containment to surface water
Animals (Terrestrial habitat)	Terrestrial Habitat (Terrestrial habitat for wildlife and invertebrates)	• Terrestrial habitat for wildlife and invertebrates
Water (Weather resilience)	Water Quantity (Drifted snow)	• Drifted snow
	Water Quantity (Naturally available moisture use)	• Drought susceptibility • Moisture management
	Water Quantity (Ponding and flooding)	• Ponding and flooding
	Water Quantity (Seasonal high-water table)	• Seasonal high-water table
	Water Quantity (Seeps)	• Seeps
Soil (Wind and water erosion)	Soil Erosion (Sheet and rill erosion)	• Sheet and rill erosion

Resource Concern Category	Resource Concern	Resource Concern Component
	Soil Erosion (Wind erosion)	• Wind erosion

NRCS Program Consideration Categories

Program Consideration Category	Program Considerations	Program Consideration Components
Human Considerations (Long-term protection of land)	Loss of functions and values	• Loss of floodplain functions and values • Loss of forestland functions and values • Loss of wetland functions and values
	Threat of conversion	• Agricultural land conversion to non-agricultural uses • Grassland conversion to non-grassland uses

Program-Specific Information

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

The following ACEP-ALE national ranking criteria are included in the "Applicability Question" section of the ranking pool: *Did the applicant apply for ACEP-ALE?*

The following ACEP-ALE national ranking criteria are included in the "Category Question" section of the ranking pool: *Which enrollment type applies to the proposed easement area being offered for ACEP-ALE?*

The following ACEP-ALE national ranking criteria are included in the "Program Questions" section of the ranking pool, with the weighting of each question based on national-level priorities:

1. Percent of prime, unique, and important soils in the parcel to be protected (geospatial).
2. Percent of cropland, pastureland, grassland, nonindustrial private forestland, and rangeland in the proposed easement area to be protected.
3. Ratio of the total acres of land in the parcel to be protected, compared to the average farm size in the county according to the most recent USDA Census of Agriculture.

4. Decrease in the percentage of acreage of farm and ranch land acreage, in the county in which the parcel is located, between the last two USDA Censuses of Agriculture (geospatial).
5. Percent population growth change, in the county, as documented by the two most recent U.S. Censuses (geospatial).
6. Population density, of the county where the proposed easement resides, as documented by the most recent United States Census (geospatial).
7. Existence of a farm or ranch succession plan or similar plan established to address agricultural viability for future generations.
8. Proximity of the proposed easement area to other protected land (geospatial).
9. Proximity of the proposed easement area to other agricultural operations and agricultural infrastructure.
10. What is the proposed easement area's ability to maximize the protection of contiguous or proximal acres devoted to agricultural use (geospatial).
11. 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 (geospatial).
    a) If no valid data for #11, 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 reported USDA Censuses of Agriculture.
12. 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.

The following ACEP-ALE national ranking criteria are included in the "Resource Questions" section of the ranking pool and are applicable to all categories/enrollment types, with the weighting of each question based on national-level priorities:

1. Does the 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 (geospatial)?
2. Lead Eligible Entity has demonstrated performance in managing and enforcing easements by monitoring 100 percent of its NRCS easements last fiscal year, per the 'Eligible Entity List - National Ranking - Monitoring and Efficiency - 2026' spreadsheet, on the EPD SharePoint?
3. The Lead Eligible Entity has demonstrated efficiency in completing NRCS easement transactions per the 'Eligible Entity List - National Ranking - Monitoring and Efficiency - 2026' spreadsheet, on the EPD SharePoint?
4. The producer/landowner has executed and is currently implementing an NRCS contract that includes agricultural and forestry regenerative practices?
5. The proposed easement is in an area with a threat of conversion: high, moderately high, moderately low, low, or otherwise (geospatial).
    a) The proposed easement is in an area with a threat of conversion (Alaska, Hawaii, or Puerto Rico): 1 mile buffer of urban area, intersects a

metropolitan statistical area, intersects a micropolitan statistical area, or otherwise (geospatial).

Specific Resources Questions for grasslands under threat of conversion applications:

1. What percentage of the proposed easement area is located in the 'Very High' priority rating for the Grassland Conversion Risk Area layer?
    b) What percentage of the proposed easement area is located in the 'High' priority value for the Grassland Conversion Risk Area layer?
    c) What percentage of the proposed easement area is located in the 'Moderate' priority rating for the Grassland Conversion Risk Area layer?
    d) What percentage of the proposed easement area is located in the 'Low' priority rating for the Grassland Conversion Risk Area layer?
2. How suitable are the soils for crop cultivation?
3. Proposed easement area intersects with Federally listed habitat for at-risk species.

Specific Resource Questions for agricultural lands under threat of conversion applications:

1. Proposed easement boundary is located within: 1 mile buffer of urban area, intersects a metropolitan statistical area, intersects a micropolitan statistical area, or otherwise (geospatial).
2. Proposed easement area proximity to a major transportation corridor: directly adjacent, within one mile, greater than 1 mile and less than 2 miles, greater than 2 miles and less than 5 miles, greater than 5 miles (geospatial).