

Frequently Asked Questions

Conservation Innovation Grants (National Component)

Federal Fiscal Year 2021

The Basics

1. Who should we contact if we have questions not addressed in this FAQ?

nrcscig@usda.gov This is the general CIG email box that is checked daily.

2. Where is the link to the application and process?

The following link to the grants.gov website gives access to the National Funding Opportunity (NFO): <https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/view-opportunity.html?oppId=333631>

3. How do I apply?

Please see the NFO for further instructions on how to apply.

To begin an application, you must first be registered with the USDA eAuthentication system:
<https://www.eauth.usda.gov/eauth/b/usda/home>

Once you are eAuthenticated, you can fill out an application in the CIG Portal:
<https://nrcs-sites.secure.force.com/>

4. If we have received a CIG award in the past, do we need to apply for new DUNS number and redo our SAM registration?

All CIG applicants are required to be registered in the System for Award Management (SAM), and provide a valid unique entity identifier (Data Universal Numbering System (DUNS) number before submitting an application. A CIG applicant who received an award in the past does not need a new DUNS number or SAM registration before applying, but all applicants need to ensure their DUNS number and SAM registration is current. For further Information, please see the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NFO) Section D(1).

5. What is the percentage of applications that receive CIG funds?

The percentage varies from year to year on the basis of demand (total applications received) and total funding availability. In 2019, \$12.5 million in funding was made available, 114 applications were received, and 19 grants were awarded. In 2020, \$15 million in funding was made available, 100 application were received, and 24 grants were awarded.

6. Why can I not find where to submit an application in grants.gov?

The CIG program now has its own application portal. To apply to the CIG Classic program, applicants will be required to have USDA eAuthentication credentials and to register with the new NRCS CIG portal. There are two steps to accessing the Programs Portal:

- 1) Obtain level 2 eAuthentication (<https://www.eauth.usda.gov/eauth/b/usda/home>)
- 2) Sign up for a Portal user account at <https://nrcs-sites.secure.force.com/>

Other CIG Competitions

7. Distinction between the three CIG competitions currently available (State CIG, National CIG, and On-Farm Trials)?

The CIG program has three components, each of which has a separate competition (NFO):

1. National CIG Classic competition,
2. State CIG competitions (each participating state holds their own competition), and
3. On-Farm Conservation Innovation Trials.

This FAQ is for the 2021 National CIG Classic competition (funding code: USDA-NRCS-NHQ-CIG-21-NOFO0001113)

The State and National CIG Classic competitions are similar, with similar award criteria and eligibility, but the State competitions offer smaller award amounts and priority areas specific to the needs in each particular state. Each state that decides to host a competition will post their own NFO.

On-Farm Trials is a new CIG competition that is focused on technology that is more proven and scalable. The CIG State and Classic competitions target technologies not necessarily fully developed whereas the On-Farm Trials competition targets projects that have been proven effective and are poised for widescale adoption.

8. Where can I find out if there will be a state-level CIG competition available in my state?

See your state's NRCS website ([accessible here](#)) for information on state-level funding availability for CIG.

9. What are the benefits to apply to a state CIG competition versus the national competition, other than financial limits?

There is often less competition in the state competition, with fewer applications submitted. In addition, States may use different funding priorities than the national competition, so in some cases an entity may not be able to apply for the national competition but could apply to a state that is using relevant funding priorities.

10. Can one applicant apply to multiple CIG competitions (including the National CIG Classic competition, a State-based CIG competition and On-Farm trials) in the same year?

Yes, one applicant can apply to more than one CIG competition as long as each application is a unique project.

Competitiveness and Eligibility

11. Can a single organization be awarded funds for more than one project in a single year?

There is no prohibition on a single entity being awarded more than one grant in a single year as long as each project is unique.

12. Could a project that involves just one farm for field testing be competitive? Is there a minimum acreage amount required to be selected?

There is no minimum acreage amount required.

13. If you get multiple applications from the same geographic area, are you likely to only choose one of them?

Multiple applications may be selected from the same geographical area. Geographic diversity is one criterion NRCS may consider in making final award selections.

14. Is there any limit or preference on geographic scope? Are multi-state projects desirable?

There is no set limit on geographic scope. As stated in the evaluation criteria in the Notice of Funding Announcement, projects that have the potential to transfer their approach or technology to a broader audience or to other geographic areas or agricultural sectors will receive a higher point ranking and therefore be more competitive.

15. If a proposal addresses more than one CIG priority, does that make it more competitive?

Addressing more than one priority or sub-priority neither increases nor lessens the competitiveness of a proposal. All proposals must identify a primary priority or sub-priority that will be used in assigning applications to peer review panels. Each priority area has their own review panel and each application can only be reviewed in one review panel.

16. What would meet the requirement for inclusion of EQIP eligible producers?

The CIG statute states that all CIG projects must involve EQIP eligible producers. The extent to which projects involve EQIP eligible producers is taken into consideration as part of the application evaluation criteria.

17. Must the EQIP-eligible producers who are part of the project be recruited and identified at the time of application?

It is not necessary to recruit and identify the intended EQIP eligible producers that will be participating in a project at the time of application. Applications must, however, describe the extent of involvement of EQIP-eligible producers in the project. In addition, if matching funds are to be provided by producers, those producers must be identified and need to provide a signed commitment letter showing the amount they are committing to the project.

18. Can a proposal include some producers that are EQIP-eligible, and some that are NOT EQIP-eligible?

If yes, then will there be any limitations on activities we can conduct on non-EQIP eligible farms?

While EQIP-eligible producers must be involved in all CIG projects, not all producers involved in project must be EQIP-eligible. Any CIG payments made to producers as part of a project must go to EQIP-eligible producers. Refer to the NFO for more details.

19. Is there a limit on the number of letters of support that can be included within the applications?

No. Letters of support for the project from individuals or entities that are not project partners may be submitted and there is no limit to how many may be submitted.

20. Are Federal collaborators (e.g., a USGS scientist) allowed to be included in applications if the submitting entity is a state university?

Yes. However, CIG funding cannot be used to support salary, benefits, or travel of a Federal employee. In addition, federal salaries cannot be used as in-kind matching funds for the CIG project. An employee providing non-federal match through their work hours cannot be supported from a federal grant, such as a State Extension Agent paid from federal funding.

21. How is funding allocated across the priority areas in the NFO?

There is no set amount of funding dedicated to each priority area.

23. Does the funded activity have to be an established NRCS Conservation Practice?

The technology does not have to be something that NRCS has a practice standard for. As long it has been proven to have conservation benefit, it does not have to have a conservation practice standard associated with it.

24. Do we have to start the project on the date the grant agreement is signed? If our project is designed around growing years, starting in January is difficult.

CIG projects begin on the date of final execution of the grant agreement. No cost extensions have been used in the past when growing year conflicts have made it difficult for an entity to complete their project within the given timeframe.

25. What are some examples of projects you hope to participate in?

We have no project preferences. We encourage all eligible entities to submit their ideas to undergo our competitive process so NRCS can fund the most promising innovations!

Budget and Funding

26. Does the “funding amount” include the total for the project, both government and private, or just the government portion?

The funding amount is the amount the awardee will receive from the NRCS if selected. The funding amount is not the total project cost. The project is also required to provide non-federal matching funds. The federal funding with the non-federal match makes the total project budget.

27. If a portion of CIG funds are used for development of a tool that was already in development prior to receiving the grant, does the tool still need to be free for all to use?

NRCS does not prohibit the development of tools that are ultimately commercialized and sold to farmers, ranchers or forest landowners. As stated in the NFO, USDA receives a royalty free license for federal use should the project be awarded.

28. The mandatory travel amount is \$3,000. Do we budget that per staff included in the project or just the primary project director?

The \$3,000 travel amount should be budgeted per project, not per staff member. This travel funding is designated for each project to send up to two contacts to a CIG orientation meeting and one additional conference or similar event. If the cost is expected to be more for such travel, the project team should include more funding. Any additional travel required for completion of the project must be considered additional to this \$3,000.

29. Is the purchase of new equipment that is not fixed allowed?

Yes, purchase of unfixed equipment is permitted consistent with the definitions and provisions of [2 CFR 200.313](#). Supplies are considered equipment only if they cost \$5,000 or greater. Equipment purchased for the project with federal funds is a conditional title vested with the awarded organization for the life of the project and is subject to the equipment disposition schedule at the end of the project.

30. Can overhead costs be reimbursed or used as match?

Yes. Please refer to section D.14 of the Notice of Funding Opportunity to learn more about indirect costs.

31. Can you give examples of indirect costs?

Indirect cost is usually a general fee organizations include in their budgets that is viewed as the cost to “keep the lights on”. It is the cost for the organization to do business, so would include many incidentals such as internet, electricity, copy machines, building costs, etc. Items that are not direct costs to the project but still required for the business to perform their work. The indirect cost rate for federal awards above 10% needs to be a negotiated rate with the federal government, so it varies for different geographic locations and types of organizations.

32. Will NRCS negotiate CIG awards if the amount requested is determined to be too costly by the reviewers for the work proposed?

NRCS reserves the right to negotiate CIG award amounts. Negotiations are considered on a case-by-case basis.

Matching Funds

33. What is the difference between matching funds, non-federal funds, cash match and in-kind contributions?

Non-federal funding and match funding are terms used interchangeable. Cash and in-kind are two different types of matching funds. Cash funding is something that directly costs an organization money, while in-kind is something of value but does not require cash on the part of the awarded institution of their partners, such as volunteer hours.

34. What are some of the categories that can be used for matching funds? Can equipment serve as matching funding?

Matching funds may be committed by the applicant, project partners, or both, and can be a combination of cash and in-kind contributions. Examples of matching contributions include work done by unpaid volunteers and donations of supplies, facilities, farmer land use or land management costs, or equipment use. Indirect costs can also be applied to the non-federal portion of the budget.

35. Can 50% of the matching funds be provided by other grants?

Yes, as long as the matching funds are documented in line with the requirements of the NFO, are not from federal funding sources, are committed at the time of application, and are not being used as match on another Federal grant.

36. What is the difference between the match required for the historically underserved set aside and match for all other grantees?

The required match for the CIG program is a 50% of the total project costs. This means if the project costs \$600,000, the project team can request \$300,000 of federal funding and need to bring at least \$300,000 of funding to the project. If the project team, though, qualifies under the historically underserved set aside funding, and meets the additional criteria for that funding as stated in the NFO, for a project with a total cost of \$600,000 they can request \$400,000 of federal funding and only have to bring \$200,000 of non-federal match to the project. For projects that qualify for the historically underserved set aside, those project teams need to only commit 33% of the total project cost to the project.

37. Can state-level CIG awards that we have received for the project count as matching funds?

No state-level CIG funding cannot count as match. No federal funding can be used as matching funding for CIG projects.

38. Are matching funds for a project only relevant if they are spent after the grant agreement is signed, or can an applicant count related expenditures leading up to the agreement being finalized?

Costs incurred prior to the effective date of the grant may not be reimbursed, nor may matching funds expended prior to the effective date of the grant be counted as matching funds for the project.

39. Does the match need to be secured at the time of application? How should an applicant address the match requirement if specific producers involved in the project will not be identified until after proposal submission?

All matching funds for CIG projects must be committed at the time of application. If matching funds are to be provided by producers, those producers and matching fund amounts must be identified at the time of application and those individual producers or an organization representing them must provide a commitment letter.

40. Are there guidelines for how to determine the value for in-kind contributions cost?

The value of applicant contributions to the project is established according to federal cost principles. Applicants should refer to [§2 CFR 200.306](#) for additional guidance on matching funds, in-kind contributions, and allowable costs. In general, value should be based on the local fair market value for that work.

41. The Notice of Funding Opportunity states that an applicant can voluntarily reduce or waive indirect cost rate recovery as part of the required match. If an applicant decides to do this, can the applicant decide what percent to waive?

Yes. An applicant can claim unrecovered indirect costs as part of their match and they can choose what percentage of their indirect costs that they want to contribute to match instead of claim for reimbursement.

However, applicants cannot decide the rate at which they value their indirect costs. Eligibility to recover indirect cost and the rate at which indirect costs can be claimed is described in section D.14 of the Notice of Funding Opportunity.

Other Information

42. Is a list of previous awardees available?

A list of previous National awardees can be found on the [CIG webpage](#) using the project search tool. Multimedia stories on the 2017 and 2018 grantees can also be found on the CIG webpage.

43. Are women considered a category of historically underserved?

*No, women are not one of the identified groups that qualify as historically underserved for NRCS programs. Producers that can qualify are identified on the following website:
<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/people/outreach/slbfr/>*

44. How are proposal reviewers chosen? Are they typically from within NRCS or other agencies or universities?

Proposal reviewers are usually a mix of NRCS technical experts, staff from other Federal agencies, and even non-Federal technical experts. The majority of the reviewers are NRCS experts.

45. Roughly how long does it take from submission date to receiving grant money?

Applicants should plan their project with a projected start date of March 1, 2022. This date, though, may slightly vary depending on how quickly the agreement is processed. Once a grant agreement is signed by NRCS and the awardee and the project is active, grantees can access their funding spent when the project is active.

46. Are there NRCS staff who can offer advice on proposal writing?

NRCS does not provide assistance with proposal writing. CIG staff are available to answer questions related to the contents of the CIG Notice of Funding Opportunity (NFO).

47. If a project is highly successful, will there be an option to seek additional funding during the project's lifespan?

No, there is no provision for renewing or adding additional funding during the project's lifespan.