



United States Department of Agriculture

State Technical Committee Notification of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Review Process for FY 2020/2021 Applications

In order to comply with the RCPP Farm Bill statute, State Technical Committees must be informed of the RCPP proposal evaluation process. The briefing information should cover the process only, not the evaluation results, proposal scores, or rankings.

The attached guidance document is being shared with State Technical Committees to satisfy this requirement.

Attachment: FY 2020 RCPP Classic State Technical Review Guidance

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FY 2020 RCPP Classic State Technical Review Guidance

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Introduction

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) was first authorized in the 2014 Farm Bill as a competitive program to which partners could apply to one of three funding pools. Each year, a national review team was convened to evaluate submitted proposals, and States also provided evaluations of relevant proposals.

RCPP was re-authorized in the 2018 Farm Bill with significant changes. Based on these changes, there are now three program components:

1. RCPP Classic
2. RCPP Renewals
3. RCPP Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFA)

RCPP Renewals are noncompetitive and are administered through a partner self-assessment process. RCPP Classic and AFAs rely on a peer review process to evaluate the merits of partner applications. For RCPP Classic, elimination of the National funding pool led to the decision to eliminate the national review team. RCPP Classic proposals will undergo a technical review at the State level only, with final award decisions made by the NRCS Chief.

For the forthcoming AFA provision, to be administered through a separate competition in 2020, a national review team will be convened. States will also be asked to review relevant AFA proposals.

RCPP proposals are scored and ranked based on the evaluation criteria included in the funding announcement. The four criteria are based on the RCPP principles:

- **Impact:** RCPP proposals must propose effective solutions that address one or more natural resource priorities to help solve natural resource challenges that are limited in geographic scope. Partners are responsible for evaluating a project's impact and results.
- **Partner Contributions:** Partners are responsible for identifying any combination of direct and in-kind value-added contributions to leverage NRCS's RCPP investments. Partners must provide substantial contributions and the magnitude of contributions is considered in the RCPP application evaluation criteria.
- **Innovation:** NRCS seeks projects that integrate multiple conservation approaches, implement innovative conservation approaches or technologies, build new partnerships, or effectively take advantage of program flexibilities to deliver conservation solutions.
- **Partnerships and Management:** Partners must have experience, expertise, and capacity to manage the partnership and project, provide outreach and technical assistance to producers, and quantify the environmental (and when possible, economic and social) outcomes of an RCPP AFA project. NRCS gives preference to partnerships that engage Historically Underserved farmers and ranchers.

The credibility and success of RCPP relies on our collective ability to evaluate proposals and select those that best embody these four principles.

This document serves as a guide through all the parts of the State technical review process and details the duties of review team members, RCPP Coordinators and State Conservationists.

Section 1: Confidentiality and Conflicts of Interest

To maintain integrity of the RCPP technical review, each reviewer must read and sign a conflict of interest and confidentiality form prior to initiating reviews of any RCPP proposals. Please review the following information before you sign this form.

Confidentiality

The entire RCPP review process is carried out confidentially to protect the integrity of the process and the intellectual property included within the proposals. The following information is considered confidential and should not be disclosed before, during or after a panel with anyone who is not associated with the panel review process:

- names of other reviewers on the panel;
- information about any proposal including unique technology developments and individuals or entities associated with the project.
- any outcomes of the review process including how proposals ranked or reviewer opinions on specific proposals.

Material reviewed should not be copied or quoted and all materials printed related to the review should be destroyed.

Conflicts of Interest

RCPP reviewers should not complete individual reviews of proposals for which they cannot provide a fully objective evaluation. It is common that reviewers may be familiar with RCPP applicants—that alone is not considered a conflict of interest (COI). A clear COI exists if a reviewer has a close personal relationship to someone involved in a proposal that would benefit from a RCPP award or if a reviewer is associated with an organization that is part of a proposal and which would benefit from a RCPP award. Examples of conflict of interest include:

- a reviewer's wife, child, or a close personal friend stood to benefit from a proposal being awarded.
- a reviewer's close personal colleagues such as mentors/mentees, professors, or individuals a reviewer collaborated with on other projects in the recent past stood to benefit from a proposal being awarded.

If a reviewer believes that he or she cannot objectively review a proposal, please inform your panel facilitator before you review a proposal and the proposal will be reassigned. In addition, during the peer panel meeting, the reviewer should recuse him or herself from any discussion of that proposal. If you discover a COI later in the process, please notify the panel facilitator

immediately.

Each member of a state RCPP review team must submit to his/her RCPP Coordinator a signed Confidentiality/Conflict of Interest form. RCPP Coordinators must maintain these forms as part of the official RCPP files.

Section 2: Overview of the RCPP Review and Selection Process

Review and Selection Process

All RCPP proposals that enter the technical peer review process have already been screened for completeness and basic compliance with the provisions of this notice. If for any reason you believe a proposal you are reviewing is incomplete or does not meet the basic requirements of the RCPP program, please let National RCPP program staff know immediately.

The following is the workflow of the Review and Selection Process:

1. **Initial Proposal Vetting** – RCPP Coordinators must review each proposal for three eligibility items (lead partner eligibility, land eligibility and ensuring that each CCA proposal addresses one of the identified priority resource concerns) prior to initiation of technical reviews.
2. **State Technical Reviews** - The State technical review will need to consist of NRCS Staff with programmatic and technical expertise. The composition of a State’s review team should include a variety of technical disciplines that are applicable to the State/Region and the projects that are being reviewed. The team should be lead by the State Conservationist or designee and should have an odd number of members, with a minimum of 3 members.

It is the State review team’s responsibility to provide a ranked list of projects to the NHQ Projects Branch, using the RCPP SharePoint site.

3. **Leadership Review** - The RCPP leadership review team consists of members of NRCS senior leadership, specifically the Associate Chief for Conservation, Deputy Chief for Programs (Chair), the Deputy Chief for Soil Science and Resource Assessment, the Deputy Chief for Science & Technology, the Deputy Chief for Management and Strategy, and the Regional Conservationists. The leadership review evaluates the state technical review recommendations and ensures that the evaluations are consistent with program objectives. In addition to the technical review rankings, the leadership review team may consider available funding, funding pools, geographic diversity, applicant diversity, and other factors. The leadership review team then makes recommendations for funding to the NRCS Chief.

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4. **Final Decision** - The NRCS Chief makes the final RCPP award decisions.

Section 3: Initial Proposal Vetting

Prior to initiating the technical review process, RCPP Coordinators must review each proposal for three eligibility items:

- 1) **Lead partner eligibility**—lead partners must fall under one of the eligibility categories found in the funding announcement list starting at the bottom of page eight. The most challenging assessments will come when lead partners would fall under this category:

An organization or entity with an established history of working cooperatively with producers on agricultural land, as determined by NRCS, to address—

- o Local conservation priorities related to agricultural production, wildlife habitat development, or nonindustrial private forest land management; or*
- o Critical watershed-scale soil erosion, water quality, sediment reduction, or other natural resource issues.*

RCPP Coordinators must evaluate proposal information to ensure that the lead partner meets this description.

- 2) **Land eligibility**—RCPP activities must be carried out on agricultural or nonindustrial private forest land or associated land on which NRCS determines an eligible activity would help achieve conservation benefits (i.e., improved condition of natural resources resulting from implementation of eligible conservation activities).

Eligible conservation activities may be implemented on public lands when those activities are allowable, will benefit eligible lands as determined by NRCS, and are included in the scope of an approved RCPP project.

- 3) **CCA priority resource category**—each CCA project must address one of the priority resource categories NRCS has identified for the CCAs. A list of CCAs and their associated priority resource categories is on page seven of the funding announcement.

If RCPP Coordinators identify a project that fails one or more of these eligibility checks, they must notify RCPP national staff by sending an email to rccp@usda.gov. Coordinators may also email the same inbox if they are unsure if a proposal meets the eligibility requirements.

Section 4: State Review Team

How to put together a Team

State review teams are chaired by the State Conservationist and coordinated/facilitated by the State RCPP Coordinator. State review teams should have three members at a minimum. States with many proposals to review are strongly encouraged to have larger review teams.

The duties of a State RCPP review team are:

- Read, evaluate and score RCPP proposals for which the State is either the lead or supporting State.
- Convene a team meeting at which each proposal is discussed and ranked.

Develop constructive feedback that is later provided to partners that are not selected for an award.

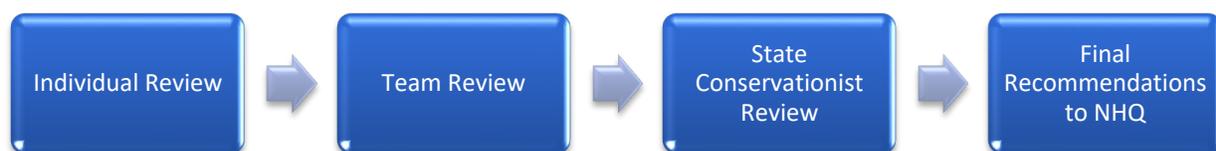
State review teams must be comprised of NRCS employees ONLY. State review teams must have diversity in programmatic and technical expertise- consider including subject matter experts from both program areas and technical disciplines (e.g., ecological sciences, SRCs, area technical staff, soil scientists, etc.).

Section 5: Conducting Technical Reviews

State Review Basics

RCPP proposals are submitted and stored in the RCPP Portal. Since a limited number of State staff have access to the Portal, it is recommended that the RCPP Coordinator print out proposals for reviewers to use during the review process (see Appendix 1 for detailed instructions).

The following sections explain in detail the State technical review process outlined by the blue boxes below.



Individual Reviews

Each RCPP proposal must be evaluated and scored by at least two State reviewers.

Number of proposals	Minimum number of proposal scores (based on review by at least two reviewers)	Recommended minimum # of Review Team Members
2	4	3
8	16	4
15	30	5

Prior to beginning reviews, review team members must familiarize themselves with the RCPP funding announcement and this guidance document. It is recommended that the RCPP Coordinator hold a kickoff meeting or teleconference to explain the review process, discuss the evaluation criteria and answer any questions reviewers may have.

All reviewers must use the RCPP scorecard to evaluate and score proposals. The scorecards are based on the evaluation criteria included in the RCPP funding announcement. States cannot make changes to the evaluation criteria or the scorecard.

State Review Team Meeting

Following completion of individual reviews, the RCPP Coordinator will facilitate a meeting of state review team members. The following are the required outputs of the meeting:

- 1) A ranked list of proposals, from highest to lowest. A State's rankings must be submitted [using this Sharepoint form](#), which differentiates between funding pools and whether a State is the lead State or a partner State. Below is a sample of a State proposal ranking submission (the Sharepoint form looks different but asks for the same information).

<u>State/Multistate Lead</u>	<u>State/Multistate Partner</u>	<u>CCA Lead</u>	<u>CCA Partner</u>
1. University A	1. NGO A	1. Tribe Y	1. NGO K
2. SWCD B	2. State Agency Z	2. Land Trust G	2. Municipality M
3. State Agency C	3. Irrigation District X		

- 2) A single summary scorecard for each proposal. The summary score is the result of the group discussion of proposals and may or may not be consistent with individual review scores. Additional information provided by team members may cause individual reviewers to modify their thinking about a proposal they scored before the meeting. At the conclusion of the meeting, the consensus summary score is the only score that is provided to National RCPP staff. A summary scorecard must be submitted for each project a State evaluates, [using this Sharepoint form](#).

The summary scorecard form includes boxes to provide constructive narrative feedback for each proposal. States are responsible for providing feedback to each partner not selected for an award. The history of RCPP has shown that many partners are unsuccessful with their first submission. Our partners deserve an understanding of how their proposals fell short and how they might improve for the next competition. The RCPP Coordinator is responsible for working with state review team members to compile feedback for dissemination to unsuccessful partners, once awards are announced. Appendix 4 includes examples of constructive feedback statements.

The summary scorecard also includes room for States to alert national RCPP staff to any project or partner considerations that aren't captured by the evaluation criteria.

Following the state review team meeting, the RCPP Coordinator provides the proposal rankings and summary scorecards to the State Conservationist for review.

Other recommendations for the state review team meeting:

- 1) Review the RCPP scorecard to ensure that everyone has a consistent understanding of the evaluation criteria and can effectively discuss the proposals.
- 2) For each criterion, reviewers need to assess in a comprehensive and detailed fashion the strengths and weaknesses they see in the proposal.
 - a. a strength is an aspect of a project proposal that, when compared to a stated

evaluation criterion, leaves virtually no doubt regarding the partner's capability to satisfy the criterion.

- b. It is helpful to capture both minor and major weaknesses/flaws. A minor weakness raises doubts regarding the partner's ability to satisfy the criterion but can be overcome or offset by proposal strengths. A major weakness leaves no doubt regarding the partner's inability to satisfy the criterion. The combination of several minor weaknesses within a criterion may become a significant weakness.
- c. In general, a high-ranking proposal should have significantly more strengths than weaknesses and a poorly ranked proposal should have significantly more weaknesses than strengths.

State Conservationist Review and Submissions to NHQ

The State Conservationist (STC) reviews the recommendations made by the State review team. Once the STC is satisfied with the proposal rankings and summary scorecards (including feedback), the RCPP Coordinator must submit the Sharepoint forms to satisfy the State's technical review requirements.

Multi-State Proposals

States must review every application that proposes work in their State, regardless of whether a State is the lead State or a supporting State. The ranking form asks States to distinguish between proposals for which it is the lead or supporting State.

Beyond that, for multi-State proposals, the relevant States are HIGHLY ENCOURAGED to coordinate reviews. National RCPP staff do not intend to prescribe approaches for multi-state reviews, given the huge number of permutations of States that could be involved in any given project.

A teleconference among the relevant RCPP Coordinators to discuss a multi-State project is one approach that may be effective. Such discussions could also be conducted over email.

Proposal Evaluation Criteria

As stated in the overview, the RCPP evaluation criteria are based on the program principles which were established in coordination with NRCS and Departmental leadership. Following is a broad discussion and ideal embodiment of each criterion.

IMPACT: Is there a compelling need for this project? How important are the resource concerns being addressed? At the end of the project, what story can NRCS and the partner(s) tell about what was achieved? Does the lead partner propose an approach for measuring and reporting on conservation outcomes of the project?

Ideal: The lead partner proposes solutions to a compelling natural resource challenge. The project goals and objectives are clear and the results achievable. The lead partner understands the NRCS planning process and has integrated steps 1-7 into their proposal. The lead partner has a plan for measuring and reporting on the conservation outcomes of the project.

CONTRIBUTIONS: Are partner contributions significant and at least equal to the funding request? Are partners proposing contributions that are value-added to elevate the project's goals, objectives and outcomes beyond what can be achieved just with NRCS funding? Do partners bring unique and qualified expertise to the project?

Ideal: Project partners have substantial contributions that are clearly connected to project outcomes in a way that is easy to understand. Efforts that integrate NRCS funding into existing initiatives with their own dedicated funding source(s) often make successful projects. Partners that bring skills, expertise and resources that complement NRCS funding, expertise and technical resources are especially prized. Examples include economic analysis of conservation activities, environmental monitoring in support of outcomes reporting, producer outreach, etc.

INNOVATION: Does the project take advantage of RCPP flexibilities vs. the covered programs? Is there a reason to fund this project through RCPP and not EQIP, CSP, ACEP, etc.? Does the project target resource concerns or assessment techniques that are based on applied research or scientific inquiry?

Ideal: Projects that are uniquely suited to RCPP vs. other NRCS programs. For example, easement-based projects that take advantage of land use flexibilities provided by RCPP easements. Projects that integrate multiple RCPP activity types. Projects that propose innovative approaches to resolve intractable natural resource challenges. Projects grounded in conservation science to hone the partners' approach. Projects that are grounded in behavioral science to appeal to producers and landowners. Partners may have piloted strategies outlined in the proposal or the project will complete work that already has momentum.

PARTNERSHIPS AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT: Is the partnership sufficiently composed of the right people to achieve project outcomes? Does the lead partner have experience managing agricultural conservation projects of similar size and scale? Is there a history of engagement with agricultural producers and an understanding of how to collaborate with NRCS? Does the partnership have access to producer networks to target project implementation? Is the project timeline realistic based on NRCS program implementation timelines? Does the proposal include a strategy for inclusion of the historically underserved?

Ideal: The partnership team has experience working with agricultural producers and the lead partner in particular is experienced managing a conservation partnership and

delivering on project goals and objectives. The lead partner demonstrates past success with similar projects proposes a project management strategy that is based on realistic timelines. The project proposes work in a reasonable number of States. Preferential consideration is given to projects that have a plan to encourage and include the participation in the project by historically underserved producers.

The RCPP scorecard is designed to help reviewers rate the proposal based on the evaluation criteria. The scorecard is designed to encourage reviewers to look for gradations in the value of the proposed work and rank the presence or absence and quality of the concepts reflected in the evaluation criteria. The evaluation criteria and reviewers' judgment are meant to facilitate the ranking of proposals, with accompanying commentary to support the scores.

Partners will put their best feet forward in their proposals. It is the reviewers' responsibility to use best professional judgement and their own experience (but not bias!) to separate proposal fluff from substance.

The best way to use the scorecard is as a calibration tool. A good way to calibrate reviews is to read through the first column for the highest possible scores to understand what would make a great project and partner. Next, read through the final column for the absence of success criteria as a contrast to the first column for the highest scores. If none of the cells describe sufficiently what is presented for a given criterion by the proposal, consider what the ideal would be for that proposal as it relates to the question and grade accordingly while documenting your objectivity and reasoning.

Many proposals will struggle to reach the ideal for a given criterion. But by defining what is ideal for RCPP and leadership's desire to ensure that RCPP has a unique program identity, the state review team can begin to differentiate fairly between proposals and understand the extent to which they embody the RCPP principles. Reviews can be an iterative process. Once the review team meets it may be necessary to re-review a few proposals and seek out the nuances, such as the presence or absence of key success criteria.

Critical Review Items—FA/TA Table and Partner Contributions Table

While the entirety of each RCPP proposal is important and should be evaluated carefully, reviewers should pay particular attention to the information submitted in the FA/TA and Partner Contribution tables. It is in these tables that partners exhibit their understanding of NRCS conservation activities and how they can be harnessed to meet project goals and objectives. Reviewers should closely examine the TA funding requests—if Enhancement TA is requested, is the request reasonable (based on uploaded fee schedules or other information) and do the requested TA activities match what is required for the project? If Implementation TA is requested, has the partner provided information that illustrates the capability and capacity to

perform implementation TA activities? Are the timelines for FA and TA implementation reasonable? Do they reflect reasonable expectations of NRCS staff?

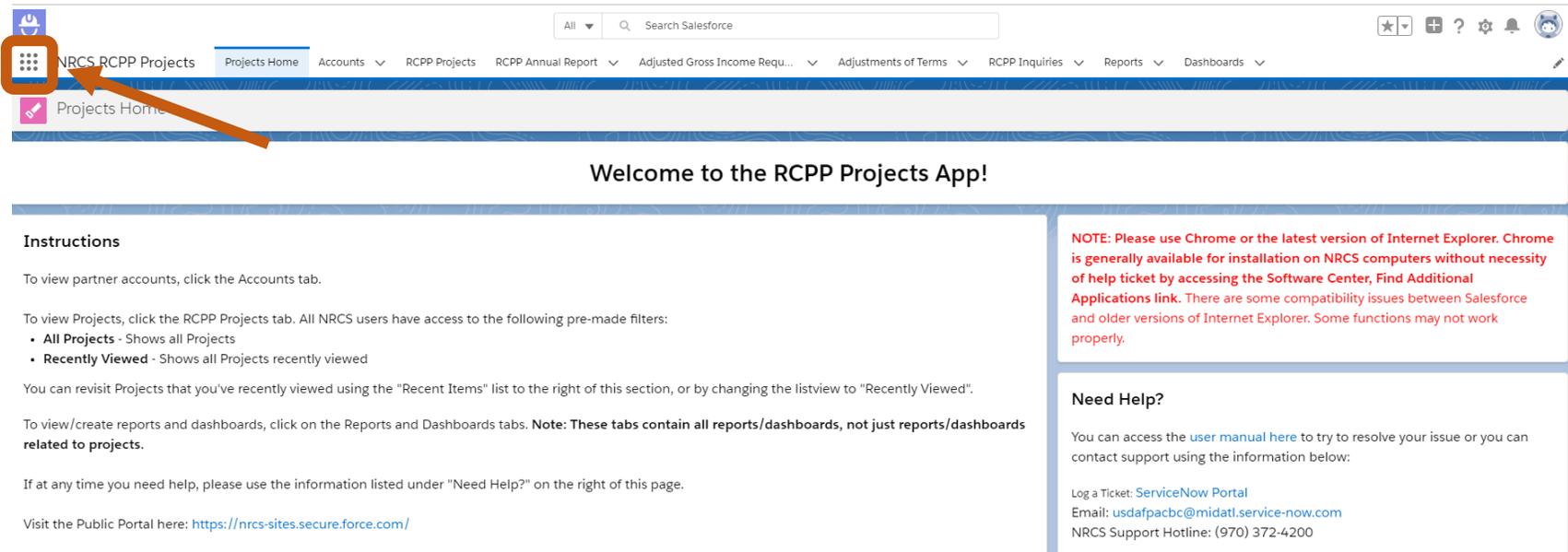
The Partner Contributions table allows reviewers to explore the characteristics of the proposed contributions—do they add value to the project? What is the ratio of Federal vs. non-Federal contributions? Do the contributions at least match NRCS’s investment in the project and are contributions directly related to eligible RCPP project purposes? Ideal proposals will include FA contributions and align Partner TA contributions to RCPP-funded FA activities, and provide fee schedules or other documentation justifying the value of contributions.

State Technical Committee Briefing

In order to comply with the RCPP Farm Bill statute, State Technical Committees must be informed of the RCPP proposal evaluation process. The briefing information should cover the process only, not the evaluation results, proposal scores, rankings, etc. States may inform their State Technical Committees however they see fit, either with an in-person meeting or over email. This guidance may be shared with State Technical Committees.

Appendix 1: How to Find and Print Proposals in the RCPP Portal

1. Depending on which screen you last view in the portal, you may need to switch to the NRCS RCPP Proposal section. Click the icon in the top left corner.



Instructions

To view partner accounts, click the Accounts tab.

To view Projects, click the RCPP Projects tab. All NRCS users have access to the following pre-made filters:

- **All Projects** - Shows all Projects
- **Recently Viewed** - Shows all Projects recently viewed

You can revisit Projects that you've recently viewed using the "Recent Items" list to the right of this section, or by changing the listview to "Recently Viewed".

To view/create reports and dashboards, click on the Reports and Dashboards tabs. **Note: These tabs contain all reports/dashboards, not just reports/dashboards related to projects.**

If at any time you need help, please use the information listed under "Need Help?" on the right of this page.

Visit the Public Portal here: <https://nrcs-sites.secure.force.com/>

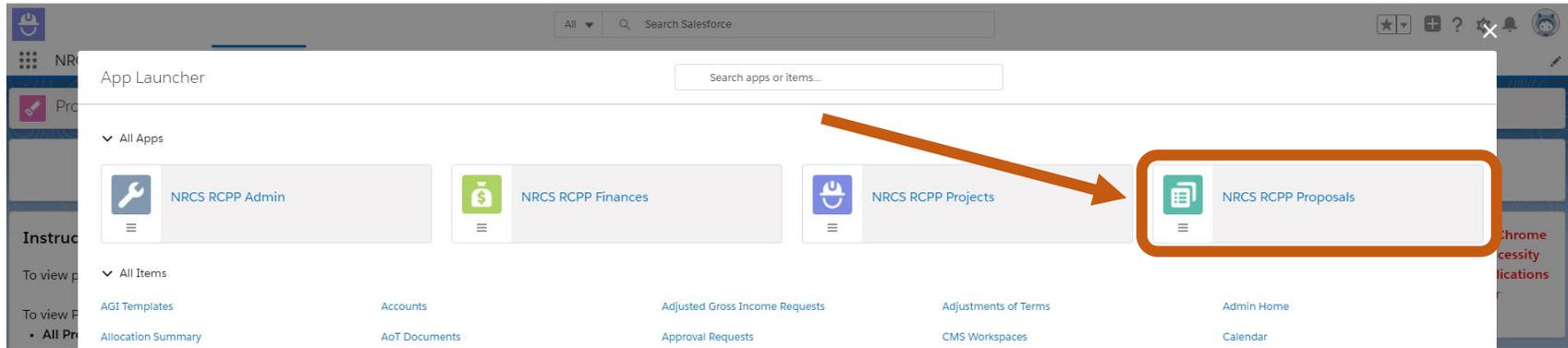
NOTE: Please use Chrome or the latest version of Internet Explorer. Chrome is generally available for installation on NRCS computers without necessity of help ticket by accessing the Software Center, Find Additional Applications link. There are some compatibility issues between Salesforce and older versions of Internet Explorer. Some functions may not work properly.

Need Help?

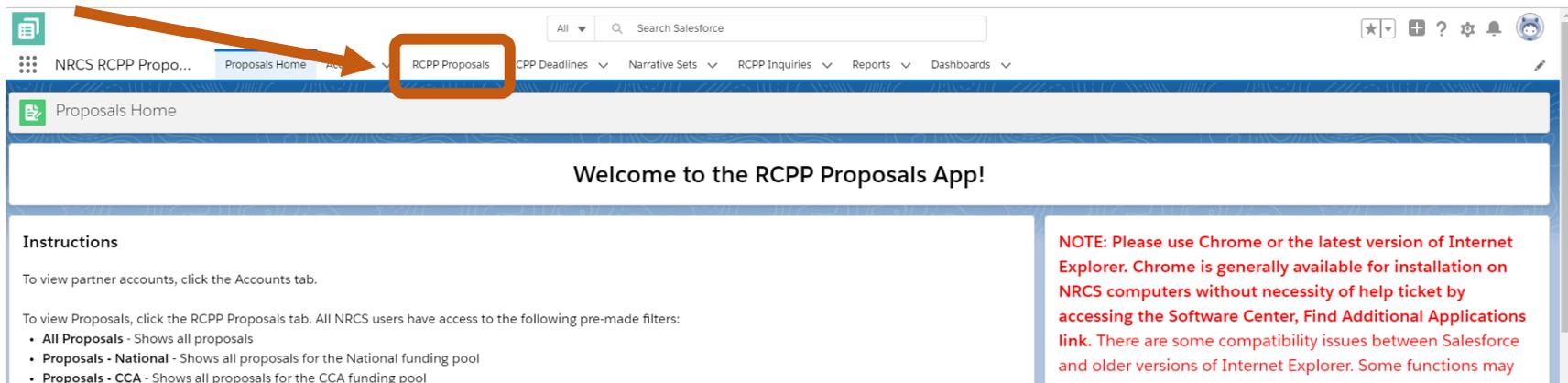
You can access the [user manual here](#) to try to resolve your issue or you can contact support using the information below:

Log a Ticket: [ServiceNow Portal](#)
Email: usdafpacbc@midatl.service-now.com
NRCS Support Hotline: (970) 372-4200

2. Select the NRCS RCPP Proposal section of the portal.



3. Select the RCPP Proposals tab to see a list of all proposals.



4. Click on the proposal number for the specific proposal you would like printed.

NRCS RCPP Propo... Proposals Home Accounts RCPP Proposals RCPP Deadlines Narrative Sets RCPP Inquiries Reports Dashboards All Proposals

Proposal/Project All Proposals

50+ items • Sorted by Project Name • Filtered by all proposal/project - Record Type • Updated a few seconds ago

	Pr...	Pro...	Fisc...	Lea...	Sel...	Lead Partner Account	Status	Funding Pool	CCA(if Applicable)	Sta...	End...	Narra...	RCPP...	Pre...	Full...
1	<input type="checkbox"/>	1846	2018			Chester County Conservation District	Withdrawn			2017		NARR-02	RCPP-02		
2	<input type="checkbox"/>	1849	2020			Palouse Conservation District	Full Proposal In Progress			2019		NARR-04	RCPP-04		
3	<input type="checkbox"/>		2020			West Virginia Agricultural Land Protection Authority	Full Proposal In Progress			2019		NARR-04	RCPP-04		
4	<input type="checkbox"/>	1854	2020			Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District	Full Proposal In Progress			2019		NARR-04	RCPP-04		
5	<input type="checkbox"/>	1856	2020			Tyonek Tribal Conservation District	Withdrawn			2019		NARR-04	RCPP-04		
6	<input type="checkbox"/>	1858	2020	VA	VA	Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional Commission	Full Proposal In Progress	Critical Conservation Areas (CCAs)	Chesapeake Bay Watershed	2019		NARR-04	RCPP-04		
7	<input type="checkbox"/>	1863	2020			Trout Unlimited, Inc.	Full Proposal In Progress			2019		NARR-04	RCPP-04		
8	<input type="checkbox"/>	1864	2020			Sunny Acres Farm LLC	Full Proposal In Progress			2019		NARR-04	RCPP-04		
9	<input type="checkbox"/>	1867	2020			202 Farms	Full Proposal In Progress			2019		NARR-04	RCPP-04		
10	<input type="checkbox"/>	1868	2020			202 Farms	Full Proposal In Progress			2019		NARR-04	RCPP-04		
11	<input type="checkbox"/>	1869	2020			202 Farms	Full Proposal In Progress			2019		NARR-04	RCPP-04		

5. The proposal entry will open, click the print button in the top right corner.

Proposal/Project 1849

Project Name Status Full Proposal In Progress Total NRCS Funding \$0.00 Total NRCS Deliverables \$0.00 Total Partner Deliverable Contribution \$0.00

Details Related

Project Created Flag

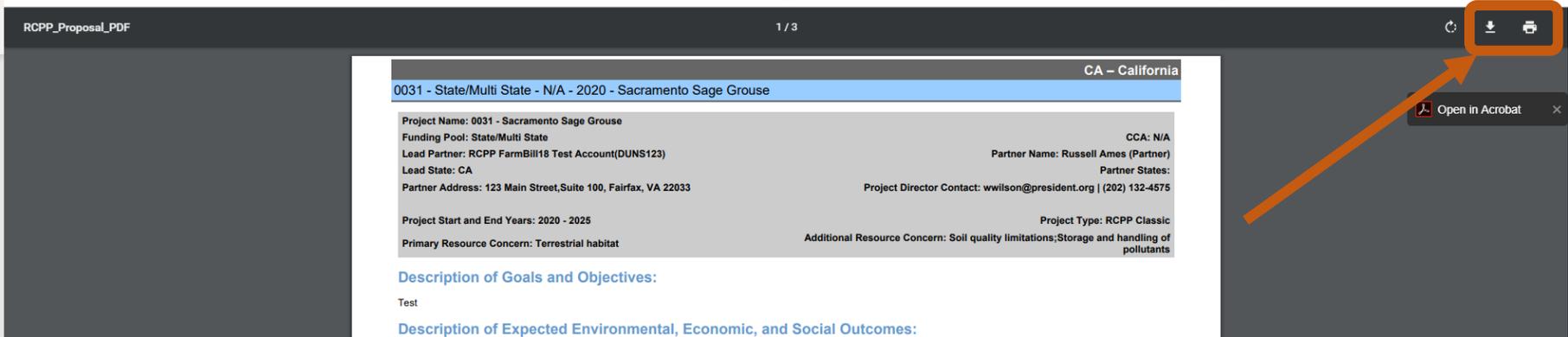
Proposal

Project Number	1849	Narrative Set	NARR-04
RCPP Deadline	RCPP-04	Fiscal Year	2020
Is this a 5 year Project?	Yes		
Active SAM Registration?	<input type="checkbox"/>		

Status

Status	Full Proposal In Progress	Record Type	Proposal (FarmBill '18)
Pre-Proposal Review Team		Full Proposal Review Team	

6. The printout will open in a new screen, use the “download” icon to save a copy on to your computer or the “print” icon to immediately print the document. Both icons can be found in the top right corner.



Appendix 2. Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Form

FY 2019 Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND CONFIDENTIALITY CERTIFICATIONS **Confidentiality**

The entire RCPP review process is confidential. It is imperative that RCPP applicants have trust in NRCS's ability to keep all information about proposals and their review confidential. Peer reviewers are individually responsible for safeguarding personal notes and copies of documents related to the peer panel's activities for the duration of the proceedings, including housing evaluation documents in locked or secured cabinets. Upon completion of the evaluation, peer reviewers agree to return all paper copies of proposals in their possession and to delete all electronic copies of the same.

Confidentiality Certification I certify that I understand the confidential nature of the RCPP review process. I will not disclose, either during the proceedings of the evaluation or at any subsequent time, the names of peer reviewers or any information concerning the content of proposals (unless such information is otherwise publicly made available) or the evaluation process, to anyone who is not authorized access to the information by RCPP staff. Furthermore, I will report immediately to RCPP staff any communication directed to me from any outside source concerning either the content of proposals or the evaluation process. Unless authorized by RCPP staff, I agree not to contact applicants or any entities included in a proposal concerning any aspect of its contents.

SIGNATURE

DATE

Conflict of Interest

The potential for a conflict of interest for those involved in the evaluation of applications is a serious matter. Even the appearance of a conflict of interest during the review process may discourage potential applicants and invite requests for information under the Freedom of Information Act, disputes or appeals. It is not unusual for RCPP peer panelists to be familiar with applicant entities and their conservation activities. This familiarity does not constitute a conflict of interest unless the reviewer feels as though they cannot provide an unbiased evaluation of a proposal. It is up to each reviewer to initially assess any potential conflicts of interest and to alert RCPP staff. If a potential conflict is identified, the peer panelist member will recuse him/herself from taking part in the evaluation of the application(s) in question and for the portion of the peer panel meeting(s) during the times when the application is discussed. Depending on the severity of the conflict, it may be necessary to recommend the peer reviewer be removed from the peer panel.

Conflict of Interest Certification I certify that I am not aware of any matter which might reduce my ability to review and evaluate proposals for financial assistance in an objective and unbiased manner or which might place me in a position of conflict, real or apparent, between my responsibilities as an evaluator and other interests. In making this certification, I have considered all my stocks, bonds, other financial interests and employment arrangements (past, present, or under consideration) and, to the extent known by me, all the financial interests and employment arrangements of my spouse, my minor children, and other members of my immediate family. Furthermore, I agree to disclose to RCPP staff any actual or perceived conflicts of interest as soon as I become aware of them.

SIGNATURE

DATE

Appendix 3: RCPP Scorecard

States are required to use the RCPP scorecard for proposal evaluations. Individual reviewers can use the scorecard located on the RCPP Sharepoint site. A group scorecard for each proposal must be submitted using [this link on the RCPP SharePoint](#). The group scorecard is interactive and will calculate the proposal score based on assigned values and weighted percentages for the evaluation criteria.

Appendix 4: Constructive Proposal Feedback

States are responsible for providing feedback to each partner not selected for an award. The history of RCPP has shown that many partners are unsuccessful with their first submission. Our partners deserve an understanding of how their proposals fell short and how they might improve for the next competition. The RCPP Coordinator is responsible for working with state review team members to compile feedback for dissemination to unsuccessful partners, once awards are announced.

The feedback examples on the following pages are drawn from Conservation Innovation Grants proposal reviews, but they are instructive to illustrate the approach—partners should be able to read the feedback statements and understand how they could improve their proposal for future submission.

States should avoid using general statements that don't specifically address a strength or weakness or overly negative statements. In all cases, States must consider how a partner would react when reading the feedback.

If States have questions or would like NHQ review of feedback statements, send an email to the RCPP [inbox—rcpp@usda.gov](mailto:inbox-rcpp@usda.gov).

Example:

Applicant Name: [REDACTED]

Strengths:

- Innovative approach to increase adoption of SHMS in a high-profile watershed.
- Impressive list of partners and supporters.

Weaknesses:

- Project seems to be a combination of soil health and water quality objectives, but the water quality objectives seem to take precedence.
- Tremendous expense (\$1.5 million over three years) to pay for the STAR incentives, but there is no indication that there is demand for STAR-labeled grains. Just like some producers discontinue conservation practice implementation after cost-share funding ends, unclear what happens here when STAR premiums cease at the end of the project.
- There is no explanation of the practices that are needed to improve rating with STAR in proposal. After reviewing website, it appears that the ratings are all tied to N management. There is no mention of using SHMS to improve SOM, so N might decrease over time. Again, shows precedence of water quality objectives.
- The payment process is not sustainable unless the market is set up. The applicant should focus on developing a viable market for STAR grains prior to making green payments so the market can drive the funding to pay the payments. Many, many ecosystem service payment efforts like this have been initiated or are being developed currently, with little hope of securing long-term demand.
- There is no mention of the credentials of the project staff.