



United States Department of Agriculture



# Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program

## New Grantee Guide

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Natural  
Resources  
Conservation  
Service

[nrcs.usda.gov/](https://nrcs.usda.gov/)

Congratulations on your Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) award! Now that your organization has been selected for a VPA-HIP award, the hard part begins—delivering on all the wonderful things you proposed to do in your application! Rest assured, we at NRCS are here to help.

VPA-HIP is managed nationally by the Projects Branch at NRCS National Headquarters. Individual agreements and projects are co-administered by NRCS State office staff and USDA Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) Business Center grants and agreements staff. Through the life of your project, you will interact with both groups in order 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 [VPA-HIP website](#) is a good source for program updates. If you ever have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to us.

Kari Cohen  
Projects Branch Chief

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Appendix B. SF 270 Sample

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## Signing your Agreement and Starting VPA-HIP Projects

After NRCS announces the slate of VPA-HIP awardees, a State program contact or Grants Management Specialist (GMS) will send each awardee its grant award package for signature. This may take up to a month or more depending on grants and agreements workload. At a minimum, a grantee's award package will include an NRCS-ADS-093 (Notice of Grant and Agreement Award) form, Statement of Work (taken from the project proposal), and General Terms and Conditions.

Please review the award package for accuracy. Contact the 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**—VPA-HIP 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 as though the agency will be delayed in completing the VPA-HIP grant agreements, NRCS may offer grantees the option of requesting a pre-award letter, which authorizes project expenditures for a given period of time prior to completion of the grant agreement. NRCS will contact awardees if pre-award letters are authorized in any given year.

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

## Official Grant Project Contacts

### Program Contact

NRCS assigns a Program contact to each VPA-HIP project.

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

- Project oversight
  - Review and approval of semi-annual progress reports.
  - Review and approval of financial reports and payment requests.
  - Review and get the necessary approval for project modifications.
- Additional NRCS staff may be called on to engage in a VPA-HIP project. The program contact serves to connect project staff with other NRCS staff.
- Project closeout--at the conclusion of a project, project contacts review the final performance and financial reports. If necessary, the project contacts will follow up with any issues they encounter in the final project review before initiating the closeout procedures.

### Administrative Contact

FPAC Grants & Agreements staff assigns an administrative point of contact to monitor your project for administrative compliance. The assigned administrative contact is listed on the NRCS-ADS-093 form in block 8.

The administrative contact will administer amendments, budget changes, extensions, changes in scope of work, etc.

Grants & Agreements staff (though not necessarily the assigned staff member) review VPA-HIP Requests of Advancement or Reimbursements (SF-270s, see next section) and work with the VPA-HIP program contact and NRCS financial management staff to process payments. Grants & Agreements staff also review all financial reports and progress reports and assist with closeout procedures.

## Requests for Advances and Reimbursements

NRCS VPA-HIP 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 VPA-HIP program staff. Advances may be requested by the grantee. Advances should only be requested for an amount that can be spent within the next 30 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.

Both advance and reimbursement requests are submitted using the SF-270 form either through the ezFedGrants online USDA grants and agreements management system or to the FPAC Grants and Agreements Division via email at: [FPAC.BC.GAD@usda.gov](mailto:FPAC.BC.GAD@usda.gov). The latest version of the SF-270 form can be downloaded from [grants.gov](http://grants.gov). Appendix A and B give instructions on how to complete the form and give an example form. Each request must be accompanied by documentation supporting the amount requested (see Appendix C for further information on supporting documentation). All VPA-HIP project funds must be expended within 90 days after the award expiration date. Refer to the NRCS General Terms and Conditions (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@usda.gov](mailto:ezfedgrants@usda.gov)

If you have questions on how to fill in an SF-270 claim form, email your assigned FPAC administrative contact.

NRCS generally completes payment requests within 30 days of receipt. Grants & Agreements staff process all requests before sending them to VPA 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

VPA-HIP Grantees must maintain detailed, auditable documentation of all grant and matching fund expenditures throughout the life of the grant, and generally for three years following the grant agreement's expiration date. This timeframe is subject to change according to the regulation. This documentation must be available whenever requested by USDA.

## Reporting Requirements

Grantees are responsible for submitting regular progress and financial reports, as outlined in the statement of work and 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 submit progress reports every six months. The reports are due 30 after the six-month reporting period. 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 must also include the total number of Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) and Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) acres enrolled in the public access program using VPA-HIP funding and the total amount of VPA-HIP funds that have been used to increase public access on WRP and WRE lands.

Progress reports are submitted to ezFedGrants or to the FPAC Grants and Agreements Division via email at: [FPAC.BC.GAD@usda.gov](mailto:FPAC.BC.GAD@usda.gov) every six months, with the first report due six 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.

### Financial Reports

Grantees must submit a Federal Financial Report (SF-425) on an annual basis to the ezFedGrants system or the FPAC Grants and Agreements Division via email to: [FPAC.BC.GAD@usda.gov](mailto:FPAC.BC.GAD@usda.gov). Instructions for completing a SF-425 are found in Appendix D. The latest version of the SF-425 form can be downloaded from [grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov).

## **Final Reports**

The final programmatic report submitted by VPA-HIP grantees should encompass the entire project, including successes, challenges, and overall achievements. Final reports must not include any Personal Identifiable Information (PII--such as names of landowners, addresses, financial information, etc.).

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

- Final reports should include an introduction that describes how the project went overall. This should include an explanation of any barriers that prevented the objectives from being met.
- The report should list each objective and provide a description of how/if it was met. Please provide quantitative information when available (e.g. acres enrolled, number of hunting days).
- Final reports must include the total number of Wetland Reserve Easement acres enrolled in the public access program using VPA-HIP funding and the total amount of VPA funds that have been used to increase public access on WRP and WRE lands.

All final reports are reviewed by the program contact and other appropriate NRCS technical experts within two months of receipt. Incomplete or insufficient final reports will be returned to the grantee for additional information.

## Agreement Modifications

Grantees sometimes find it necessary to request modifications to their grant agreement. A formal modification requires execution of an agreement amendment. Examples of modifications include:

- **No-Cost Extensions** - 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. 12 months is the maximum length of an extension and only in exceptional cases will more than one extension be considered. **Be aware: Extensions cannot be granted if requested after the agreement termination date.**
- **Budget Changes** - In general, VPA-HIP grantees are allowed a certain degree of latitude to re-budget within and between major budget categories (found on the SF-424A 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 NRCS program contact for notification of the change. In addition, budget changes should be noted in semi-annual progress reports.

Example: a grantee with a \$450,000 project (\$225k from NRCS, \$225k in matching funds) wants to move \$15,000 from the personnel budget category to supplies. This change can be made without an agreement amendment and can be enacted after the grantee emails its NRCS program contact.

For budget changes that impact more than 10% of project funds, a modification form must be submitted.

- **Change in Scope of Work** - Please coordinate any changes in project scope of work or deliverables with the NRCS program contact assigned to the project. Changes ultimately must be enacted through an agreement amendment.
- **Change in Project director/Key Personnel** – A 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) a request form should be completed and submitted for approval.

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 [VPA-HIP website](#). Submit forms to your assigned NRCS program contact.

## **Award Termination**

In rare circumstances, awardees or NRCS may seek to terminate a VPA-HIP award. It is always NRCS's preference that a project continue to its conclusion and VPA-HIP staff are committed to working with awardees to avoid agreement terminations. When a termination is called for, it will be carried out in accordance with 2 CFR 200.339.

## Environmental Compliance and Cultural Resources

Every NRCS-funded conservation project that involves ground disturbance activities is subject to the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) and Endangered Species Act (ESA). As part of NRCS's effort to comply with these Federal environmental laws, each VPA-HIP project must undergo a project-level Environmental Evaluation (EE) before commencing. VPA-HIP 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 discuss the project activities and determine if there will be any ground disturbing activities. State office staff will conduct an environmental evaluation (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. The State Office will inform the Grantee when compliance efforts are complete and project work may begin.

In addition, when VPA-HIP funding is provided to producers/landowners to implement wildlife habitat practices, site-specific NEPA, NHPA and ESA analyses may be required. NRCS State offices should work with VPA-HIP grantees to ensure that program activities are in compliance with these laws.

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

## Public Affairs

VPA-HIP grantees should make every effort to coordinate with the VPA 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.

At a minimum, the NRCS and the VPA-HIP program should be credited on all public presentations and media, including conference/meeting posters, presentations, news releases or other public information about your project. You may consider using the following statement below, if appropriate:

*"This work is supported by the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program at USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service."*

Please submit any news releases, videos, photos and other media about VPA-HIP projects to your assigned NRCS program contacts and copy the [vpa@usda.gov](mailto:vpa@usda.gov) email box.

## Program Contacts

VPA-HIP Inbox: [vpa@usda.gov](mailto:vpa@usda.gov)

ezFedGrants help desk: [ezfedgrants@usda.gov](mailto:ezfedgrants@usda.gov)

[ezFedGrants website: https://nfc.usda.gov/FSS/ClientServices/ezFedGrants/](https://nfc.usda.gov/FSS/ClientServices/ezFedGrants/)

VPA-HIP website:

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/farbill/?cid=stelprdb1242739>

## Appendices

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