U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Commodity Credit Corporation
Financial Assistance Programs Division
Programs Deputy Area

Regional Conservation Partnership Program

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is authorized by Subtitle I of Title XII of the Food Security Act of 1985 (the 1985 Act), as amended by Section 2401 of the Agriculture Act of 2014 (2014 Act). The Secretary of Agriculture has delegated the authority to administer RCPP to the Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), who is Vice President of the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC). NRCS is an agency of the Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Announcement No. USDA-NRCS-NHQ-RCPP

For Fiscal Years 2014/2015

Date Issued: May 27, 2014

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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

ANNOUNCEMENT TYPE: Announcement for Program Funding

AGENCY: Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC)

Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance (CFDA) Number: 10.930

DATES: Applications must be received by NRCS before 5:00 p.m. (Eastern Daylight Time).

Preproposal applications due:	July 14, 2014
Announcement of selected preproposals:	July 28, 2014
Full proposal applications due:	September 26, 2014
Announcement of selected full proposals:	October 17, 2014

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

NRCS is the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) conservation agency working with farmers, ranchers, and private forest landowners nationwide to identify and address natural resource objectives and implement conservation practices and activities to deliver environmental benefits locally, regionally, and nationally.

Through the new Farm Bill, NRCS has been given the authority to enhance regional cooperation to more effectively implement and maintain conservation activities, thereby promoting the restoration and sustainable use of soil, water, wildlife, and related natural resources on regional or watershed scales. Through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), NRCS will co-invest in mobilizing creative and workable solutions to agricultural production and resource management challenges. These solutions will benefit not only individual farming, ranching, and forest operations, but also local economies and the communities and resource users in a watershed or other geographic area that depend on the quality of the natural resources.

Through RCPP, NRCS will increase the opportunity for partners to bring innovative ideas and resources to accelerate conservation on private lands. RCPP partners will have the opportunity to join in this mission by developing project applications, as described in this notice, to address specific natural resource objectives in a proposed area or region. Partners will commit to activities to promote, implement, and evaluate the outcomes of conservation.

RCPP combines the authorities of four former conservation programs – the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program, Chesapeake Bay Watershed Program, Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI), and Great Lakes Basin Program. Assistance is delivered in accordance with the rules of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), and Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP), and in certain areas, the Watershed Operations and Flood Prevention Program.

The purpose of this notice is to announce the availability of nearly $400 million in CCC funding for RCPP and to solicit applications from potential partners who seek to enter into partnership agreements with NRCS under RCPP. Partners will work with producers and landowners to promote the restoration and sustainable use of natural resources on regional or watershed scales. Applications will be accepted from all 50 States, the Caribbean Area (Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands), and U.S. territories in the Pacific Island Areas (Guam, American Samoa, Republic of Palau, Federated States of Micronesia, Republic of Marshall Islands, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands).

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ADDRESSES:

NRCS will not consider applications that do not follow the application requirements, are incomplete, or are submitted by fax, courier, or after the deadline date listed in this notice.

Applications may be submitted by any one of the following three methods:

1. *Email*: RCPP@wdc.usda.gov (Preferred submission method).

2. *Mail*:
   Mark A. Rose, Director
   Financial Assistance Programs Division
   Department of Agriculture
   Natural Resources Conservation Service
   RCPP Application
   P.O. Box 2890
   Washington, D.C. 20013-2890

   Applications sent via Registered or Certified Mail to the Post Office Box will not be accepted.

3. *Grants.gov*:

   Please note that the Grants.gov electronic submission system is relatively complex for first-time users and involves several preliminary registration steps to be taken before the application can be submitted. To register, go to www.grants.gov, click on Applicants, then click on Get Registered.

   If you have completed a prior application, you may already have completed the registration process. Please allow sufficient time for the application to be submitted electronically and for possible computer delays.

   For registered applicants to submit an application:

   1. Go to www.grants.gov. Information about submitting an application using Grants.gov is located on the Grants.gov Web site with supplementary materials.

   2. Select the Applicants tab.

   3. Select the Apply for Grants heading, click on Apply for Grants.

   4. Step 1: Download a Grant Application Package by searching the CFDA number 10.930.

Standard Form (SF) 424 Instructions

All applications, regardless of method of submission, must contain the completed form SF-424 "Application for Federal Assistance" (Form, Instructions); SF-424A "Budget Information - Non-Construction Programs" (Form, Instructions); AD 1047 "Certification Regarding Debarment, Suspension, & other Responsibility Matters - Primary Covered Transactions" (Form, Instructions); AD 1048 "Certification Regarding Drug-Free Workplace Requirements" (Form, Instructions); and SF-424B "Assurances - Non-Construction Programs" (Form, Instructions). A Data Universal Numbering System (DUNS) number and System for Award Management (SAM) registration are also required for full proposals. Allow sufficient time to acquire a DUNS number and register in SAM.

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication (Braille, large print, audio tape, etc.) should contact the USDA TARGET Center at: (202) 720–2600 (voice and TDD).

For additional information contact:

Mark A. Rose, Director
Financial Assistance Programs Division
Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
RCPP Application
P.O. Box 2890
Washington, D.C. 20013-2890
Telephone: (202) 720-1845

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

I. FUNDING OPPORTUNITY DESCRIPTION

A. Legislative Authority

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is authorized by Subtitle I of Title XII of the Food Security Act of 1985 (the 1985 Act), as amended by Section 2401 of the Agriculture Act of 2014 (the 2014 Act). The Secretary of Agriculture has delegated the authority to administer RCPP to the Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), who is Vice President of the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC). NRCS is an agency of USDA.

RCPP is delivered through the authorities and rules of the following programs, referred to throughout this notice as "covered programs":

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), 7 CFR part 1466;
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), 7 CFR part 1470;

- Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP), 7 CFR part 625;
- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), Subtitle H of Title XII of the 1985 Act; (ACEP is a new program implemented through existing easement regulations in fiscal year (FY) 2014 to the extent consistent with Subtitle H, at 7 CFR parts 1415, 1467, and 1491); and
- **For Critical Conservation Areas only**: Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (Public Law 83-566), 7 CFR part 622.

B. Vision and Goals of the Program

RCPP offers new opportunities for NRCS to work with partners to encourage locally-driven innovation and create high-performing solutions, harness innovation, accelerate the conservation mission, launch bold ideas, and demonstrate the value and efficacy of voluntary, private lands conservation.

RCPP provides for increased coordination across conservation program activities while doubling resources through partner contributions to address resource concerns at the regional level. Successful partnerships will bring an array of financial and technical capabilities to projects, including cash contributions, technical professionals, and assessment experts. Through partnerships there will be more resources available on the ground to achieve solutions by working with agricultural producers, and forest landowners. The ability to coordinate activities and to improve stakeholder involvement in developing, implementing, and measuring those conservation actions will improve the cost-effectiveness of addressing those resource concerns.

NRCS implements RCPP through several conservation authorities, including ACEP, CSP, EQIP, HFRP, and in Critical Conservation Areas (CCAs) only, certain authorities under the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (Public Law 83-566).

NRCS will follow its regular evaluation procedures for contracts with landowners. Those procedures include measuring the environmental outcomes of installing and maintaining conservation practices. However, for this new flagship program, NRCS will rely on the partners to measure environmental successes of individual projects, while NRCS will aggregate and analyze performance data to track trends and monitor progress. NRCS will measure the success of the new program through the following four criteria:

1. Solutions. NRCS will invest in projects that generate near-term results that are measurable from environmental, economic, and social perspectives. Both partners and NRCS staff will be involved with documenting the outcomes of these conservation investments through collecting environmental resource data designed to measure the results of projects.

2. Contributions. NRCS will promote leveraging of other Federal and non-Federal resources. The agency goal is to at least double the total investment in conservation, including cash and in-kind contributions.

3. Innovation. NRCS will select innovative projects that integrate multiple conservation approaches to deliver comprehensive and measurable solutions.

4. Participation. NRCS will maximize the number of organizations, including those with a proven track record and those new to NRCS programs, that participate in and contribute to projects as compared with predecessor programs (such as the CCPI).

C. Overview of the RCPP Application Process

RCPP is not a grant program. All funds targeted through RCPP will require significant contributions from the partners involved. Funding made available through this Notice of Announcement for Program Funding will be provided to eligible:

- Partners for the provision of financial assistance (FA) and technical assistance (TA) or both;
- Producers or landowners through program contracts or easement agreements;
- Entities through agreements for the purchase of ACEP Agricultural Land Easements;
- Partners for the provision of TA; and
- Partners through alternative funding arrangements with multistate water resource agency or authorities. These funds will be paid to producers and landowners through program contracts or easement agreements in accordance with program requirements. They may also be paid to partners to provide TA to implement the RCPP project.

RCPP funding will be awarded after a two-phase application process that includes: (1) a preproposal application; and (2) a full proposal application. Preproposal applications are being solicited at this time, while the full proposal process will only be open to applicants whose preproposal applications are selected by NRCS.

RCPP funding is allocated across three competitive funding pools as follows:

National	40 percent
Critical Conservation Areas	35 percent
State	25 percent

Applicants must identify one specific funding pool in which to compete in accordance with the criteria established in this notice. Project areas may be defined by geo-political boundaries, watershed boundaries, agricultural land uses, or regional natural resource concerns. The project area does not need to be contiguous, but the geographic boundaries must be described. The project must address at least one identified priority. All projects will be equally evaluated, regardless of size.

RCPP requires partners to propose projects with defined activities and anticipated outcomes. In evaluating and selecting proposals, NRCS will use the criteria set forth in Part VI.

RCPP is implemented through NRCS and partners working with producers and owners of agricultural and forest land. Partners are encouraged to facilitate the process, and at the request of the producer, partners are encouraged to assist producers in applying for assistance. All FA contracts are made directly with participating landowners and producers. Producers or landowners interested in participating may also apply for assistance directly at the local USDA service center.

Producers or landowners seeking to participate in an RCPP project must meet all program-specific eligibility requirements under the covered programs. The requirements that apply to the program contract or easement agreement are determined by the program selected. Information on program payment limitations, benefits, and other program requirements that may apply to land and participants enrolled in ACEP, EQIP, CSP, HFRP, and the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act authorities may be found in the appropriate program's regulation as stated in this notice. Additional information can be found at the NRCS Web site at:
http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/farmbill/

D. Program Authorities and Adjustment of Terms

RCPP is delivered through the authorities and rules of the following programs:

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program, 7 CFR part 1466;
- Conservation Stewardship Program, 7 CFR part 1470;
- Healthy Forests Reserve Program, 7 CFR part 625;
- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, Subtitle H of Title XII of the 1985 Act; and
- **For Critical Conservation Areas only**: Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (Public Law 83-566), 7 CFR part 622.

RCPP allows some flexibility in covered program rules in order to achieve high priority outcomes (see definition of "high priority outcomes" in Appendix A), such as significant water quality improvement. Partners may request that program adjustments be allowed provided they are within the scope of the statutory and regulatory program authorities. "Adjustment of terms" is defined as the rules of a covered program that may be adjusted, which include nonstatutory regulatory rules or provisions. The following examples are illustrative; applicants seeking flexibilities should contact NRCS for additional information.

1. Examples of rules that may be adjusted include:

   a. Operational guidance and requirements for a covered program to provide a simplified application and evaluation process.

   b. Higher or lower payment rates (not to exceed 75 percent, except for beginning farmers or ranchers, limited resource farmers or ranchers, socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers, or eligible veteran farmers or ranchers) in the project area for

one or more conservation practices compared to what nonproject area practices receive.

c. Use of a threshold score to approve applications without waiting until the end of a ranking period.

d. Weighting program application ranking criteria differently than a program may use outside of the RCPP project area as defined by the applicant.

e. Under Section 1271C(c)(3) of the 1985 Act, RCPP allows the waiving of the Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) limitations at 7 CFR part 1400 for participating producers if the Chief determines that the waiver is necessary to fulfill the objectives of the program.

2. Examples of statutory requirements that cannot be adjusted include:

a. Providing payment rates that exceed 75 percent to all EQIP participants. EQIP payment rates are limited to 75 percent by statute, except for beginning farmers or ranchers, limited resource farmers or ranchers, socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers, or eligible veteran farmers or ranchers for whom EQIP can pay up to 90 percent payment rates.

b. Exceeding payment limitation rates for a program.

c. Waiving eligibility requirements such as compliance with Highly Erodible Land and Wetland Conservation Provisions, program land eligibility, or participant eligibility.

d. Providing Federal FA for conservation practices or activities for which NRCS does not have technical standards or guidance or where the practice does not meet such standards.

Applications that request adjustments of terms will be reviewed by the Deputy Chief for Programs. Approval by NRCS will be based on how the proposed adjustments meet statutory requirements, intent, and priorities of the program and the proposed project.

Questions regarding proposed requests for RCPP flexibility may be directed to: RCPP@wdc.usda.gov.

II. FUNDING AVAILABILITY

A. Anticipated Total RCPP Funding for Fiscal Years 2014/2015

Funding Year	2014/2015
EQIP	$131,155,900
CSP	12,600,000
ACEP	55,391,280
HFRP	0
RCPP	195,680,000
TOTAL	**394,827,180**

Allocation Between CCAs, National, and State

Funding Year	2014/2015
CCA (35%)	$138,189,513
National (40%)	157,930,872
State (25%)	98,706,795
TOTAL	**394,827,180**

All funds are subject to final congressional appropriations and apportionment from the Office of Management and Budget.

The application must clearly request NRCS program funds for every year that the partner would like NRCS to fund the project within the timeframe of the proposed project. Funding will be available in FY 2015, and funds may be obligated through FY 2019. The fiscal year is October 1 to September 30. Funding details will be provided in all approved agreements. The maximum award amount for any project selected under this announcement will not exceed $20 million.

TA funding may be provided to a partner through the RCPP partnership agreement. No RCPP funding may be used to cover partners' administrative costs. (See definition of administrative costs in Appendix A). Administrative activities include any indirect or direct costs relating to submitting or implementing the project application. (See Part II, Section D for more information on TA.)

B. Funding Pools and Funding Priorities

Funding under the RCPP is divided among three funding pools: CCAs, national, and State. Each RCPP funding pool has similar requirements and some unique authorities and considerations. Each application must identify a single funding pool under which the application will be evaluated.

Applicants may only submit one application for a single project proposal. However, applicants may submit more than one application, as long as the proposals are for distinctly different projects. If an applicant wishes to submit multiple applications, the applicant must identify and provide clear evidence that project activities under one application are distinct from any other application. NRCS reserves the right to discard any or all applications that the applicant attempts to submit to multiple funding pools for the same project activities.

1. CCAs designated by USDA

Project applications submitted for consideration through the CCAs funding pool should address the resource concern priority listed for each CCA. CCAs represent an opportunity for many stakeholders to come together at a regional level to address common natural resource goals while maintaining or improving agricultural productivity. Through selected CCA projects, partners and NRCS will ensure that local producers and communities are fully engaged in addressing these goals while also meeting complementary local conservation goals.

To select CCAs, the Secretary evaluated areas throughout the country and assessed the degree to which each area contains significant agricultural production; is covered by an existing plan adopted by a Federal, State, or regional authority; would benefit from water quality or water quantity improvement; and contains producers that may have a need for assistance in meeting or avoiding a natural resource regulation.

Information about location, selection, criteria, and other information about the designated CCAs can be found at:
http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/farmbill/rcpp/.

Each CCA has an overarching goal that includes addressing primary and secondary resource concerns that are common throughout the area. Applications that demonstrate that the project will contribute to the overall CCA goals will be given priority as well as those that provide detail on how specific resource objectives will be monitored to assess outcomes. In addition to the availability of ACEP, CSP, EQIP, and HFRP authorities, projects within CCAs may use authorities under the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (other than the Watershed Rehabilitation Program), hereafter referred to as "watershed authorities." Applicants may include the use of these authorities in their project applications, but are not required to do so.

Table of Critical Conservation Areas

Critical Conservation Area	Resource Concern Priorities
Great Lakes Region (IL, IN, MI, MN, NY, PA, OH, WI)	**Water Quality Degradation**: Excess nutrients and pesticides in surface and ground waters; excessive sediment in surface water **Inadequate Habitat for Fish and Wildlife**: Habitat degradation
Chesapeake Bay Watershed (DE, MD, NY, PA, VA, WV)	**Water Quality Degradation**: Excessive sediment in surface water; excess nutrients and pesticides in surface and ground waters **Inadequate Habitat for Fish and Wildlife**: Habitat degradation
Mississippi River Basin (13-state area: AR, KY, IA, IL, IN, LA, MN, MO, MS, OH, SD, TN, WI)	**Water Quality Degradation**: Excess nutrients and pesticides in surface and ground waters; excessive sediment in surface waters **Insufficient Water**: Inefficient use of irrigation water (associated with Water Quality Degradation) **Inadequate Habitat for Fish and Wildlife**: Habitat degradation
Longleaf Pine Range (AL, FL, GA, LA, MS, NC, SC, TX, VA)	**Inadequate Habitat for Fish and Wildlife**: Habitat degradation **Degraded Plant Condition**: Undesirable plant productivity and health; excessive plant pest pressure **Water Quality Degradation**: Excess nutrients and pesticides in surface and ground waters; excessive sediment in surface waters
Columbia River Basin (ID, OR, WA)	**Insufficient Water**: Inefficient use of irrigation water **Water Quality Degradation**: Excessive sediment in surface waters; excess nutrients and pesticides in surface and ground waters **Inadequate Habitat for Fish and Wildlife**: Habitat degradation
California Bay Delta (CA)	**Water Quality Degradation**: Excess nutrients and pesticides in surface and ground waters; excessive sediment in surface waters **Insufficient Water**: Inefficient use of irrigation water **Inadequate Habitat for Fish and Wildlife**: Habitat degradation
Prairie Grasslands Region (CO, KS, IA, MO, MN, MT, ND, NE, NM, OK, SD, TX, WY)	**Inadequate Habitat for Fish and Wildlife**: Habitat degradation **Insufficient Water**: Inefficient use of irrigation water **Excess Water**: Runoff, Flooding or Ponding **Degraded Plant Condition**: Excessive Plant Pest Pressure
Colorado River Basin (AZ, CA, CO, NM, NV, UT, WY)	**Water Quality Degradation**: Excessive salts in surface waters and ground waters **Insufficient Water**: Inefficient use of irrigation water **Soil Quality Degradation**: Concentration of salts and other chemicals **Inadequate Habitat for Fish and Wildlife**: Habitat degradation

2. National Funding Pool

Project applications submitted for consideration through the national funding pool should further the conservation, restoration, and sustainable use of soil, water, wildlife, and other related resources. Applications that address multistate resource concerns, and those that provide detail on how specific resource objectives will be monitored to assess outcomes, will be given priority under the national funding pool. National priorities established under this Announcement for Program Funding include:

1. Water quantity
2. Water quality
3. Soil health
4. At risk species habitat
5. Air quality

3. State Funding Pool

Project applications submitted for consideration through the State funding pool should address at least one of the national priorities stated above or a State-identified priority. NRCS State Conservationists, with advice from the State Technical Committees and Tribal Conservation Advisory Councils, may also define more specific resource concerns to be addressed and give priority to applications that address these identified resource concerns and those that provide detail on how specific resource objectives will be monitored to assess outcomes. State priorities are available from the NRCS State offices identified in Appendix B. Applications competing under the State funding pool should be located entirely within one State.

For additional information on funding pools, go to:
http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/farmbill/rcpp/.

C. Alternative Funding Arrangements

Under alternative funding arrangements, NRCS may enter into agreements with multistate water resource agencies or authorities to deliver TA and FA under RCPP.

1. NRCS may only enter into an alternative funding arrangement with a multistate water resource agency or authority if:

   a. NRCS determines that the goals and objectives of the program will be met by the alternative funding arrangement;

   b. The multistate water resource agency or authority certifies that applicable limitations established under agreements with individual producers or landowners will not be exceeded, including statutory payment limitations; and

c. All participating producers and landowners meet applicable payment eligibility provisions.

2. As a condition of receiving an alternative funding arrangement, the multistate water resource agency or authority will agree:

   a. To ensure and certify that all of the covered program eligibility conditions, AGI limitations at 7 CFR part 1400, covered program payment limitations, conservation compliance requirements at 7 CFR part 12, and contract implementation requirements for RCPP and all applicable covered programs are met by all participating producers and landowners;

   b. To submit an annual independent audit to NRCS that describes the use of funds;

   c. To provide any data necessary for NRCS to issue a report on the use of funds;

   d. Not to use any funds provided for administration or to provide for administrative costs through contracts with another entity;

   e. To enter into a Cooperator Agreement to ensure the confidentiality of producer and landowner information in accordance with Section 1619 of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008; and

   f. To meet any requirements the NRCS Chief Financial Officer necessitated to ensure the integrity of Federal funds.

3. Limitation. As provided by Section 1271C(b)(2)(C) of the 1985 Act, NRCS may not enter into more than 20 alternative funding arrangements for the period of FY 2014 through FY 2018.

D. Technical Assistance Funds

TA funding can be provided in two different ways, or in a combination of both, in order to implement contracts and agreements with producers, landowners, and (for agricultural easements under ACEP) eligible entities to carry out the purposes of the program. NRCS can allocate TA funds to support the following:

1. NRCS personnel in accepted project areas;

2. A partner in accepted project areas (either through alternative funding arrangements or in partnership agreements); and

3. Combination of NRCS personnel and partner(s) in accepted project areas.

Partners may choose to request TA for a variety of activities including resource assessment, conservation practice survey and design, conservation planning, conservation implementation, water quality activities, resource monitoring, followup of installed practices, etc. (See definition of TA in Appendix A.) TA may not be used for a partner's administrative costs. (See definition of administrative costs in Appendix A.)

E. Examples of Significant Partner Contributions

An eligible partner must provide a significant portion of the overall cost of the project. The overall cost includes direct FA to producers, TA, and other in-kind services, such as outreach and education, monitoring, and administrative services. Partners may consider funds they have received from other Federal sources as part of their contribution to the project, provided they submit a written commitment from the Federal agency confirming that such Federal funds can be used in conjunction with NRCS funds.

Priority will be given to those applications that significantly leverage non-Federal financial and technical resources. NRCS has identified, as a goal leveraging, an amount equal to the Federal investment; therefore, partner applications that meet or exceed the amount requested from NRCS (direct or in-kind) will be the most competitive.

Examples of significant contributions may include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. A partner's leverage of non-Federal financial and technical resources to coordinate with other local, State, or national efforts within the project area.

2. A partner's financial, technical, or administrative assistance contribution to the project such that without this assistance, the project would not likely succeed.

3. A partner's ability to provide innovation in conservation methods and delivery, including outcome-based performance measures and methods.

4. The amount of time, effort, and other resources a partner will invest in developing, organizing, and managing the project. This may include administrative costs.

III. ELIGIBILITY INFORMATION

A. Partner Eligibility

Eligible partnering organizations include:

- An agricultural or silvicultural producer association or other group of producers;
- A State or unit of local government;
- An Indian Tribe;
- A farmer cooperative;
- A water district, irrigation district, rural water district or association, or other organization with specific water delivery authority to producers on agricultural land;
- A municipal water or wastewater treatment entity;
- An institution of higher education;
- An organization or entity with an established history of working cooperatively with producers on agricultural land, as determined by NRCS, to address—
    - Local conservation priorities related to agricultural production, wildlife habitat development, or nonindustrial private forest land management, or
    - Critical watershed-scale soil erosion, water quality, sediment reduction, or other natural resource issues.

Individual producers and landowners are not eligible to submit project applications under this notice. However, once NRCS has selected a project and a partnership agreement has been established, individual producers and landowners may apply directly to NRCS for programmatic assistance as part of the eligible project.

B. Land Eligibility

The following land, including Tribal land, is eligible for enrollment in the RCPP:

- Cropland
- Grassland
- Rangeland
- Pastureland
- Nonindustrial private forest land
- Other land incidental to agricultural production (including wetlands and riparian buffers) on which significant natural resource issues could be addressed under the program

IV. PREPROPOSAL APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS FOR PARTNERSHIP PROJECTS

A. Format and Instructions

RCPP provides for three funding pools—CCA, national, and State—and applications must be submitted to National Headquarters as identified at the beginning of this notice. In addition, preproposal applications for the State funding pool must also provide a copy of the preproposal application and, if selected, the full proposal to the appropriate NRCS State Conservationist by email (preferred) or U.S. Postal mail. (See list of NRCS State Conservationists and their addresses in Appendix B). Please note that each application will only be considered under one of the available funding pools; the proposed partner must indicate on the application the funding pool under which the application is being submitted.

Applicants must submit a preproposal application according to the instructions found in Part IV.B. by the application deadline. Preproposals will be evaluated according to the criteria in Part VI, Application Submission and Review, of this notice. Applicants must submit only one original copy of the application that is no longer than six letter-sized pages (single spaced) in 11-point Times New Roman font, with 1-inch margins. Applicants are encouraged to submit applications via email to RCPP@wdc.usda.gov.

In addition to fulfilling the requirements of this Part, applicants are encouraged to read all of Part V, Full Proposal Application Requirements for Partnership Projects, in order to understand the requirements for full proposals. Applications that fail to comply with the required content and format will not be considered for funding. Applicants may submit applications for more than one project. If an applicant wishes to submit applications to more than one funding pool, the applicant must identify and provide clear evidence that project activities under one application are distinct from any other application. Applicants must submit a separate application for each project.

B. Content

While all of the following items must be completed, applicants should focus their efforts on the main criteria on which applications will be evaluated. (See Part VI, Application Submission and Review, for additional information on ranking criteria.)

1. Application cover. The application must include the following:

    a. Project title.

    b. Project director/manager name, telephone number, and email address.

    c. Name of lead partner submitting the application and other collaborating partners.

    d. Mailing address and telephone numbers for lead partner submitting the application.

e. Funding pool applying for (CCA, national, or State). For CCA applications, include the name of the CCA.

f. Short general summary of project and description of resource issues to be addressed, including the primary resource concern and how the partner proposes to gauge success and monitor results of the project. Secondary resource concerns may also be included.

g. Specify the geographic focus of the project such as hydrologic unit codes for watersheds, habitat areas for wildlife, political jurisdictions of State and local governments, agricultural land uses, or other means of identifying project areas. Note that the project area does not need to be contiguous, but all areas should have a common primary resource concern to be addressed by the project. Include a general location map.

h. Proposed project start and end dates (not to exceed a period of 5 years), including an estimate of how much FA and TA is requested from covered programs by year (ACEP, EQIP, CSP, HFRP, and for CCAs only, watershed authorities).

i. Estimate the total amounts of RCPP funding requested from NRCS and the total amounts provided by the partner. This includes partner FA, TA, administrative costs, etc. TA funds, if requested, should include **only** those funds needed by the partner to carry out identified activities. Budget figures are preliminary at the preproposal stage; if the application is approved for full submission, it is understood that there may be differences once the details of the budget are developed.

2. Project Summary

a. Identify the project objectives and the natural resource concerns that will be addressed and how those concerns were identified. A complete list of NRCS approved natural resource concerns may be found on the RCPP Web site at: http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/farmbill/rcpp/.

b. A general description of the plans for evaluating outcomes, including plans for monitoring and modeling, and for reporting on progress to achieve the objectives of the application.

c. A brief description of the types of activities including: conservation practices, conservation activity plans, enhancements, wetland restoration activities, easement acquisition activities, other partner activities to be implemented during the project timeframe, and the general sequence of implementation of the project.

d. If applicable, indicate how the project will help producers in the area in "assisting producers in meeting or avoiding the need for natural resource regulatory requirements." Section 1271B(d)(4)(A) of the 1985 Act.

e. A description of any requested adjustments of terms, by program, with an explanation of why the adjustment of terms is needed in order to achieve the objectives of the project.

f. Whether and how the project may use alternative funding arrangements.

V. FULL PROPOSAL APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS FOR PARTNERSHIP PROJECTS

Full proposals will be accepted **only** from applicants who are notified at the end of the preproposal review process that their application has been identified for further evaluation. All RCPP applications become the property of NRCS for use in the administration of the program, may be filed or disposed of by the agency, and will not be returned to the partner. At its sole discretion, NRCS may request additional information from individual applicants as part of the review process.

A. Format and Instructions

Applicants must submit a project application that is no longer than 20 letter-sized pages (single spaced), excluding letters of support and project performance evaluation plans, as noted in the application requirements Parts IV and V. The project application must be submitted in 11 point Times New Roman font, with 1-inch margins. Only the information outlined below will be used for evaluation and ranking purposes. Do not submit documents other than those specifically requested in this Part. Incomplete applications, or those that do not meet the requirements set forth in this notice, will not be considered, and notification of elimination will be mailed to the applicant. NRCS may request additional information from individual applicants as part of the review process.

B. Partnership Application Requirements

The application must include the following:

1. Application cover (narrative must not exceed four pages, not including SF-424 forms, maps, and tables).

   Items 1.a. through 1.g. are the same as the application cover preproposal requirements in Part IV.1.a.-g. Applicants may use the same information but should highlight any areas that have changed since the preproposal was submitted.

   a. Project title.

   b. Project director/manager name, telephone number, and email address.

   c. Name of lead partner submitting the application and other collaborating partners.

   d. Mailing address and telephone numbers for lead partner submitting the application.

e. Funding pool applying for (CCA, national, or State). For CCA applications, include the name of the CCA.

f. Short general summary of project and description of resource issues to be addressed, including the primary resource concern and how the partner proposes to gauge success and monitor results of the project. Secondary resource concerns may also be included.

g. Specify the geographic focus of the project such as hydrologic unit codes for watersheds, habitat areas for wildlife, political jurisdictions of State and local governments, agricultural land uses, or other means of identifying project areas. Note that the project area does not need to be contiguous, but all areas should have a common primary resource concern to be addressed by the project.

h. Application form SF-424, Application for Federal Assistance. Applicants must use this form as the cover sheet for each project application. The SF-424 can be downloaded from Grants.gov – Forms Repository (Form, Instructions).

i. Applicants must also clearly state, by project objective, how they intend to leverage Federal funds along with partner resources (identify in-kind and cash contributions).

j. Form 424A, Budget Information – Non-Construction Programs (Form, Instructions). Complete all spaces, as appropriate. Section B, Item 6, Column 1 should reflect the NRCS funds, and Column 2 should reflect the funds contributed. This form is the summary budget for the project.

k. Proposed project start and end dates (not to exceed a period of 5 years), and a table showing how much FA and TA funds are being requested from covered programs by fiscal year. TA funds, if requested, should include **only** those funds needed by the partner to carry out identified activities. Identify the amount of program funding being requested from covered programs each year (ACEP, EQIP, CSP, HFRP, and for CCAs only, watershed authorities). Provide totals for all years and programs as illustrated in the following table.

Example Table for Requesting Program Funding

	EQIP	CSP (include acres)	ACEP (include acres for both WRE and ALE)	HFRP	CCAs only: Watershed Authorities	Totals
FY 2015 Partner request for FA $ Partner request for TA $* Partner provided TA $ Partner provided FA $ Partner Admin $ Acres**						
FY 2016 Partner request for FA $ Partner request for TA $* Partner provided TA $ Partner provided FA $ Partner Admin $ Acres**						
FY 2017 Partner request for FA $ Partner request for TA $* Partner provided TA $ Partner provided FA $ Partner Admin $ Acres**						
FY 2018 Partner request for FA $ Partner request for TA $* Partner provided TA $ Partner provided FA $ Partner Admin $ Acres**						
FY 2019 Partner request for FA $ Partner request for TA $* Partner provided TA $ Partner provided FA $ Partner Admin $ Acres**						
TOTALS						

*Partner request for TA only includes amounts needed for partner activities, not NRCS TA activities.
**Acres for CSP and ACEP.

l. A budget table, by fiscal year, that describes the activities and resource contributions. This table must include the amount of FA funds needed annually for producer contracts or agreements that will be used to implement the conservation practices and enhancements identified in the previous Part, by activity. If the partner is requesting TA, include the funding requested by activity. **For multistate projects, provide the funds or acres by State, as appropriate.**

Applicants must also clearly state, by project objective, how they intend to leverage Federal funds along with partner resources (identify in-kind and cash match).

Example activity table (narrative descriptions may also be included)

Fiscal Year	**Activity**	**Lead Partner(s)**	**Federal Financial Assistance Requested**	**Federal Technical Assistance Requested**	**Non-Federal Resources (In-kind)**	**Non-Federal Resources (Cash)**
FY 2015	Activity One	Lead Partner(s)	(Amount and Program)	(Amount and description)	(Amount and description)	(Amount and description)
FY 2015	Activity Two					

m. Describe the intended producer and landowner participants. (See definition of producer in Appendix A.)

n. Describe the land that will be the focus of the project (e.g., cropland, grazing land, forest land, and incidental land uses).

2. Letter of support from the applicable NRCS State Conservationist. For national or CCA applications, all NRCS State Conservationists in the proposed area should be consulted; however, only one letter of support is required. The State Conservationist writing the letter should indicate support from other appropriate State Conservationists.

3. Natural Resource Objectives and Actions (not to exceed four pages).

a. Identify the specific primary natural resource concern and any secondary resource concerns to be addressed through the project. Provide details about the natural resource concern(s) to be addressed and how they were identified.

b. List the proposed objectives and how they will address the identified resource concerns. Objectives should be specific, measurable, achievable, and results-oriented. Include a timeline for completion and demonstrate cost effective use of agency, partner, and producer resources. Describe how objectives will lead to environmental outcomes and how these outcomes will be measured. Environmental outcomes should consider either local or regional resource concerns and priorities, or both, as appropriate for the funding pool (CCA, national, or State).

c. For each objective, identify the actions to be completed to achieve the objective and to address the identified natural resource concern. Note which actions are to be addressed through this project using NRCS program assistance and which actions are being addressed through non-Federal funding sources or other resources provided.

4. Detailed application requirements (narrative must not exceed 12 pages, not including forms, maps, and tables).

a. A detailed map, accompanied by a narrative description of the geographic area covered by the application. If submitting the application electronically, the map should be in an electronic portable document file (PDF).

i. Describe the location and size of the proposed project area.

ii. Briefly describe the major land uses of the area with special emphasis on the lands that will be included in the project.

iii. Briefly describe why the particular area was chosen, including the scientific basis for the choosing the area (e.g., high levels of nutrient yields in a locally, regionally, or nationally significant water body; the area contains known habitat for an endangered or listed species; the area has experienced significant land-use change from agriculture to other uses; the area has a history of flooding or drought; etc.), and why targeted conservation in this area will contribute to CCA, national, or State priorities.

iv. Outline on the map or describe in the application the areas that need conservation treatment, and identify the number of acres involved.

b. Describe the consideration of cost-effectiveness of the proposed approach in terms of achieving the stated goals of the project. Briefly describe whether and how the application contributes to the efficient use of funding compared to at least one alternative approach, which may include an "as is" scenario describing the cost-effectiveness of current program delivery in the project area. The partner is encouraged to consider other alternative approaches to achieving the stated goals of the project and the relative cost-effectiveness of these approaches, and why the approach described in the application was chosen.

c. A description of how the partner(s) will collaborate to achieve the objectives of the partnership agreement and the roles, responsibilities, and capabilities of the partner(s). Applications that include resources from other than the submitter of the application must include a letter or other documentation from the other partners confirming this commitment of resources (letters may be in addition to the 20-page limit). Potential partners should also describe whether and how the project will coordinate with other local, State, or national activities, including regional plans adopted by government entities that address resource concerns identified in the project area.

d. A description of the project timeline, not to exceed 5 years in length, and a project implementation schedule which details when the potential partner anticipates finishing the project and submitting annual reports and final report.

e. A listing and description of the conservation activity plans, conservation practices, enhancements, wetland restoration activities, easement acquisition activities, and other partner activities to be implemented during the project timeframe and the general sequence of implementation of the project. Include TA efforts that will be made by the partner and those that the partner requests NRCS provide using eligible approved conservation practices and enhancements. List easement acquisition activities to be implemented by the partners and how they will be submitted by the partners/applicants to NRCS for review and approval. Describe any activities that are innovative or include outcome-based performance measures implemented by the partner.

Information about approved NRCS practices can be found in the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) at: http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/efotg/;

Descriptions of practices at: http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/technical/references/?cid=nrcs143_026849; and

Information on eligible enhancements on the CSP Web site at: http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/financial/csp/?cid=stelprdb1242683.

f. A description of the plans for assessing and evaluating the results of the project along with plans for reporting on progress to achieve the objectives of the application. Priority will be given to projects where the partner can provide resources or services or conduct activities to evaluate effects of conservation practices and activities implemented through the project.

g. Partners should consider different approaches for evaluating project outcomes and propose the best approach given partner resources and capacity. Approaches may include, but are not limited to, the following: identification of issues of concern and related priority source areas within a watershed, followed by an assessment of relevant conservation implemented in the critical areas to address the identified resource concern(s); monitoring at field or applicable broader scale (e.g., watershed

designated critical habitat) to document the effects of conservation practices installed; or simulation modeling to estimate practice effects.

h. Identify potential criteria to be used by NRCS to evaluate and rank agricultural producers' or landowners' RCPP program applications in the project area that are linked to NRCS' overarching metrics for judging the success of the program: solutions, contributions, innovation, and participation. Those criteria should reflect local priorities in addressing the primary resource concern as well as local considerations for conservation implementation. For all applications (CCA, national, and State), potential partners should collaborate with the appropriate NRCS State Conservationist(s) or his or her designee to develop these criteria. For approved projects, this joint effort will help NRCS select applications that will best accomplish the project's intended conservation goals and address priority resource concerns identified by the partner in the application. Additional information regarding the process NRCS uses to evaluate and rank individual applications is found in each of the authorized programs regulations. (See list of NRCS State Conservationists and their addresses in Appendix B).

i. An estimate of the percentage of eligible producers and landowners in the project area who may participate in the project, along with an estimate of the total number of participants located in the project area. Include a description of how the partner will provide for outreach to producers with special emphasis on beginning farmers or ranchers, limited resource farmers or ranchers, socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers, eligible veteran farmers or ranchers, and Tribal producers and how many are expected to participate. Include a description of the partner or partners' history of working with agricultural producers or landowners to address the conservation objectives to be achieved, any barriers expected in working with landowners to adopt conservation, and how those barriers will be addressed. How will the partner encourage participation to guarantee success of the project? Are there groups of producers who may submit joint applications to address resource issues of common interest and need? Describe how the partner will assist producers in applying for NRCS programs, including acting on the behalf of a producer at the producer's request.

j. If applicable, indicate how the project will help producers in the area in "assisting producers in meeting or avoiding the need for natural resource regulatory requirements." Section 1271B(d)(4)(A) of the 1985 Act. Briefly describe the regulation or potential regulation; the impact or potential impact of the regulation on producers, including any economic impact or impact on production; what mechanism (e.g., State-level or "safe-harbor" agreement or Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances) will allow project activities to be considered under the regulation.

k. A description of any requested adjustments of terms, by program, with an explanation of why the adjustment of terms is needed in order to achieve the objectives of the project. If a partner is requesting specific program flexibilities that depend on detailed participant or project information, the application must provide the needed

information. Partners should contact the appropriate NRCS State Conservationist, or his or her designee, to determine the specific information that may be required. (See list of NRCS State Conservationists and their addresses in Appendix B.)

l. If the project will request an alternative funding arrangement, include a detailed description of the proposed arrangement. Include how the proposed arrangement will meet all requirements for: RCPP; applicable covered programs; and participating individuals and entities, specifically eligibility conditions, payment limitations, AGI requirements, conservation compliance requirements, and contract implementation requirements. Detailed information on proposed alternative funding arrangements may be provided as an attachment to the project proposal and may be in addition to the 20-page limit. More details on specific requirements of alternative funding arrangement proposals will be provided to selected preproposals.

m. If the proposal includes any activities that are not covered by one of the NRCS conservation practice standards, briefly identify the beneficial and adverse effects of those activities on affected natural resources (soil, water, air, plants, and animals) and specially protected resources (e.g., cultural and historic resources, wetlands, threatened and endangered species, etc.). If these other actions are covered by an existing National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) document, provide the name of the document, a link, or indicate how a copy can be obtained.

n. Certifications: SF-424B – Assurances, Non-Construction Programs. All applications must include this document. The SF-424B may be found at: Grants.gov – Forms Repository (Form, Instructions).

o. The following items must be obtained prior to entering into an agreement with the Federal Government. Applicants are encouraged to apply early for their DUNS number and SAM registration.

   1. DUNS Number. A Dun and Bradstreet DUNS number is a unique nine-digit sequence recognized as the universal standard for identifying and keeping track of over 70 million businesses worldwide. Applicants must obtain a DUNS number. Information on how to obtain a DUNS number can be found at: http://fedgov.dnb.com/webform or by calling 1-866-705-5711. Please note that the registration may take up to 14 business days to complete.

2. SAM. System for Award Management is the official U.S. Government system that consolidated the capabilities of the Central Contractor Registration, Federal Register, Online Representations and Certification Application, and Excluded Parties List System. To register, go to: https://www.sam.gov/portal/public/SAM/. Please allow a minimum of 5 days to complete the SAM registration.

VI. APPLICATION SUBMISSION AND REVIEW

A. Definition of Success and Ranking Criteria

Applications will be evaluated against the following four criteria (also listed is the weight of each criterion and example questions that may be used to assess to what degree the criterion is met):

Table of Ranking Criteria and Weight for Preproposals and Full Proposal Applications

Weight	Ranking Criteria	Guidance and example questions
25%	Solutions	Successful partnerships will engage communities at the outset to identify the resource management opportunities in a defined area and then establish attainable and measurable goals for delivering on those opportunities. Successful partnerships will also design solutions that are enduring and locally recognized and supported by producers so that their benefits will extend well beyond the Federal investment from NRCS. • Has the partner outlined a project plan at the watershed or regional scale, with further targeting of critical, high-priority areas in order to maximize conservation effectiveness? • Has the partner identified the specific resource concern(s) and specific, measurable, achievable, and results-oriented goals to address the resource concern(s) in a cost effective manner, with a timeline for completion? • Has the partner outlined a plan to deliver high percentages of applied conservation practices to address water quality, water conservation, wildlife, or State, regional, or national conservation initiatives? • Has the partner demonstrated a strong relationship with the agricultural community, such that a high number of producers in the area are likely to participate in the project? • Has the partner demonstrated that the solutions identified in the application are supported by potential participants? • How will the partner assess the success of the project and measure environmental outcomes?

Weight	Ranking Criteria	Guidance and example questions
30%	Contributions	Successful partnerships will bring an array of financial and technical capabilities to projects. These capabilities will include cash contributions, technical professionals to work one-on-one with farmers and ranchers to provide planning and engineering activities, and experts to conduct field assessments of agronomic and environmental performance. Through partnerships, there will be more resources available on the ground to achieve solutions by working with agricultural producers and forest land owners on private lands. Priority will be given to those applications that significantly leverage non-Federal financial and technical resources, particularly those that include partners who may not have traditionally worked with NRCS. NRCS' goal is to double the conservation investment with partner contributions. • How much FA can the partner commit or leverage from other partners? • How much TA can the partner commit or leverage from other partners? • What types of in-kind activities will the partner contribute? Priority may be given to projects that have a plan for: outreach and education, particularly to producers who are not currently participating in NRCS programs and historically underserved producers; monitoring outcomes (e.g., water quality monitoring and species monitoring); and tracking the installation and maintenance of conservation systems. • Are the intended uses of cash and in-kind resources clearly stated and tied to overall project objectives?
20%	Innovation	Successful partnerships will realize the full potential of RCPP by drawing all of the program authorities into an integrated project so that resource management solutions are achieved most cost effectively. • Does the partner demonstrate an understanding of recent scientific findings and lessons learned in identifying suites of conservation practices that will lead to environmental outcomes? • Will the project utilize innovation mechanisms (such as "safe harbor" agreements) to help producers in "assisting producers in meeting or avoiding the need for natural resource regulatory requirements." Section 1271B(d)(4)(A) of the 1985 Act. • Will the project utilize environmental markets or other innovative methods of conservation delivery? • Has the partner evaluated the cost-effectiveness of at least two approaches to achieving project goals?
25%	Participation	Successful partnerships will bring a diverse array of stakeholders into a project and capitalize on their unique capabilities to help make a project successful. • Has the partner obtained a commitment from other entities, particularly nontraditional partners, to perform specific activities as part of the project? Extra consideration may be given to partner activities that NRCS does not typically perform. • Does the project contribute to a regional plan or activities by other local, State, or Federal efforts? • Does the partnership demonstrate a strong ability to collaborate successfully with agricultural producers and forest land owners?

B. Review Process

All applications will be reviewed for conformance with the requirements as established in this notice to determine qualified applications. Technical review boards of subject-matter experts will review qualified applications based on the criteria outlined in VI.A. Applications may be further divided by conservation purpose or resource concern for evaluation as a group.

A National review board will evaluate the results from the technical review boards and make recommendations to the Chief of NRCS for preproposals and final proposals for the national and CCA funding pools. Generally, applications that encompass a multistate area should apply for funding through the CCA, if applicable, or the national funding pool. For applications to the State funding pool, NRCS State Conservationists will establish a review process for preproposals and final proposals.

Once preproposals are selected, applicants will be notified and may submit final proposals in accordance with the requirements outlined in the announcement. Once the Chief or applicable NRCS State Conservationist selects a partner's final project application, partnership agreements will be negotiated and signed.

C. Environmental Review Requirements

The Council on Environmental Quality's NEPA regulations at 40 CFR parts 1500-1508 and the NRCS regulation that implements NEPA at 7 CFR part 650 require that an environmental review be prepared for Federal actions that may have environmental effects. NRCS FA, under RCPP, requires compliance with these regulations. As part of the application packet, applicants conducting activities other than NRCS conservation practices are required to provide environmental information pertaining to their project to help NRCS determine the appropriate documentation. Selected applicants may be required to provide additional information or otherwise assist NRCS, if NRCS requires such information or assistance, to ensure that the Federal funding meets environmental requirements. Funding cannot be approved until the environmental review requirements demonstrating compliance with NEPA are met. Note: Please be aware that applications for projects with potentially adverse impacts may need to be modified in order to achieve acceptable and beneficial levels of environmental impact. NRCS may choose not to approve funding for projects that cannot be modified.

VII. AWARD INFORMATION AND ADMINISTRATION

A. Partnership Agreements

Upon selection and approval of final full proposal applications, NRCS will enter into a partnership agreement with the selected partner(s). The partnership agreement will address, at a minimum, the following statutory and NRCS requirements:

Statutory requirements:

1. Under a partnership agreement, the eligible partner shall—

   a. define the scope of a project, including—

      i. the eligible activities to be implemented;

      ii. the potential agricultural or nonindustrial private forest land operations affected;

      iii. the local, State, multistate, or other geographic area covered; and

      iv. the planning, outreach, implementation, and assessment to be conducted

   b. conduct outreach and education to producers for potential participation in the project;

   c. at the request of a producer, act on behalf of a producer participating in the project in applying for assistance under section 1271C;

   d. leverage financial or technical assistance provided by the Secretary with additional funds to help achieve the project objectives;

   e. conduct an assessment of the project's effects; and

   f. at the conclusion of the project, report to the Secretary on its results and funds leveraged.

2. An eligible partner shall provide a significant portion of the overall costs of the scope of the project that is the subject of the agreement entered.

NRCS requirements:

1. The role(s) of the partner(s), including the lead partner's responsibilities to ensure the cooperation of other identified partners;

2. The role(s) of NRCS;

3. The responsibilities of the partner as they relate to conservation activities and evaluation;

4. The frequency and duration of conservation activities and evaluation to be completed by the partner;

5. The format and frequency of reports (annual and final) required as a condition of the partnership agreement;

6. The budget, including non-NRCS funding sources for FA and TA or easements;

7. NRCS funding amount being requested by activity;

8. The specified project schedule and timeframe; and

9. Other requirements deemed necessary by NRCS to further the purposes of the RCPP project.

Once the partnership agreement is signed by both the partner and NRCS, subject to the availability of funding, partners may initiate approved TA activities such as outreach, conservation planning, conservation implementation, monitoring/modeling, and other activities that further the purposes of the partnership agreement. NRCS may begin entering into applicable program contracts or agreements directly with eligible producers, landowners, or other eligible entities who wish to participate in the project, are located in the approved geographic area, and meet all program eligibility requirements of the covered program authorities being used in order to receive funding. In the case of alternative funding arrangements, partners will fulfill the applicable program contracting and agreement requirements, including all statutory and regulatory requirements associated therein.

B. Reporting Requirements

NRCS is required to report to the Secretary and Congress the following items for each project. Partners will be required to provide input on these items and submit reports to NRCS, as established in the partner agreement, no later than **November 30, 2015**, and every year thereafter. Reporting items and responsible entities are outlined in the table below.

REPORTING ITEMS TABLE

Reporting Item	Responsible Entity	
	NRCS	Partner
1. The number and types of eligible partners, landowners, and producers participating in the partnership agreements selected.	X	*
2. The number of producers and landowners receiving assistance.	X	*
3. The number of new producers and landowners reached (i.e., those who have not previously participated in NRCS programs) and if any beginning farmers or ranchers, limited resource farmers or ranchers, socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers, eligible veteran farmers or ranchers, or Indian Tribes received assistance.		X
4. Total funding committed to projects, including from Federal and non-Federal resources.		X
5. A description of how the funds are being administered under an alternative funding arrangement.		X
6. Means for tracking adherence to any applicable provisions for payment eligibility.	X	*
7. Any oversight mechanisms implemented.	X	*
8. The process through which program appeals by program participants are resolved.	X	

* In the case of alternative funding arrangements, the partner must provide this information.

In addition, on an annual basis, partners will be required to provide updates on the activities conducted to date; a status of the accomplishment of goals established in the project application, including whether and why goals have been adjusted; any proposed adjustments to funding requested from NRCS; and other items as required in the partnership agreement. Requirements for the final report will be established in the partnership agreement and will include a description of the goals and outcomes accomplished.

Failure to meet goals and reporting requirements may result in termination of a partnership agreement.

C. Notifications

All applicants will receive notification on selection or nonselection of projects. For CCA and national applications, partners should contact the Director of the Financial Assistance Programs Division, to develop the required partnership agreement and other implementation requirements. Upon notification of selection for a State application, the partner must contact the NRCS State Conservationist, listed in the letter, to develop the required partnership agreement and other project implementation requirements.

Potential partners should note that, depending upon available funding and agency priorities, NRCS may offer a reduced amount of program assistance from what was requested in the application.

D. Withdrawal of Applications

Partner applications may be withdrawn by written notice to the Director, Financial Assistance Programs Division, at any time prior to selection.

VIII. AGENCY CONTACTS

RCPP Program Contact:

Mark A. Rose, Director
Financial Assistance Programs Division
Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
RCPP Application
P.O. Box 2890
Washington, DC 20013-2890
Telephone: (202) 720-1845
Email: mark.rose@wdc.usda.gov

Administrative Contact:

Frankie Comfort
Grants Specialist
Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
P.O. Box 2690
Washington, D.C. 20013-2890
Telephone: (202) 690-0164
Email: frankie.comfort@wdc.usda.gov

Additional information about RCPP, including fact sheets, is available at:
http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/farmbill/rcpp/.

Signed this 22nd day of May, 2014, in Washington, D.C.

Jason A. Weller
Vice President, Commodity Credit Corporation and
Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service

APPENDIX A

Definitions. Terms used for the RCPP are defined in either Subtitle I of the Food Security Act of 1985, the covered program authorities, or as set forth below. To the extent any definition set forth below is inconsistent with a statutory or regulatory definition, the statutory or regulatory definition will control.

Administrative costs.—Costs beyond the costs of direct services (direct costs). These are also known as "indirect costs/overhead." Examples: rent/utilities, space used by staff, copies, phones, IT support, etc., that are used by all staff and not directly related to the project.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program.—The program administered by NRCS in accordance with Subtitle H of Title XII of the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended by section 2301 of the Agriculture Act of 2014.

Beginning farmer or rancher.—Defined under Section 343(a) of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act (7 U.S.C. 1991(a)), as a participant who:

- Has not operated a farm or ranch, or who has operated a farm or ranch for not more than 10 consecutive years. This requirement applies to all members of a legal entity; and
- Will materially and substantially participate in the operation of the farm or ranch.

In the case of a contract with an individual, individually or with the immediate family, material and substantial participation requires that the individual provide substantial day-to-day labor and management of the farm or ranch consistent with the practices in the county or State where the farm is located.

In the case of a contract made with a legal entity, all members must materially and substantially participate in the operation of the farm or ranch. Material and substantial participation requires that the members provide some amount of the management, or labor and management necessary for day-to-day activities, such that if the members did not provide these inputs, operation of the farm or ranch would be seriously impaired.

Chief.—The Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, or designee.

Commodity Credit Corporation.—A Government-owned and operated entity that was created to stabilize, support, and protect farm income and prices. CCC also helps maintain balanced and adequate supplies of agricultural commodities and aids in their orderly distribution.

Conservation planning.—Using the NRCS planning process outlined in the NRCS National Planning Procedures Handbook (NPPH)(Title 180, Part 600). The NPPH is available at: http://directives.sc.egov.usda.gov/.

Conservation Stewardship Program.—The program administered by NRCS in accordance with 7 CFR part 1470, which provides for TA and FA to encourage producers to address resource concerns in a comprehensive manner by undertaking additional conservation activities and improving, maintaining, and managing existing conservation activities.

Covered programs.—ACEP, EQIP, CSP, HFRP, and in CCAs only, the watershed authorities defined below.

Critical Conservation Area.—A geographic area designated by USDA based on the degree to which an area addresses RCPP priorities.

Eligible activity.—Any of the following conservation activities:

- Water quality restoration or enhancement projects, including nutrient management and sediment reduction;
- Water quantity conservation, restoration, or enhancement projects relating to surface water and ground water resources including—
    - The conversion of irrigated cropland to the production of less water-intensive agricultural commodities or dryland farming, and
    - Irrigation system improvement and irrigation efficiency enhancement;
- Drought mitigation;
- Flood prevention;
- Water retention;
- Air quality improvement;
- Habitat conservation, restoration, and enhancement;
- Erosion control and sediment reduction;
- Forest restoration; and
- Other related activities that NRCS determines will help achieve conservation benefits.

Eligible partner.—An entity that enters into a partnership agreement with NRCS to carry out the approved RCPP project including any of the following:

- An agricultural or silvicultural producer association or other group of producers;
- A State or unit of local government;
- An Indian Tribe;
- A farmer cooperative;
- A water district, irrigation district, rural water district or association, or other organization with specific water delivery authority to producers on agricultural land;
- A municipal water or wastewater treatment entity;
- An institution of higher education; and
- An organization or entity with an established history of working cooperatively with producers on agricultural land, as determined by the Secretary, to address—
    - Local conservation priorities related to agricultural production, wildlife habitat development, or nonindustrial private forest land management, or
    - Critical watershed-scale soil erosion, water quality, sediment reduction, or other natural resource issues.

Eligible veteran farmer or rancher.—Defined under Section 2501(e) of the Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990 (7 U.S.C. 2279(e)), is a farmer or rancher who has served in the Armed Forces (as defined in section 101(10) of Title 38 U.S.C.) and who—(A) has not operated a farm or ranch; or (B) has operated a farm or ranch for not more than 10 years.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program.—The program administered by NRCS in accordance with 7 CFR part 1466 which provides TA and FA to eligible producers for the installation and implementation of conservation practices and activities on private agricultural and nonindustrial forest land.

Field Office Technical Guide.—The official local NRCS source of resource information, conservation practice standards, specifications, and interpretation of guidelines, criteria, and requirements for planning and applying conservation practices and conservation management systems. It contains natural resource quality criteria to be achieved to provide for the conservation and sustainability of soil, water, and wildlife resources applicable to the geographic area where resource concerns are addressed. The FOTG can be accessed online at: http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/efotg/.

Fiscal year.—The Federal Government year beginning October 1 of each calendar year and ending September 30 of the following calendar year.

Financial assistance.—A payment made to a program participant.

Healthy Forests Reserve Program.—The program administered by NRCS in accordance with 7 CFR part 625.

High priority outcomes.—Project results that meet the purposes identified in Section 1271(c) of the 1985 Act and can include: assisting producers in meeting or avoiding the need for a natural resource regulatory requirement; covering a high percentage of producers in the area by the agreement; significantly leveraging non-Federal financial and technical resources and coordinate with other local, State, or national efforts; delivering high percentages of applied conservation to address conservation priorities or regional, State, or national conservation initiatives; providing innovation in conservation methods and delivery, including outcome-based performance measures and methods; or meeting other factors that are important for achieving the purposes of the program, as determined by NRCS.

Historically Underserved Producer.—An eligible person, joint operation, or legal entity that is a beginning farmer or rancher, socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher, or limited resource farmer or rancher.

Indian Tribe.—Any Indian Tribe, band, nation, or other organized group or community, including any Alaska Native village or regional or village corporation as defined in or established pursuant to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (43 U.S.C. 1601 et seq.), which is recognized as eligible for the special programs and services provided by the United States to Indians because of their status as Indians.

Legal entity.—An entity that is created under Federal or State law and that owns land or an agricultural commodity or produces an agricultural commodity.

Limited resource farmer or rancher.—Defined in 7 C.F.R § 1469.3 (CSP) and 7 C.F.R. § 1466.3 (EQIP), is a participant:

- With direct or indirect gross farm sales not more than the current indexed value in each of the previous 2 years; and
- Has a total household income at or below the national poverty level for a family of four, or less than 50 percent of county median household income in each of the previous 2 years.

A legal entity or joint operation can be a limited resource farmer or rancher only if all individual members independently qualify. A Self-Determination Tool is available to the public and may be completed online or printed hardcopy at: http://www.lrftool.sc.egov.usda.gov/.

Natural Resources Conservation Service.—An agency of USDA which has responsibility for administering the covered programs either directly, or on behalf of the CCC and the watershed authorities, which are made available through RCPP.

Participant.—A person, legal entity, joint operation, or Indian Tribe who has been determined eligible, has been accepted into a covered program, and is receiving payment or is responsible for implementing the terms and conditions of a conservation program contract or easement agreement under a program covered by RCPP.

Partnership agreement.—An agreement between NRCS and an eligible partner.

Payment.—FA provided to a program participant under the terms of the conservation program contract, long-term contract, cooperative agreement, or easement agreement. Payments and payment rates are established by program rule.

Person.—A natural person and does not include a legal entity.

Private land.—Land that is not owned by a governmental entity and includes acreage owned by Indian Tribes.

Producer.—A person, legal entity, or joint operation who has an interest in the agricultural operation, as determined by NRCS, or who is engaged in agricultural production or forestry management.

Program.—The RCPP authorized by Subtitle I of Title XII of the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended by section 2401 of the Agriculture Act of 2014.

Socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher.—Defined under section 355(e) of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act (7 U.S.C 2003(e)), as added in 1990, is an individual or entity who is a member of a socially disadvantaged group. For an entity, at least 50 percent ownership

in the farm business must be held by socially disadvantaged individuals. A socially disadvantaged group is a group whose members have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual qualities. These groups consist of the following:

- American Indians or Alaskan Natives
- Asians
- Blacks or African Americans
- Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders
- Hispanics

Notes: (1) Gender alone is not a covered group under NRCS conservation programs, and (2) the term "entities" reflects a broad interpretation to include partnerships, couples, legal entities, etc.

State Conservationist.—The NRCS employee who is authorized to implement conservation programs administered by NRCS and who directs and supervises NRCS activities in a State, the Caribbean Area, or the Pacific Island Areas.

State Technical Committee.—A committee established by the USDA Secretary in a State pursuant to 16 U.S.C. 3861 and described in 7 CFR part 610. Information regarding these committees can be found at: http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/technical/stc/.

Technical assistance.—Technical expertise, information, and tools necessary for the conservation of natural resources on land active in agricultural, forestry, or related uses. The term includes: (1) technical services provided directly to farmers, ranchers, and other eligible entities, such as conservation planning, technical consultation, and assistance with design and implementation of conservation practices; and (2) technical infrastructure including activities, processes, tools, and agency functions needed to support delivery of technical services, such as technical standards, resource inventories, training, data, technology, monitoring, and effects analyses. Information regarding TA can be found at: http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/cta/.

Technical Service Provider.—An individual, private-sector entity, or public agency certified by NRCS, in accordance with 7 CFR part 652, to provide technical services to program participants in lieu of or on behalf of NRCS. Additional information regarding TSP services available through RCPP is found in EQIP regulation (7 CFR part 1466.11) (http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip).

Tribal Conservation Advisory Council.—In lieu of forming a Tribal Conservation District, an Indian Tribe may elect to designate an advisory council to provide input on NRCS programs and the conservation needs of the Tribe and Tribal producers. The advisory council may be an existing tribal committee or department and may also constitute an association of member Tribes organized to provide direct consultation to NRCS at the State, regional, and national levels to provide input on NRCS rules, policies, and programs and their impacts on Tribes.

Watershed authorities.—The provisions of the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (Public Law 83-566) administered by NRCS in accordance with 7 CFR part 622, except such authorities do not include the Watershed Rehabilitation Program authorized by Section 14 of the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (16 U.S.C. 1012).

APPENDIX B

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