

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) – Expectations of Partners for Project Outcomes Data and Reporting

What has changed?

Historically, RCPP partners have been required to report on project deliverables, activities or outputs. Examples include acres of closed conservation easements, number of Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans completed, acres of cover crops implemented, acres of pollinator habitat created, number of Partner TA-funded conservation plans written, and others.

The 2018 Farm Bill increases expectations of accountability and return-on-investment, including a new emphasis on environmental (and economic and social) outcomes¹. This is true across many NRCS programs, but especially for RCPP. Below is an excerpt from the Farm Bill's Manager's Report for RCPP:

"The Managers emphasize the importance of a partner's duty to quantify the environmental outcomes of their RCPP projects, and partners are encouraged to assess and report on the economic and social outcomes of their projects, as partners may be able to encourage increased adoption of conservation practices. The Managers expect the Secretary to provide guidance to partners on how to quantify and report on the outcomes of their projects. This guidance should include methods and tools that can be used to quantify outcomes at varying scales appropriate to projects (regional, state, county, watershed, field, etc.), and for the various natural resource concerns addressed by projects."

While the Farm Bill is clear that it is a duty of partners to develop and report outcomes, NRCS intends to provide substantial assistance to partners to increase consistency in reporting. NRCS submits RCPP data to Congress annually to support program funding, as well as every two years through a formal Congressional report. The increased expectations on and accountability from partners will add significant value to future Congressional reporting.

How will this work?

RCPP partners and NRCS will work collaboratively to develop the data collection plan for project outcomes, which NRCS intends to include as an appendix to each RCPP partnership agreement. This guidance document outlines the expectations for RCPP partners so that they may prepare competitive proposals that address the new outcomes reporting requirements.

What is required for the proposal?

The RCPP portal requires partners submitting applications to describe their approach for developing, measuring and reporting the expected environmental outcomes of an RCPP project. Details regarding the quantification of outcomes do not need to be included with the

¹ Outcomes are the measurable environmental, economic and social impacts of RCPP project activities. Examples of outcomes are pounds of nitrogen runoff avoided, tons of carbon sequestered, cost savings to producers, number of neighboring producers adopting the practice, decision factors leading to producer adoption of a soil health management system, etc. These are just examples, as project outcomes are as diverse and should reflect the local priorities of the partnership and landscape.

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proposal, however it should be clear in the proposal how the project deliverables connect to expected outcomes. Estimates of outcomes can be provided, however, the methodology for outcome measurement will be further developed during the agreement negotiation process.

Only environmental outcomes are required. However, inclusion of economic and/or social indicators analyses will be given priority consideration in the RCPP evaluation criteria. More details on economic and social outcomes are provided in the background below.

What are the expectations for selected proposals?

After the partner has been notified of project selection for funding, details will be provided to prepare partners for the agreement negotiation process. During the agreement negotiation process, NRCS intends to work with partners to develop an appendix to the partnership agreement that includes a simple data collection plan customized for each project. The project deliverables, activities, and outputs will be aligned to the appropriate outcome measurement tool or methodology and partners will be provided a tool to report on the outcomes.

State RCPP Coordinators will be available to assist with negotiations as well as reporting throughout the life of RCPP projects.

What do partners need to do during the life of the funded project?

As each project is unique, outcomes reporting requirements will be itemized in the agreement appendix as a data collection and reporting plan. Requirements will be designed to be clear and straightforward across all projects to minimize the burden of reporting. NRCS will assist with the data quality assurance on the methodologies and reporting on outcomes over the life of a project to ensure consistency across all RCPP projects. RCPP partners are required to report annual progress on achieving deliverables and to report on project outcomes progressively, with the final report including total project outcomes (realized and projected future outcomes).

Background on outcomes

Each awarded project's data collection plan for project outcomes will be finalized during the negotiation process. The background below is provided to help partners with proposals that directly address the following outcome types.

Environmental outcomes (required)

The ability to develop, measure and report on environmental outcomes of RCPP projects will vary by project type, natural resource concern, and available tools and methods. Some projects will have straightforward environmental outcomes that have national datasets to support them. Projects that address water quality improvements using conservation practices may have existing methods and can be largely assisted by NRCS at the national level with national outcome models or tools. For example, projects that overlap with NRCS Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) watersheds and resource concerns will be able to coordinate collection of conservation outcomes data with a member of the CEAP team to facilitate agency modeling of RCPP outcomes. Other projects that are focused on different resource concerns may need a hybrid approach of local expertise on data as well as some national models.

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If there is no national tool or model that can adequately represent the environmental outcomes of the RCPP project, a customizable method will be used. The example provided is for wildlife resource concerns, but the template is easily modified for water quality, water quantity and soil health. For other resource concerns for which the template is not easily customized, lead partners are expected to work with State RCPP Coordinators to develop a template(s) appropriate for their projects.

Customizable Template Sample:

With the RCPP investment of **A** dollars matched by **B** partner contributions over **C** year (s) we have made a lasting improvement to the biodiversity of the **D** (geographic region) over initial benchmark **E**) by improving **F** acres habitat and increasing our {priority species} population by **G** to a naturally sustainable size that will benefit the region for **H** years.

A = Total RCPP funds dispersed over **C** period of time

B = Partner contributions (cash and in-kind)

C = Defined number of years

D = Defined geographic area in the RCPP agreement

E = benchmark conditions developed for the outcome from the partnership agreement. Each outcome should have a benchmark against which to measure **E** and **F**.

F = Acres of wildlife habitat improvement practices for the RCPP project

G = to be modeled or estimated figures based on the best professional judgement of a scientific expert

H = Connected to reference in **F** (define assumptions such as regeneration time, lifespan, population dynamics, etc.)

Economic Outcomes (Optional)

Understanding the economic and financial impact to producers of implementing conservation actions is critical to driving lasting adoption of conservation practices and systems. Conservation actions that negatively impact a producer's net profit are less likely to be implemented and sustained.

Economic indicators can quantify the financial impacts conservation practices on a farm, ranch or forestland. Economic indicators that may be used to report outcomes include (but are not limited to):

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- Conservation cost effectiveness—the cost to the producer of practice implementation vs. conservation benefits.
- Economic/financial benefits—the impact of conservation implementation on net profit, the value of farmland/farm assets, etc.
- Valuation of ecosystem benefits—benefits to downstream beneficiaries, local economies, etc.

Partners measuring economic outcomes will need to collect financial information from producers and measure baseline economic indicators at the outset of the project, and then evaluate change in those economic indicators over time. A case study approach is a commonly used means of reporting on the economic and financial impacts of conservation implementation. For economic and financial analyses, partners should refer to the NRCS technical note on developing economic case studies, [available here](#). Applicants are encouraged to consult the resources available on [this NRCS website](#).

Partners are also free to explore other analytical approaches, in consultation with their State RCPP Coordinator(s). Examples of project-based economics analyses include two documents ([ONE here](#) and [TWO here](#)) developed by Illinois Corn Growers as part of their Precision Conservation Management RCPP project.

Development and implementation of an approach to quantify economic outcomes quantification should be viewed as an opportunity for RCPP lead partners to engage non-traditional RCPP partners such as ag lenders and data platforms in pursuit of innovative and replicable analytical models for future projects. Partners planning to report on economic outcomes should make sure that the effort is overseen by a qualified staff person or third party.

Social Outcomes (Optional)

Reporting of social outcomes can inform strategies to increase adoption of conservation practices and systems in pursuit of lasting change beyond the duration of an RCPP project. Social outcomes analyses consider the factors that go into a producer's decision to undertake conservation activities, how that producer's decision influences other producers, and any broader impacts on communities. Factors included in evaluation may include (but are not limited to):

- Characteristics of producers and forestland owners
- Farm, forest or ranch characteristics
- Perceptions of characteristics of conservation practices
- Social capital of project participants
- Community characteristics
- Timing of conservation adoption
- Evaluation of management capabilities
- Conservation adoption motivations

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- Technical assistance needs
- Information/Education needs
- Financial assistance needs to motivate conservation adoption

Partners measuring social outcomes should measure baseline social indicators at the outset of the project and then evaluate change in those social indicators over time. In measuring social outcomes of an RCPP project, partners should maintain a focus on the factors motivating or influencing landowners and communities to adopt—and maintain-- conservation approaches.

Partners may wish to refer to the Social Indicators Data Management and Analysis (SIDMA) tool. SIDMA was developed by the Great Lakes Regional Social Indicators Team, and provides resources for measuring, organizing and analyzing social indicators related to conservation practices. While SIDMA was developed for use in water quality projects, extrapolation of its methods to other resource concerns is generally straightforward.

To explore and use the online tool, SIDMA (Social Indicators Data Management and Analysis), visit the [SIDMA website](#). Partners who conduct an analysis of social outcomes of their project should make sure that this effort is overseen by a qualified staff person or third party.