

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

AGENCY: Natural Resources Conservation Service, Commodity Credit Corporation

ACTION: NOTICE

Conservation Innovation Grants Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 Announcement for Program Funding

Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance (CFDA) Number: 10.912

SUMMARY: The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), an agency under the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), is announcing availability of Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies. Proposals will be accepted from all 50 States, the District of Columbia, the Caribbean Area (Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands), and the Pacific Islands Area (Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands). NRCS anticipates that the amount available for support of this program in FY 2015 will be up to **\$20 million**. Proposals are requested from eligible governmental or non-governmental organizations or individuals for competitive consideration of grant awards for projects between 1 and 3 years in duration.

Funds will be awarded through a two-phase nationwide competitive grants process that will include (1) a pre-proposal process and (2) a full proposal process. The full proposal process will only be open to applicants whose pre-proposals are selected by NRCS. Both phases are described in this announcement, but **only pre-proposals are being solicited at this time**.

This notice identifies the objectives, eligibility criteria, and application instructions for CIG projects. Proposals will be screened for completeness and compliance with the provisions of this notice. Incomplete and/or noncompliant proposals will be eliminated from competition, and notification of elimination will be sent to the applicant. NRCS will request a full proposal package only from those applicants selected in the pre-proposal phase.

DATES: Pre-proposals must be received by NRCS before 4:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time (EST) on **February 24, 2015**. NRCS will announce selected pre-proposals by **April 1, 2015**. Selected applicants will then be required to submit a full proposal package to NRCS by 4:00 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time (EDT) on **April 30, 2015**.

ADDRESSES: Proposals sent via express mail or overnight courier service must be sent to the following address: USDA-NRCS, CIG Program, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Room 6143-S, Washington, DC 20250. Proposals sent via the United States Postal Service must be sent to the following address: USDA-NRCS, CIG Program, P.O. Box 2890, Room 6143-S, Washington, D.C. 20013-2890. Proposals sent electronically must be sent through www.grants.gov or to nrcscig@wdc.usda.gov.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT: Stacy Swartwood, National CIG Program Analyst, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Room 6143-S, Washington, D.C. 20250; telephone: (202) 720-1895; email: stacy.swartwood@wdc.usda.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

I. FUNDING OPPORTUNITY DESCRIPTION

A. Legislative Authority

The Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) program is authorized as part of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) (16 U.S.C. 3839aa-8). The Secretary of Agriculture delegated the authority for the administration of EQIP, including CIG, to the Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), who is Vice President of the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC). EQIP is funded and administered by NRCS under the authorities of the CCC.

B. Overview

The purpose of CIG is to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies, while leveraging the Federal investment in environmental enhancement and protection in conjunction with agricultural production. CIG projects are expected to lead to the transfer of conservation technologies, management systems, and innovative approaches (such as market-based systems) into NRCS technical manuals and guides or to the private sector. CIG is used to apply or demonstrate previously proven technology in order to increase adoption with an emphasis on opportunities to scale proven, emerging conservation strategies. CIG promotes sharing of skills, knowledge, technologies, and facilities among communities, governments, and other institutions to ensure that scientific and technological developments are accessible to a wider range of users. CIG funds projects targeting innovative on-the-ground conservation, including pilot projects and field demonstrations. CIG does not fund research projects, with the exception of on-farm conservation research. On-farm conservation research is defined as an investigation conducted to answer a specified conservation-related question using a statistically valid design, while employing farm-scale equipment on farm fields. Specifically, a valid study design will use an appropriate number of replications and statistical analysis of results. To the extent NRCS funds research projects through CIG, the Agency will only fund research projects that stimulate innovative approaches to natural resource management in conjunction with agricultural production.

NRCS will accept proposals under this notice for single or multiyear projects, not to exceed three years, submitted by eligible entities from all 50 States, the District of Columbia, the Caribbean Area (Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands), and the Pacific Islands Area (Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands). Eligible entities include Indian Tribes, State and local units of government, non-governmental organizations, and individuals.

A two-phase evaluation process will be utilized for proposals submitted under this notice. The first phase requires the applicant to submit a pre-proposal. Pre-proposals will be screened for completeness and compliance with the provisions of this notice. Incomplete and/or noncompliant pre-proposals will be eliminated from competition, and notification of elimination will be sent to the applicant. NRCS staff will evaluate complete pre-proposals based on how they demonstrate the use of innovative technologies and/or approaches to address at least one of the topics provided in section I.D. of this notice.

NRCS will only request a full proposal package from those applicants selected in the pre-proposal process. Complete proposals received by applicable deadlines will be evaluated by a

technical peer review panel based on the Proposal Evaluation Criteria identified in the instructions in section VI.B. Full proposals, along with their technically based recommendations from the peer review groups and findings from review by State Conservationists or their delegates, will then be forwarded to the Grants Review Board. The Grants Review Board will make its recommendations for project approval to the NRCS Chief who will make the final selections.

C. Innovative Conservation Projects or Activities

For the purposes of CIG, the proposed innovative project or activity must promote environmental protection or natural resources enhancement, and encompass development and pilot field testing, on-farm research and demonstration, evaluation, and/or implementation of:

- Conservation adoption incentive systems, including market-based systems, or
- Promising conservation technologies, practices, systems, procedures, or approaches.

Projects or activities under CIG must comply with all Federal, State, and local regulations throughout the duration of the project and:

- Make use of proven technology or a technology that has been studied sufficiently to indicate a high probability for success,
- Demonstrate, evaluate, or verify environmental (soil, water, air, plants, energy and animal) effectiveness, utility, affordability, and usability of conservation technology in the field,
- Adapt conservation technologies, management, practices, systems, procedures, approaches, and incentive systems to improve performance, and encourage adoption,
- Introduce conservation systems, approaches, and procedures from another geographic area or agricultural sector, or
- Demonstrate transferability of knowledge.

D. National Component

For FY 2015, NRCS will consider pre-proposals that demonstrate the use of innovative technologies and/or approaches to address at least one bulleted topic under the categories listed below. Additional topics, not listed below, may be considered at the Chief's discretion. If an additional topic is proposed for the Chief's consideration, it must be identified as such in the pre-proposal. Both pre-proposals and full proposals must identify the funding pool, primary category AND bulleted topic the innovation/technology is addressing. The funding pool and primary/first category identified in the full proposal will determine the technical peer review group assignment. Up to 10 percent of the total funds available for CIG in FY 2015 may be set-aside for proposals from historically underserved producers, veteran farmers or ranchers, or community-based organizations comprised of or representing these entities. Please see Section III. E. below for more information on the 10 percent set-aside.

1. Environmental Markets and Finance Funding Pool

The quantification of ecosystem services and development of environmental markets present opportunities for accelerating voluntary conservation implementation on private lands, in service of improving natural resource and environmental conditions. Over the past decade, CIG funding has supported many of the leading environmental markets programs across the country.

For fiscal year 2015, NRCS is soliciting proposals for Greenhouse Gas markets (GHG), Water Quality markets, and Conservation Finance. GHG and Water Quality markets have seen tremendous growth in recent years, culminating in the execution of credit trades that have improved on-farm, national, and global natural resource conditions and economically benefited farmers and ranchers. NRCS seeks to fund the next generation of environmental markets projects, expanding the scope and success of nascent markets nationwide. Additionally, NRCS recognizes growing interest in leveraging private capital markets to foster impact investments in conservation, sustainable agriculture and forestry, and the provision of ecosystem services. Early stage, low risk capital in the form of CIG grants can help underwrite costs of demonstrations that can significantly expand impact investments in conservation for the benefit of America's working lands and offer new models for working in partnership with NRCS conservation programs. Moreover, many of these opportunities can help past NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant recipients transform successful demonstration projects into replicable and scalable transactions. Following are the categories and topics that proposals may address:

a. Greenhouse Gas Markets

To be given consideration, the project or activity should demonstrate at least one of the following:

1. Permanence of the Greenhouse Gas (GHG)-benefitting practices (longevity and risk aversion).
2. Coordination of market-based approaches to conservation. Establish and demonstrate efforts to strengthen regional collaboration and quantification of multiple ecosystem service crediting for a single NRCS conservation practice, also known as credit stacking.
3. Demonstration, metrics improvement, and calibration of GHG tools for use in environmental markets. Establish and demonstrate efforts to parameterize ecosystem service quantification tools for use in environmental markets. This may include improvement and refinement of quantification methodologies, simplification of verification processes, aggregation of small projects, and innovative methods to minimize transaction costs.
4. Integration of new conservation partners. Establish collaborative relationships with corporate supply chain initiatives that recognize the instrumental role of NRCS voluntary conservation practices in meeting and exceeding corporate GHG reduction and carbon sequestration targets. Identify opportunities for corporate entities to participate and invest in innovative conservation partnerships linked with carbon credits and other quantifiable ecosystem services.
5. Linkage with entity- and aggregate-level GHG registries—via either developing new quantification protocols and techniques, or refinement and utilization of established agricultural and forestry protocols. Carbon market projects should provide linkages with registries such as the Climate Action Reserve (CAR), the Verified Carbon Standard (VCS), the American Carbon Registry (ACR), regulatory registries (e.g., California, RGGI, etc.), or others.

For the purpose of this section, NRCS is seeking proposals to stimulate the development of GHG markets to include at least one of the bulleted topics.

- **Soil health.** Establish and demonstrate how implementation of soil health management systems can be integrated into carbon markets: 1) Cropland Soil Health, including tillage, cover crops, nitrogen management, etc., and/or 2)

Grazing Land Soil Health, including animal management, prescribed grazing, soil amendments such as manure or compost, and interseeding legumes. Proposals must demonstrate and quantify the GHG benefits of the approaches. Proposals that include engagement with voluntary and regulatory environmental markets to help incentivize management changes are encouraged.

- **Agroforestry.** Establish and demonstrate innovative uses of agroforestry practices to encourage renovation of existing farmstead and field windbreaks, new efforts in silvopasture, alley cropping, riparian buffers, or other agroforestry practices. Proposals must demonstrate and quantify the GHG benefits of the approaches. Proposals that include engagement with voluntary and regulatory environmental markets to help incentivize management changes are encouraged.
- **Energy.** Establish and demonstrate how farm and ranch energy efficiency and renewable energy can be quantified with enough certainty to allow for engagement with voluntary and regulatory carbon markets.
- **Biogas.** Establish and demonstrate innovative ways to expand the capture and use of methane from livestock systems. Examples include anaerobic digestion associated efforts to create markets for value-added byproducts, and covering/flaring or other means of capturing and utilizing methane. The project should emphasize efficient and cost effective means of adopting technologies that are especially relevant to small- to medium-sized livestock operations. Proposals must demonstrate and quantify the GHG benefits of the approaches. Proposals that include engagement with voluntary and regulatory environmental markets to help incentivize management changes are encouraged.

b. Environmental Markets for Water

To be given consideration, the project or activity should demonstrate each of the following:

1. Demonstrated effort to build on the existing knowledge and successes of water quality or water quantity markets.
2. Expansion of the scope and scale of existing markets or development of new markets.
3. Consideration of multiple natural resource benefits (e.g., GHG mitigation, wildlife habitat).
4. Commitment to increasing agricultural producer participation in environmental markets.
5. Understanding of supply and demand challenges and commitment to solving them.

For the purpose of this section, NRCS is seeking proposals to stimulate the development of water quality or water quantity markets to include at least one of the bulleted topics.

- **Market Rules and Infrastructure.** Develop innovative, forward-thinking rules, protocols, guidance and infrastructure supporting environmental markets for water, including one or more of the following concepts:
 - i. Increase buyer and seller participation in existing markets.
 - ii. Demonstrate, expand and evaluate the use of proven approaches to improve the performance of existing or emerging markets.
 - iii. Develop or improve credit trading platforms, including certification protocols, registries, and reporting systems.
 - iv. Develop or improve credit quantification tools.

- **Scale and Scope.** Develop approaches to expand the scale and scope of existing credit markets, including one or more of the following concepts:
 - i. Accelerate and expand market participation by buyers and sellers through approaches that increase transparency and reduce risk.
 - ii. Coordination of trading systems between states/within regions (e.g., parity of trading rules, reciprocity, consistent exchange rates and other elements supporting eligibility for interstate buying and selling of credits).
 - iii. Development of multiple-resource crediting and creation of co-benefits (e.g., wildlife habitat, GHG mitigation) protocols.

c. Impact Investments in Working Lands Conservation

To be given consideration, the project or activity should demonstrate each of the following:

1. Significant potential to leverage scalable investment from private capital markets to achieve conservation goals in areas such as soil health, air quality, nutrient management, water quality and water use-efficiency, forest restoration, on-farm energy efficiency and generation, and green infrastructure.
2. Commitment to improve measurement and metrics of conservation outcomes associated with investment strategies.
3. Engagement of new conservation partners including diverse segments of the private investment community.
4. New models for retention of productive working farm, forest and ranchlands consistent with landowner ownership and management objectives.

Priority will be given to projects that help successful past CIG grant demonstrations mature into replicable and scalable transactions. For the purpose of this section, NRCS is seeking applications to stimulate the development of new demonstrations to include at least one of the following topics:

- **New Product Development.** Develop new investment product and demonstrations in areas such as:
 - i. Pay-for-success Environmental Improvement Bonds
 - ii. Climate/Green Bonds
 - iii. Sustainable Agricultural Investment
 - iv. Sustainable Forestry Investment
 - v. Green Infrastructure Investment
- **Metrics.** Efforts to improve the consistency and transparency of monitoring, environmental performance or measurement of environmental outcomes associated with existing or planned investment demonstrations.

2. **Natural Resources Funding Pool**

For the purpose of this section, NRCS is seeking proposals to stimulate the development of natural resources improvements to include at least one of the categories and bulleted topics listed below.

a. *Projects Benefitting Historically Underserved Producers, Veteran Farmers or Ranchers, or Organizations Comprised of or Representing these Individuals or Entities (i.e. Outreach)*

- Technology transfer.
- Demonstration of new or novel technology that can easily and inexpensively be adopted.
- Projects that assess resource conditions and land capabilities.
- Projects that emphasize program outreach.
- Projects that develop technical training.

b. *Air Quality*

- Demonstrate and evaluate strategies and/or technologies that help manage nitrogen-based ambient air emissions (such as ammonia and oxides of nitrogen).
- Develop and demonstrate ambient air quality assessment methodologies and procedures for identifying air quality issues and solutions related to animal and/or crop production systems. The methodologies and procedures should focus on one or more agriculturally related air contaminants and identify opportunities for mitigating emissions at multiple steps in the animal and/or crop production process.
- Demonstrate and evaluate technologies for mitigating air emissions from livestock and poultry production systems via alternative animal, housing, feed, manure, and/or nutrient management strategies. The demonstration should focus on preventing the initial generation of air contaminants and quantify the economics of implementing the alternative management strategy, as well as the impact on animal health and performance.
- Demonstrate and evaluate innovative strategies, technologies, and/or equipment for reducing particulate matter emissions from land preparation, planting, harvesting, and other field operations for cropland (including orchards and vineyards), pastureland, or forest land. Potential areas of focus can include equipment that allows multiple operations in a single pass to reduce the number of field passes per crop rotation and other alternative equipment technology; the use of harvest and/or alternative crop cultural methodologies; the use of precision guidance systems for reducing overlap of field passes, or other purposes; methodologies or technologies for better timing field operations; and others. The demonstration should quantify the economics of implementing the strategy, technology, and/or equipment, as well as the impact on crop production.
- Increase cross-cutting support for market development, and interest in credit-stacking and “co-benefits.”

c. *Soil Health*

- Demonstrate and quantify impacts of soil health promoting practices (e.g., no-tillage, cover crops, crop rotations) on yield, yield variability, and economics of crop production across a range of soils, cropping systems, and climates. Methodologies for demonstration may include case studies and enterprise budgets.
- Demonstrate and quantify the impacts of cover crops, crop rotations, tillage and/or soil amendments on soil chemical, physical, and/or biological properties

and their relationships with nutrient cycling, soil water availability, and plant growth.

- Demonstrate and quantify the ability of soil health assessments (e.g., Cornell Soil Health Assessment, Haney Soil Health Nutrient Tool) to inform fertility recommendations for meeting crop nutrient needs, and relate to other economic and environmental outcomes (e.g., yield, yield stability, input cost, risk, water quality, greenhouse gas emissions).
- Demonstrate and quantify the rate of increase in available soil water-holding capacity as a function of soil properties (e.g., particle size, mineralogy), management practices (e.g., tillage, amendments, cover crop or crop residue inputs), and/or climate.
- Development of optimal species mixes, seeding rates and seeding methods (e.g., inter-seeding, inter-cropping, frost-seeding) to enhance cover crop establishment/survival and increase soil organic matter.
- Quantify and demonstrate the impacts of Soil Health Management Systems on nutrient losses through surface and subsurface pathways for tile-drained and non-drained soils.
- Development of a decision support tool that incorporates the impacts of crop residue/cover crop quality parameters (e.g., cellulose, lignin, C/N) on decomposition and nutrient turnover for designing Soil Health Management Systems that optimize nutrient availability, control soil-borne diseases, and increase available soil water holding capacity.
- Demonstrate and quantify the potential increases in water availability and reductions in nutrient losses given widespread adoption of soil health promoting practices such as cover crops and no-tillage.
- Demonstrate and quantify the impacts of cover crop presence, species mix, and management (e.g., termination growth stage, tillage practice) on soil water content and subsequent crop yield across a range of climates and cropping systems.
- Demonstrate and quantify the impacts of Soil Health Management Systems (e.g., cover crops, reduced tillage) on key soil health attributes (e.g., available water holding capacity, disease suppression, nutrient cycling) and determine the extent to which the rates of change are influenced by climate, organic input, chemical composition/placement, and soil properties (e.g., particle size, mineralogy). This should be conducted across a range of inherent soil properties, cropping systems, and climates to develop a Decision Support Tool that promotes selection and design of the components of a Soil Health Management System.
- Demonstrate innovative approaches for adopting soil health promoting practices in relatively cool and/or wet climates (e.g., zone tillage, short season cultivars).
- Demonstrate and quantify at a watershed scale the water quality impacts of installing conservation systems that support and improve soil health.
- Demonstrate pasture cropping techniques, seeding rates, equipment needs for improving soil and animal health in grazing systems.
- Demonstrate and quantify the impacts of grazing systems on soil health.

d. Aquatic Resources

- Demonstrate and quantify the impact of conservation approaches and technologies most useful for addressing ocean resources—particularly coastal wetlands and coral and oyster reefs—while achieving USDA conservation goals.

e. Economics and Sociology

- Demonstrate the impacts of conservation practices and suites of conservation practices on net revenue, net cost, and yield variability (or other measures of economic risk). Methods to demonstrate these impacts may include both case studies and enterprise budgets.
- Develop and demonstrate individual enterprise budgets/case studies for a range of major agricultural systems, production zones, and management practices (e.g. comparing no-tillage vs. tillage, cover crops vs. no cover crops; rotations vs. continuous cropping).
- Develop a tool for measuring economic returns of conservation for landowners. Tools should be useful for analyzing and demonstrating the financial costs and potential returns of alternative conservation practices, taking into account such factors as land characteristics and production potential. Tools should adhere to the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association standards for estimating farm costs and returns, including estimating opportunity costs for operator labor and management, be easy to use and understand, and provide transparent calculations.
- Develop a tool for assessing the economics of conservation that includes a defensible and acceptable valuation of environmental benefits and identification of knowledge gaps.
- Demonstrate, through coordinated case studies, how conservation efforts have benefited landowners and rural communities in different regions.
- Evaluation of the sociological/economic/farm management barriers to adoption and demonstration of ways to overcome those barriers for several conservation practices including: implementation of nutrient management plans, adoption of manure injection technologies, installation of stream bank fencing or riparian buffers, adoption of precision livestock feeding or precision grazing practices, manure redistribution, and/or other practices that landowners appear reluctant to adopt.
- Demonstrate and evaluate the conservation and economic value/advantages of sensor-based input management for crop production.
- Demonstrate and quantify the economics of intensive grazing systems.

f. Organic Operation Technologies

- Demonstrate and evaluate innovative organic pest and nutrient management technologies for single and/or integrated vegetable, row crop, orchard, and/or livestock systems.

g. Wildlife

- Develop regional, crop-specific guidance providing the vegetative species, landforms, and necessary acreage to support appropriate populations of managed and wild pollinators per unit area of pollinated crops (e.g., describe the components of the landscape).
- Develop planning and decision aids to assess and maximize wildlife habitat value on land used to grow biofuel crops.
- Demonstrate new techniques and/or technologies for monitoring and evaluating wildlife habitat both on-site and via remote sensing.
- Demonstrate and quantify the impacts of grazing as a habitat management tool.

- Develop and/or demonstrate fish screen, fish passage, and other fish-related technology and criteria for native aquatic species of conservation concern.
- Demonstrate innovative approaches for restoring and reconnecting bottomland hardwood ecosystems that preserve hydrologic connectivity and aquatic organism passage.
- Develop metrics of measurable habitat improvement that could potentially be traded under a species-banking framework.

h. Water Quantity

- Develop and demonstrate strategies for limited/deficit irrigation water management and quantify its impact on water resources and farm profitability.
- Demonstrate and evaluate technologies to enhance agricultural water use efficiency at field, farm, and/or watershed scales.
- Demonstrate and evaluate technologies and approaches to mitigate the impacts of long-term drought on agricultural production.

i. Nutrient Management and Water Quality

- Demonstrate and quantify the optimal combinations of nutrient source, application rate, placement, and application timing (4 Rs of nutrient management), as measured by impact on nutrient use efficiency and yield for one or more of the following crops: corn, soybeans, wheat, vegetables, hay/pasture, cotton, and/or rice. Demonstrations are encouraged that show how these optimal combinations change for one or more of the following comparisons: irrigated vs. non-irrigated management, conventional tillage vs. reduced tillage systems, manure-amended vs. non manure-amended systems, and/or organic vs. conventional production systems.
- Demonstrate and quantify the effectiveness of bundling conservation measures to avoid, control, and trap nutrient losses from the field.
- Demonstrate and quantify the effectiveness of methods to capture dissolved phosphorus from field runoff and subsurface drainage.
- Demonstrate the applicability and utility of in-season nitrogen management tools for determining additional nutrient needs for a range of soils, climates and/or cropping systems.
- Demonstrate technologies that can improve cost efficiency of transporting manure nutrients from regions of dense populations of animal agriculture operations to areas with low densities of animal operations that have demand for manure nutrients.
- Demonstrate innovative techniques for keeping liquid manure applied via irrigation, surface application, or injection from entering subsurface drainage systems through macro pores.
- Demonstrate new alternatives to manure application to frozen or saturated soils.
- Demonstrate suite(s) of conservation practices and document the conditions for their optimal use in protecting surface and ground water quality if manure or nutrients were to be applied to frozen soil.

j. Energy Conservation

- Evaluate and demonstrate renewable energy systems (e.g., hydropower, solar, and/or wind) that offset fossil fuel energy use and meet on-farm energy needs,

while increasing energy efficiency and/or reducing environmental contaminants (e.g., greenhouse gas emissions, particulate matter).

- Develop and demonstrate innovative planning and decision aids to assess potential impacts of small on-farm renewable energy systems on wildlife and wildlife habitats and that can be used to identify appropriate sites to avoid or minimize potential adverse impacts.
- Develop and/or demonstrate innovative implementation systems to achieve greater use and quantify benefits of energy audits that address cropland, buildings, and equipment.

k. Co-Management for Food Safety¹

- Demonstrate and quantify the effects of conservation practices (e.g., buffers) and/or systems of conservation practices for reducing manure-born zoonotic pathogen transport and survival for different climates and agricultural systems. This may include pathogens originating from animal production facilities or from wildlife.
- Demonstrate innovative ways to support:
 1. continued land application of manure and manure-based soil amendments as components of a soil health or nutrient management strategy;
 2. adaptation of irrigation water management or treatment programs that allow continued gains in water optimization and reuse (e.g., tailwater recovery) efforts; or
 3. wildlife management strategies that mitigate concerns about wildlife movement into the crop field from adjacent conservation practices and/or adjacent lands.
- Demonstrate an assessment process to evaluate the impact of conservation practices and the landscape on food safety to assist in conservation planning.
- Demonstrate strategies to effectively direct wildlife movement as to avoid regular animal intrusion into produce farms. Evaluate fencing techniques such as offset (3-dimensional, one or two strand) double, electrified fence for economic viability and effectiveness.
- Demonstrate and evaluate the effectiveness of using GIS applications and digital elevation data obtained by remote sensing technology such as LiDAR to determine best locations for siting grazing and animal health facilities (relative to produce fields) when working with producers to develop conservation plans and contracts.
- Demonstrate management practices, as well as appropriate adaptations, that will reduce pathogen loading throughout irrigation water delivery, application, and recovery systems. Include economic analysis for cost feasibility.
- Provide guidance for conservation practice design or adaptation to influence wildlife use of conservation practices that may also serve as wildlife habitat (e.g., those with vegetation or water components, including but not limited to buffers,

¹ The projects should demonstrate and evaluate the use of conservation practices that can be co-managed to meet food safety management objectives as described in the FDA’s Proposed Rule “Standards for the Growing, Harvesting, Packing and Holding of Produce for Human Consumption” (i.e., the Produce Safety Rule) (proposed standards to implement section 105 of the Food Safety Modernization Act). Where appropriate, projects should focus on adaptations to existing conservation practices or establishing new conservation practices that retain conservation functions while simultaneously allowing farmers to address food safety concerns.

riparian areas, and hedgerows). Project should also articulate and demonstrate that conservation value of practice maintained with modifications to address food safety.

1. Herbicide Weed Resistance

- Demonstrate and evaluate voluntary herbicide resistance management implemented by groups of farmers in communities impacted by or that wish to prevent/delay evolution of herbicide resistance in weeds.

II. FUNDING AVAILABILITY

NRCS anticipates that the amount available for support of this program in FY 2015 will be up to **\$20 million**. The anticipated funding breakdown for each funding pool is:

- Environmental Markets: approximately \$10 million
- Natural Resources: approximately \$10 million

Funds not used in one pool may be transferred to the other funding pool.

CIG will fund single and multi-year projects, not to exceed 3 years (anticipated project start date of **September 30, 2015**). Funds will be awarded through a nationwide competitive grants process. The maximum award amount for any project will not exceed \$1 million in FY 2015.

III. PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS AND INFORMATION

A. Applicant Eligibility

CIG applicants must be a federally recognized Indian Tribe, State or local unit of government, non-governmental organization, or an individual.

B. Project Eligibility

To be eligible, projects must involve producers who meet the EQIP eligibility requirements set forth in § 1466.6(b)(1) through (3). Additional information regarding EQIP eligibility requirements can be found at:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/eqip>. Participating producers are not required to have an EQIP contract.

C. Matching Funds Requirements

Selected applicants may receive CIG grants of up to 50 percent of their total project cost not to exceed \$1 million. CIG recipients must provide non-Federal funding equal to the amount of Federal funds requested. Non-Federal funds must be derived from cash and/or in-kind sources.

Matching funds must be secured at time of application. Proposals should include written verification of commitments of matching support (including both cash and in-kind contributions) from third parties. Additional information about matching funds can be found at [2 CFR 215](#).

D. EQIP Payment Limitation and Duplicate Payments

The following payment requirements apply to CIG:

- CIG funds are awarded through grant agreements. These grant agreements are not EQIP contracts; thus, CIG awards in and of themselves are not limited by the payment limitation found at section 1240G of the Food Security Act of 1985, 16 U.S.C. 3839aa-7, which imposes a \$450,000 payment limitation for all payments made to persons or legal entities under an EQIP contract entered into between FY 2014 and FY 2018.
- All agricultural producers receiving a direct or indirect payment through participation in a CIG project must meet the eligibility requirements of 7 CFR § 1466.6(b)(1) through (3).
- In addition, section 1240B of the Food Security Act of 1985, 16 U.S.C. 3839aa-2, prohibits duplicative payments. Accordingly, direct or indirect payments cannot be made for a practice for which an individual or legal entity has already received funds, or is contracted to receive funds through any USDA conservation program (e.g., Conservation Reserve Program, EQIP, Agricultural Management Assistance, Conservation Security Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program).

To participate in EQIP financial assistance, an individual or entity must meet the eligibility requirements in 7 CFR § 1466.6, which include the following:

Criteria	Potential Verification Documentation*
Be in compliance with the highly erodible land and wetland conservation provisions (7 CFR Part 12)	Documentation of their compliance status can be obtained by the producer at their local USDA Service Center or through the USDA customer service on-line portal
Have an interest in a farming operation as defined in 7 CFR Part 1400	Documentation of their interest in a farming operation can be obtained by the producer at their local USDA Service Center or through the USDA customer service on-line portal showing that the producer has established farm records
Have control of the land for the term of the proposed contract period	Documentation can be provided in the form of a deed, lease, or other documents which show the producer has adequate control for the term of the proposed contract period
The average adjusted gross income of the individual, joint operation, or legal entity may not exceed \$900,000	If using FY 2014-2018 CIG funding, documentation of a producer's Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) eligibility status can be obtained by the producer at their local USDA Service Center, or through the USDA customer service on-line portal.

*Many of the verification documents will require that the producer have current records established with the Farm Service Agency or require that the producer establish new records.

E. Historically Underserved Producers and Veteran Farmers or Ranchers

For the FY 2015 CIG award process, up to 10 percent of the total funds available for CIG may be set-aside for proposals from historically underserved producers or veteran farmers or ranchers, or community-based organizations comprised of or representing these entities.

To compete for these set-aside funds, the applicant must make a declaration in the application as described in Part V.A.10. of this notice. Proposals that are unsuccessful in the set-aside competition will automatically be placed in the general application pool for consideration. Funds not awarded from the set-aside pool will revert back into the general funding pool. Listed below are the regulatory definitions of a Historically Underserved Producer and a Veteran Farmer or Rancher, which are found at [7 CFR 1466.3](#):

- *Historically underserved producer* means a person, joint operation, legal entity, or Indian Tribe who is a beginning farmer or rancher, socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher, or limited resource farmer or rancher.
- *Veteran farmer or rancher* means a producer who meets the definition in section 2501(e) of the Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990, as amended (7 U.S.C. 2279(e)).

F. Activities Limitation and Implementation

Technologies and approaches that are eligible for funding in a project's geographic area through EQIP are ineligible for CIG funding except where the use of those technologies and approaches demonstrates clear innovation. The burden falls on the applicant to sufficiently describe the innovative features of the proposed technology or approach. Applicants should reference the appropriate State's EQIP Eligible Practices List by contacting the applicable [NRCS State office](#).

CIG is designed to provide financial assistance to grantees. Procurement of any technical assistance required to carry out a project is the responsibility of the grantee. Technical oversight for grant projects will be provided by a Federal technical representative who will be designated by NRCS. NRCS will also designate a Program Contact and Administrative Contact for each project.

IV. SUBMISSION INFORMATION FOR PRE-PROPOSALS

All standard forms necessary for CIG submission are posted on the following Web site: [Grants.gov - Forms Repository](#).

A. How to Obtain Materials

The announcement for this CIG funding opportunity can be found on the following web sites: www.grants.gov and <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/cig/index.html>.

B. Content and Format

Pre-proposals must contain the content, format, and information set forth below to receive consideration for funding. Applicants should not assume prior knowledge on the part of NRCS or others as to the relative merits of the project described in their application. Applicants must submit only one original copy of the pre-proposal in the following format:

- Each page must be on numbered 8½” x 11” white paper that has one-inch margins; and
- Text must be typed single spaced in a font no smaller than 12-point.

Pre-proposals that fail to comply with the required content and format will not be considered for funding. If submitting applications for more than one project, submit a separate pre-proposal for each project. Material exceeding stated page limits will not be considered.

1. **Application Form:** (Standard Form 424 Application for Federal Assistance)
Applicants must use this document as the cover sheet for each project proposal. Standard Form 424 can be downloaded from Grants.gov - Forms Repository. NRCS will communicate via email with the person identified in the “Name and contact information/telephone number of person to be contacted on matters involving this application” block regarding invitations to submit full proposals – ensure that an email address is provided.
2. **Project Summary:** (Three (3)-page maximum.) Applicants must submit a description including the information below:
 - a. Project title;
 - b. Funding pool, primary category and topic for consideration (refer to page 3) and why;
 - c. Project duration (anticipated project start date of **September 30, 2015**, not to exceed three years);
 - d. Project director name, and contact information (including address, email, and telephone number);
 - e. Names and affiliations of project collaborators;
 - f. Project background (describe the issue or problem and how the project addresses it innovatively as defined in Section I.C. - one paragraph)
 - g. Project objectives (purpose and goals);
 - h. Project methods (methodology, tools, and processes)
 - i. Project geographic area/location (where project activities will take place – at a minimum provide state(s));
 - j. Project deliverables/products; and
 - k. Description of EQIP eligible producer involvement. Applicants must include a statement indicating that the proposed project will involve EQIP eligible producers and describe and certify their type and level of involvement in the project. Projects that do not involve EQIP eligible producers are ineligible for a CIG award.
3. **Budget Information:** (Standard Form 424A Budget Information Non-Construction Programs).
 - a. Fill in all spaces as appropriate. Section B, Item 6, Column 1 should reflect the NRCS funds and Column 2 should reflect the applicant’s matching funds. Applicants must prepare this document to identify budget needs. The SF-424 is available at: Grants.gov - Forms Repository.
 - b. **Budget Narrative:** (One (1)-page maximum.) A narrative describing the budget needs and justifying why the budget is appropriate should also be included.

Note: Please note that we understand these are preliminary figures at this point. If the application is approved for full submission there may be differences once the full details of the budget are developed. Please include \$3,000 in the project budget for grantee's travel to NRCS-designated events. These funds are required and can be part of the Federal portion, the cost share, or both.

C. How to Submit an Application

Applicants may submit pre-proposals electronically through Grants.gov or to the email address listed. Alternatively, pre-proposals may be submitted via express mail, overnight courier service, or U.S. Postal Service to the addresses listed. Pre-proposals must contain all of the elements of a complete package and meet the requirements described. Instructions for electronically submitting the required standard forms, and instructions for adding attachments are posted on Grants.gov. Grants.gov provides date and time stamps on pre-proposals submitted through its Web site. All pre-proposals, regardless of how they are submitted, must be received by NRCS before 4:00 p.m. EST on **February 24, 2015**.

Note: NRCS is not responsible for any technical malfunctions or Web site problems related to Grants.gov or emailed submissions. Applicants should begin the Grants.gov process or send their email in advance of the submission deadline to avoid problems.

The address for submitting by email is nrcscig@wdc.usda.gov

The address for submitting via express mail or overnight courier service is:
USDA-NRCS, CIG Program
1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Room 6143-S
Washington, D.C. 20250

The address for submitting via the United States Postal Service is:
USDA-NRCS, CIG Program
P.O. Box 2890, Room 6143-S
Washington, D.C. 20013-2890

Note: Applicants must submit only one signed original copy of each project pre-proposal. Pre-proposals submitted by fax will not be considered. The use of Federal Government postage-paid envelopes, email and/or equipment in submissions is a violation of Federal law and will disqualify you from consideration.

D. Due Date

Pre-proposals must be received by 4:00 p.m. EST on **February 24, 2015**. The applicant assumes the risk of delays in application delivery. Applicants are strongly encouraged to submit completed pre-proposals early via email to ensure timely receipt by NRCS.

E. Acknowledgement of Submission

NRCS will acknowledge receipt of timely pre-proposals via email. An applicant who does not receive such an email acknowledgement within 30 days of their submission, but believes he/she submitted a timely pre-proposal, must contact the NRCS program contact within 30 days of submission deadline. Failure to do so will result in the pre-proposal not being considered.

CIG Program Contact:

Stacy Swartwood
National CIG Program Analyst
1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Room 6143-S
Washington, D.C. 20250
Phone: (202) 720-1895
Email: stacy.swartwood@wdc.usda.gov

F. Withdrawal

Applicants or their authorized representative may withdraw a pre-proposal by written notice at any time before selections are made.

G. Review

Pre-proposals will be evaluated by NRCS, Federal partners, and non-Federal partner agency staff under the funding pool and primary/first category identified by the applicant. Each pre-proposal will be screened for completeness and compliance with the provisions of this notice, including EQIP payment limitations. Incomplete and/or noncompliant pre-proposals will be eliminated from competition and notification of elimination will be sent to the applicant.

For the purposes of CIG, the proposed innovative project or activity must promote environmental protection or natural resources enhancement, and encompass development and pilot field testing, on-farm research and demonstration, evaluation, and/or implementation of:

- Conservation adoption incentive systems, including market-based systems, or
- Promising conservation technologies, practices, systems, procedures, or approaches.

The innovative projects or activities under CIG must comply with all Federal, State, and local regulations throughout the duration of the project and:

- Make use of proven technology or a technology that has been studied sufficiently to indicate a high probability for success,
- Demonstrate, evaluate, or verify environmental (soil, water, air, plants, energy and animal) effectiveness, utility, affordability, and usability of conservation technology in the field,
- Adapt conservation technologies, management, practices, systems, procedures, approaches, and incentive systems to improve performance, and encourage adoption,
- Introduce conservation systems, approaches, and procedures from another geographic area or agricultural sector, or
- Demonstrate transferability of knowledge.

NRCS staff will evaluate complete pre-proposals based on how they demonstrate the use of innovative technologies and/or approaches to address at least one of the topics provided in section I.D. of this notice.

H. Anticipated Notification

Applicants will be notified of the outcome of the pre-proposals via email by **April 1, 2015**. Applicants selected for full proposals will be required to submit a full proposal package by **April 30, 2015**.

V. APPLICATION AND SUBMISSION INFORMATION FOR FULL PROPOSALS (only for those applicants notified at the end of the pre-proposal review process that their application has been identified for further evaluation).

All standard forms necessary for CIG submission are posted on the following Web site: Grants.gov - Forms Repository.

A. Content and Format

Proposals must contain the content, format, and information set forth below to receive consideration for funding. Applicants should not assume prior knowledge on the part of NRCS or others as to the relative merits of the project described in their application.

Applicants must submit only one original copy of the application in the following format:

- Each page must be on numbered 8½” x 11” white paper that has one-inch margins; and
- The text of the application must be typed single spaced in a font no smaller than 12-point.

Proposals that fail to comply with the required content and format will not be considered for funding. Material exceeding stated page limits will not be considered. Proposals must include all required forms and narrative sections described below. Incomplete and/or noncompliant proposals will not be considered.

1. **Application Form:** (Standard Form 424 Application for Federal Assistance) Applicants must use this document as the cover sheet for each proposal. Standard Form 424 can be downloaded from Grants.gov - Forms Repository.
2. **Project Executive Summary**— (One (1)-page maximum.) Provide the project title, applicant entity name, funding requested, funding pool, primary category and topic for consideration (refer to page 3 – the funding pool and primary/first category identified will determine the technical peer review group that the proposal is assigned to) and describe in non-technical language the issue/problem and how the project addresses it innovatively through its objectives (one paragraph - note that this will be used for publicity related to the selection announcement for successful proposals) methods, environmental outcomes, participating partners, deliverables, and any potential negative impacts.
3. **Project Description:** (Fifteen (15)-page maximum.) The description must include the following information:
 - a. **Project background:** Describe the issue or problem, and the history of, and need for, the proposed innovation. Provide evidence that the proposed innovation has been studied sufficiently to indicate a high probability for success of the project.
 - b. **Project objectives:** Be specific using qualitative and quantitative measures, if possible, to describe the project’s purpose and goals. Describe how the project is innovative.
 - c. **Project methods:** Describe clearly the methodology of the project and the tools or processes that will be used to implement the project.
 - d. **Geographic location and size of project or project area:** Describe the geographic location of the project and the relative size and scope (e.g., acres, farm types, demographics, etc.) of the project area. Provide a map, if possible.
 - e. **EQIP eligible producer participation:** Estimate the number of EQIP eligible producers involved in the project, and describe the type and extent of their involvement (Note: Producers receiving direct or indirect payments through participation in a CIG project must also meet the EQIP eligibility requirements).

- f. Project action plan and timeline: Provide a table listing project actions, timeframes, and associated milestones through project completion. Anticipated project start date of **September 30, 2015**.
 - g. Project management: Give a detailed description of how the project will be organized and managed. Include a list of key project personnel, their relevant education or experience, and their anticipated contributions to the project. Explain the level of participation required in the project by government and non-government entities. Identify who will participate in monitoring and evaluating the project.
 - h. Project deliverables/products: Provide a list of specific deliverables and products that will allow NRCS to monitor project progress and payment. The proposal shall include a set of technical deliverables designed to evaluate the performance and broader applicability of the project being proposed for implementation. In addition to project-specific deliverables, selected applicants will be required to provide the following:
 1. Semi-annual progress reports;
 2. Supplemental narratives that explain and support payment requests;
 3. A final report;
 4. Performance items specific to the project that indicate progress;
 5. A new technology and innovative approach fact sheet;
 6. A draft practice standard, if appropriate; and
 7. Participation in at least one NRCS approved event during the grant period.
 - i. Benefits or results expected and transferability: Identify the results and benefits to be derived from the proposed project activities, and explain how the results will be measured. Identify project beneficiaries, i.e., agricultural producers by type, region, or sector; historically underserved producers and communities; rural communities; and municipalities. Explain how these entities will benefit. In addition, describe how results will be communicated to others via outreach activities.
 - j. Project evaluation: Describe the methodology or procedures to be followed to evaluate the project, determine technical feasibility, and quantify the results of the project for the final report. Grant recipients will be required to provide a semi-annual progress report, quarterly financial reports, and a final project report to NRCS. Instructions for submitting reports will be detailed in the grant agreement.
4. **Assessment of Environmental Impacts**: Will implementation of the proposal have physical, chemical or biological impacts on the environment? If so, describe in general terms what they will be and how extensive they will be. The description of the potential environmental impacts must address beneficial and adverse impacts of the proposed action. The length of the description should be commensurate with the complexity of the project proposed and the natural environmental resources impacted directly, indirectly, or cumulatively. Where possible, information on environmental impacts should be quantified, such as number of acres of wetlands impacted, amount of carbon sequestration estimated, etc. Natural environmental resources include soil, water, air, plants, and animals, as well as other resources protected by law, regulation, Executive Order, and agency policy.

Note #1: Please be aware that proposals for projects with potentially adverse impacts to natural resources may need to be modified in order to achieve acceptable and beneficial levels of environmental impact. NRCS may choose not to select projects that cannot be modified.

Note #2: Please be aware that applicants must permit NHPA Section 106 review and consultation by NRCS State or Area Office with required consulting parties (such as the pertinent SHPO and federally recognized Tribes) prior to the implementation of conservation practices and/or activities for their potential to affect cultural resources.

5. **Budget Information:** (Twelve (12)-page maximum.) The budget portion of the application consists of the two parts described below:
- a. Standard Form (SF) 424A Budget Information- Non-Construction Programs: Fill in all spaces as appropriate. Section B, Item 6, column 1 should reflect the NRCS funds and Column 2 should reflect the applicant's matching funds. This form is the summary budget for the project.
 - b. Detailed Budget Narrative: Provide a detailed narrative in support of the budget for the project, broken down by each project year. Discuss how the budget specifically supports the proposed activities. Explain how budget items are essential to achieving project objectives. Justify the project cost effectiveness and include justification for personnel and consultant salaries with a description of duties. In addition, any subcontractors and consultants must also submit a statement of work. The budget narrative should support the Federal funds requested and the applicant's matching funds.

The format of this information, which can be in a chart, spreadsheet, table, etc., should be readable in 8 ½" by 11" printable pages. The information needs to be presented in such a way that the evaluators and NRCS can readily understand what expenses will be incurred to support the project. The breakdown of the Federal share and matching funds should be shown separately as in the SF-424A, not combined.

Note: Please include \$3,000 in the project budget for travel designated by NRCS. These funds are required and can be part of the Federal portion, the applicant's matching funds, or both. Please identify whether the funds are part of the Federal portion, the cost share, or both.

6. Indirect Costs

- a. Applicants wishing to claim indirect costs must have a federally approved indirect cost rate. The approved indirect cost rate must be included in the application package.
- b. An indirect cost rate not to exceed 15 percent may be approved for applicants without a preexisting, federally approved indirect cost rate. To be considered for an indirect cost rate not to exceed 15 percent, applicants must submit an indirect cost rate proposal with the application that includes the following:
 1. Applicant's written policy for allocating and identifying direct and indirect costs;
 2. The contact information of the person who prepared proposal;
 3. Breakdown of indirect salaries by position title and amount;
 4. Line item expenditure descriptions describing how the costs are being allocated between direct and indirect costs;
 5. Applicant's tax identification number; and
 6. Signed certification attesting that (i) all costs in proposal are allowable under the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) cost principles; (ii) costs

treated as indirect have not been claimed as direct; (iii) similar types of costs have been accounted for consistently; and (iv) the applicant will notify the Federal Government of any account changed that would affect the rate. This certification should be signed by the applicant's approving official or the applicant's chief financial officer.

- c. If applicant does not have a federally approved indirect cost rate, it is at NRCS' discretion whether to allow indirect cost.

7. **Matching:** Proposals must include written verification of commitments of matching support (including both cash and in-kind contributions) from non-Federal third parties.

Cash Match

For third-party cash contributions, a separate pledge agreement is required for each contribution, signed by the authorized organizational representative of the contributing organization and the applicant organization, which must include: (1) the name, address, and telephone number of the contributor, (2) the name of the applicant organization, (3) the title of the project for which the contribution is made, (4) the dollar amount of the cash contribution, and (5) a statement that the contributor will pay the cash contribution during the grant period.

In-Kind Match

"In-kind" refers to non-cash contributions of goods or services made by third-party individuals or organizations to support projects. Examples of "in-kind" contributions include work done by unpaid volunteers and donations of supplies, facilities, or equipment. In-kind contributions must be necessary to accomplish program activities and verifiable.

For any third-party in-kind contributions, a separate pledge agreement is required for each contribution, signed by the authorized organizational representatives of the contributing organization and the applicant, which must include: (1) the name, address, and telephone number of the contributor, (2) the name of the applicant's organization, (3) the title of the project for which the contribution is made, (4) a good faith estimate of the current fair market value of the third-party in-kind contribution, and (5) a statement that the contributor will make the contribution during the grant period.

The value of applicant contributions to the project will be established in accordance with the applicable cost principles. Applicants should refer to OMB Circulars and Cost Principles for additional guidance and other requirements relating to matching and allowable costs.

8. **List of Letters of Support:** Include entity name, location, role, and if a commitment of cash or in-kind support has been made, the type (cash vs. in-kind) and value.

Note: NRCS may conduct reference checks to ensure that organizations identified are supportive and involved with the project.

9. **Declaration of Previous CIG Projects Involvement and Past Performance:**

Identify any previously awarded National or State CIG projects related to this proposal and any of their principal investigators and please respond to item 9.a below. If you have

never received an NRCS CIG, but have received other Federal or non-Federal assistance agreements (an assistance agreement is a grant or cooperative agreement and not a contract), please respond to item 9.b below. If you have never received any type of Federal or non-Federal assistance agreements, please indicate this in your proposal.

a. Applicant has previously received an NRCS CIG

Identify the NRCS CIG(s) you currently have or have received in the past. Detail the purpose, outcomes to date, and how this new proposal relates to the previous award. For up to the five most recent projects (if within the past two years), demonstrate how you successfully managed the grant(s), and successfully performed all phases of work under the previous or existing grant(s), including whether the desired outcomes of the project(s) were met by providing information on the following:

1. Funds Expenditure: the balance of grant funds currently remaining.
2. Describe your compliance with grant requirements, including, but not limited to, information regarding your compliance with the work plan, schedule, terms and conditions, and timely reporting (e.g., semiannual progress reports, financial status reports, and any other required submittals).

Accomplishments: Describe your success using NRCS grant funds, including whether you reported accomplishments to NRCS.

b. Applicant has received other Federal and/or non-Federal assistance agreements

1. Identify current and/or prior federally and/or non-federally funded assistance agreements. Please provide information on no more than five of your most recent assistance agreements (if received within the past two years). Describe your history of successfully managing these agreements and performing the agreements including meeting and complying with reporting requirements, submitting final acceptable technical reports, and reporting on whether you were making progress towards achieving the results under those agreements and, if not, whether you explained why.

10. Declaration of Historically Underserved and Veteran Farmers or Ranchers: If an applicant wishes to compete in the 10 percent set-aside funding pool, applicants must make a declaration in writing of their status as historically underserved producers or veteran farmers or ranchers, or a community-based organization comprised of or representing these entities. (Refer to Part III.E. that describes the provision of a set-aside pool of funding for Historically Underserved Producers and Veteran Farmers or Ranchers.)

11. Documentation of Submission to State Conservationist: Applicants must include documentation showing that the application was sent to the appropriate State Conservationist(s) or delegate(s) for review by 4:00 p.m. EDT on **April 30, 2015**. If a project is multi-State in scope, all State Conservationists or delegates in the project area must be sent the application for review. A list of State office addresses and phone numbers is included at the end of this notice. Applicants are encouraged to consult with the appropriate State Conservationist(s) or delegate(s) during application development.

12. Certifications: Standard Form (SF) 424B - Assurances, Non-construction Programs. All proposals must include this document. The SF-424B may be found at: Grants.gov -

[Forms Repository](#) or by contacting the State office. In addition, applicants, by signing and submitting an application, assure and certify that they are in compliance with the following Federal regulations:

- a. 2 CFR Part 417, [Government wide Debarment and Suspension \(Non-procurement\)](#)
- b. 7 CFR Part 3018, [New Restrictions on Lobbying](#)
- c. 2 CFR Part 421, [Government wide Requirements for Drug Free Workplace \(Financial Assistance\)](#)

B. Additional Pre-award Requirements

The following items must be obtained prior to entering into an agreement with the Federal Government but do not need to be provided in the proposal. Applicants are encouraged to apply early for their Data Universal Numbering System (DUNS)/System for Award Management (SAM) number.

1. **DUNS Number:** A Dun and Bradstreet (D&B) DUNS number is a unique nine-digit sequence recognized as the universal standard for identifying and keeping track of over 70 million businesses worldwide. CIG 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:** Official U.S. Government system that consolidated the capabilities of CCR/FedReg, ORCA, and EPLS. To register, go to: <https://www.sam.gov/portal/public/SAM/>. Please allow a minimum of 5 days to complete the SAM registration.

C. How to Submit an Application

Applicants may submit proposals electronically through Grants.gov or to the email address listed below. Alternatively, proposals may be submitted via express mail, overnight courier service, or U.S. Postal Service to the addresses listed below. All proposals must contain all of the elements of a complete package and meet the requirements described above. Instructions for electronically submitting the required standard forms, and instructions for adding attachments are posted on Grants.gov. Grants.gov provides date and time stamps on proposals submitted through its Web site. All proposals regardless of how they are submitted must be received on **April 30, 2015**. Emailed proposals must be received by NRCS before the submission deadline.

Note: NRCS is not responsible for any technical malfunctions or Web site problems related to Grants.gov or emailed submissions. Applicants should begin the Grants.gov process or send their email in advance of the submission deadline to avoid problems.

The address for submitting a proposal by email is nrcscig@wdc.usda.gov

The address for submitting a proposal via express mail or overnight courier service is:
USDA-NRCS, CIG Program
1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Room 6143-S
Washington, D.C. 20250

The address for submitting proposals via the United States Postal Service is:
USDA-NRCS, CIG Program
P.O. Box 2890, Room 6143-S
Washington, D.C. 20013-2890

Note: Applicants must submit only one signed original copy of each proposal. Proposals submitted by fax will not be considered. The use of Federal Government postage-paid envelopes, email and/or equipment in filing proposals is a violation of Federal law and will disqualify you from consideration.

D. Due Date

Proposals must be received in 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Room 6143-S, Washington, D.C. 20250 by 4:00 p.m. EDT on **April 30, 2015**. The applicant assumes the risk of any delays in application delivery. Applicants are strongly encouraged to submit completed proposals early via email to ensure timely receipt by NRCS.

E. Acknowledgement of Submission

NRCS will acknowledge receipt of timely proposals via email. An applicant who does not receive such an email acknowledgement within 30 days of their submission, but believes he/she submitted a timely proposal must contact the NRCS program contact below within 30 days of submission deadline. Failure to do so will result in the proposal not being considered.

CIG Program Contact:

Stacy Swartwood
National CIG Program Analyst
1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Room 6143-S
Washington, D.C. 20250
Phone: (202) 720-1895
Email: stacy.swartwood@wdc.usda.gov

F. Withdrawal

Proposals may be withdrawn by written notice at any time before selections are made. Proposals may be withdrawn by the applicant, or by an authorized representative.

G. Funding Restrictions

Awardees may not use unrecovered indirect costs as part of their matching funds.

CIG funds may not be used to pay any of the following costs unless otherwise permitted by law, or approved in writing by the Authorized Departmental Officer in advance of incurring such costs:

1. Costs above the amount of funds authorized for the project;
2. Costs incurred prior to the effective date of the grant;
3. Costs which lie outside the scope of the approved project and amendments thereto;
4. Entertainment costs, regardless of their apparent relationship to project objectives;
5. Compensation for injuries to persons, or damage to property arising out of project activities;
6. Consulting services performed by a Federal employee during official duty hours when such consulting services result in the payment of additional compensation to the employee; and

7. Renovation or refurbishment of research or related spaces, the purchase or installation of fixed equipment in such spaces, and the planning, repair, rehabilitation, acquisition, or construction of buildings or facilities.

This list is not exhaustive. Questions regarding the allowances of particular items of cost should be directed to the administrative contact person listed on Part VI.

H. Review

Proposals will be screened for completeness and compliance with the provisions of this notice. Incomplete and/or noncompliant proposals will be eliminated from competition, and notification of elimination will be sent to the applicant. Complete proposals will be evaluated by a technical peer review panel based on the Proposal Evaluation Criteria identified in the proposal instructions in section VI.B.

Proposals, along with their technically based recommendations from the peer review groups and findings from review by State Conservationists or their delegates, will then be forwarded to the Grants Review Board. The Grants Review Board will make its recommendations for project approval to the NRCS Chief who will make the final selections.

I. Patents and Inventions

Allocation of rights to patents and inventions shall be in accordance with [7 CFR §3019.36](#). This regulation provides that small businesses normally may retain the principal worldwide patent rights to any invention developed with USDA support. In accordance with 7 CFR 3019.2, this provision will also apply to commercial organizations for the purposes of CIG. USDA receives a royalty-free license for Federal Government use, reserves the right to require the patentee to license others in certain circumstances, and requires that anyone exclusively licensed to sell the invention in the United States must normally manufacture it domestically.

J. Natural Resources and Historic Property Review Requirements

1. The Council on Environmental Quality's National Environmental Policy Act (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 financial assistance under the CIG program requires compliance with these regulations. As part of the application packet, applicants are required to provide environmental information pertaining to their project if there will be actions with potential to affect the environment to help NRCS determine the appropriate documentation required to comply with NEPA and NRCS regulations. If the application is selected for funding, the NRCS Program Contact, Technical Contact and NRCS Environmental Liaison will coordinate with the selected applicant concerning documentation for compliance with NEPA. The selected applicant will be required to prepare and pay for the preparation of the appropriate NEPA document (e.g., Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement if required for NEPA compliance). Grant funding cannot be approved until the environmental review requirements demonstrating compliance with NEPA are met.
2. The National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) Section 106 and its implementing regulations (36 CFR Part 800), and other related authorities, require federal agencies to determine if a project has the potential to cause an effect to historic properties and, if yes, if they are adverse and how the effects may be addressed. This NHPA review and compliance in accordance with Section 106 of the NHPA and implementing regulations

at 36 CFR Part 800 must be completed by NRCS and may not be delegated. This compliance process includes consultation with SHPOs, Tribes, THPOs, NHOs, and the appropriate preservation community regarding identification, evaluation of NRHP eligibility, evaluation of effects, and if the effects are adverse, treatment. This treatment may include avoidance or other forms of mitigation of adverse effects. This mitigation will occur after the grant is awarded but before it is implemented.

VI. APPLICATION REVIEW AND NOTIFICATION INFORMATION

A. Review and Selection Process

A two-phase evaluation and review process will be utilized for proposals submitted under this notice. The first phase requires the applicant to submit a pre-proposal application. Pre-proposals will be screened for completeness and compliance with the provisions of this notice. Incomplete and/or noncompliant pre-proposals will be eliminated from competition, and notification of elimination will be sent to the applicant. NRCS staff will evaluate complete pre-proposals based on how they demonstrate the use of innovative technologies and/or approaches to address at least one of the topics provided in section I.D. of this notice.

NRCS will only request a full proposal package from those applicants selected in the pre-proposal process. There are three steps in evaluating full CIG proposals. First, proposals will be divided among technical peer review groups based on the funding pool and primary/first category identified in the Executive Summary and then will be reviewed by a Technical Peer Review Panel. The Technical Peer Review Panel consists of NRCS national technical specialists, and technical specialists from other appropriately related Federal agencies, and non-Federal agencies. Proposals will be reviewed based on the CIG Proposal Evaluation Criteria listed in Part VI.B below.

The Technical Peer Review Panel will forward their recommendations and the proposals to a Grants Review Board, which will certify the peer review panels' recommendations and ensure that the application evaluations are consistent with program objectives. The CIG Grants Review Board consists of five members of NRCS leadership, specifically the Deputy Chief for Science and Technology (Chair), the Deputy Chief for Soil Science and Resource Assessment, the Deputy Chief for Programs, one Regional Conservationist, one State Conservationist, and the Director of the Office of Outreach and Advocacy. The Grants Review Board will also consider findings from review by State Conservationists or their delegates before forwarding its recommendations to the NRCS Chief for final review and selection.

B. Proposal Evaluation Criteria

For the purposes of CIG, the proposed innovative project or activity must promote environmental protection or natural resources enhancement, and encompass development and pilot field testing, on-farm research and demonstration, evaluation, and/or implementation of:

- Conservation adoption incentive systems, including market-based systems, or
- Promising conservation technologies, practices, systems, procedures, or approaches.

Projects or activities under CIG must comply with all Federal, State, and local regulations throughout the duration of the project and:

- Make use of proven technology or a technology that has been studied sufficiently to indicate a high probability for success,

- Demonstrate, evaluate, or verify environmental (soil, water, air, plants, energy and animal) effectiveness, utility, affordability, and usability of conservation technology in the field,
- Adapt conservation technologies, management, practices, systems, procedures, approaches, and incentive systems to improve performance, and encourage adoption,
- Introduce conservation systems, approaches, and procedures from another geographic area or agricultural sector, or
- Demonstrate transferability of knowledge.

The Technical Peer Review Panels will use the following criteria to evaluate project proposals:

1. Purpose, Approach, and Goals
 - a. Design and implementation of project based on sound methodology and demonstrated technology.
 - b. Promotes environmental enhancement and protection in conjunction with agricultural production.
 - c. Project outcome is clearly measurable.
 - d. Potential for successful completion.
 - e. Both beneficial and adverse impacts are considered and an acceptably significant level of improvement will be achieved.
2. Innovative Technology or Approach
 - a. Project is innovative (national, regionally, and/or local in nature).
 - b. Project conforms to description of innovative projects or activities in Announcement for Program Funding.
3. Project Management
 - a. Timeline and milestones are clear and reasonable.
 - b. Project staff has technical expertise needed.
 - c. Budget is adequately explained and justified.
 - d. Experience and capacity to partner with and gain the support of other organizations, institutions and agencies.
4. Benefits and Transferability
 - a. Potential for producers and landowners to use the innovative technology/approach or technologies/approaches.
 - b. Potential to transfer the approach or technology nationally or to a broader audience or other geographic or socio-economic areas.
 - c. Potential for successful transfer, through planned project activities, to historically underserved producers and communities.
 - d. Potential for NRCS to successfully use the innovative approach or methods.
 - e. Project will result in the development of technical or related technology transfer materials (technical standards, technical notes, guide sheets, handbooks, software, etc.).

C. Other Factors

In making final selection recommendations from among the most highly qualified applicants NRCS's Selection Official may consider the following factors if, and as, appropriate.

- A balanced distribution of funds among the states and territories.
- A balanced distribution of projects across resource concerns.
- Appropriate participation by Historically Underserved Producers, Veteran Farmers or Ranchers or community based organizations comprised of or representing these entities.

- Whether full participation by historically underserved individuals and groups will be achieved.
- Fair distribution of funds between urban and non-urban areas.

D. Anticipated Announcement and Award Dates

NRCS anticipates announcing CIG selections by **September 1, 2015**, and awarding all grants by **September 30, 2015**. However, NRCS will not distribute any funds, and grantees cannot begin work until the parties execute an appropriate CIG agreement.

Applicants should plan their projects based on a project start date of **September 30, 2015**.

E. Unsuccessful Proposals

Applicants whose proposals are not selected for funding will be notified of their status within 30 days of the announcement of CIG selections.

VII. AWARD ADMINISTRATION INFORMATION

A. Award Notification

Applicants who have been selected for funding will receive official notification from National Headquarters. However, all selections are contingent upon successful completion of the environmental, cultural and historic properties/resources review process by the appropriate NRCS State or Area Office and financial review.

Note: Appropriations Restrictions: Awards made under this solicitation are subject to the provisions contained in the Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2012 (P.L. No. 112-55), Division A, Sections 738 and 739, regarding corporate felony convictions and corporate Federal tax delinquencies.

B. Grant Agreement

Through NRCS, CCC will use a grant agreement with selected applicants to document participation in the CIG component of EQIP.

The grant will permit the NRCS National Technical Contact to be involved in overseeing the work performed by the selected recipients. Although NRCS will negotiate precise terms and conditions as part of the award process, the anticipated Federal involvement for this project may include:

- close monitoring of the recipient's performance to verify the results
- collaborating during performance of the scope of work
- reviewing substantive terms of proposed contracts
- reviewing qualifications of key personnel (NRCS will not select employees or contractors employed by the award recipient)
- reviewing and commenting on reports prepared under the agreement (the final decision on the content of reports rests with the recipient)

C. Natural Resources and Historic Property Review Requirements

1. Upon notification of selection, the applicant must contact the [NRCS State Office Environmental Liaison](#) to determine the scope and level of NEPA documentation required for the project. The environmental documentation prepared to meet NEPA requirements must be prepared prior to implementing activities with grant funds.

Selected applicants may be required to prepare and pay for the preparation of the appropriate NEPA document(s) if an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement is needed. Grant funds cannot be awarded until the environmental review requirements demonstrating compliance with NEPA are met.

2. Upon notification of selection, the recipient must contact the NRCS State Office to discuss if National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) Section 106 review is needed. The NRCS State Conservationist and appropriate staff, including the State Resources Conservationist, Cultural Resources Specialist (CRS) or Coordinator (CRC) will help and, under the direction of the State Conservationist, are responsible for completing this compliance, consultation and review. Additionally, in accordance with Section 106 of the NHPA, implementing regulations for Section 106 (36 CFR Part 800), and with USDA regulations on consultation with Tribes, and related authorities, the NRCS State Conservationist, using appropriate historic preservation staff such as the CRS or CRC, shall consult with concerned federally recognized Indian Tribes and the State Historic Preservation Officer). NRCS may not delegate or assign consultation with Tribes or the SHPO to the recipient or other parties and must carry out agency historic preservation responsibilities quickly as possible and prior to implementation of the grant project by the recipient. The State Office may have programmatic agreements in place to help facilitate and streamline this process. State CRSs and CRCs have extensive experience in determining if Section 106 review and compliance is needed. If Section 106 review and compliance is needed, it must be completed prior to expenditure of funds.

D. Reporting Requirements

Selected applicants will be required to submit a SF-425, Federal Financial Report to the NRCS administrative contact, no later than 30 days after the end of each quarter and 90 days after completion of project. In addition, every 6 months the selected applicant must submit a written performance progress report to the NRCS program, technical, and administrative contacts. This report is distinct from the quarterly financial report described above. Each progress report shall cover work performed during the previous 6-month period and include, at a minimum:

- Project Status:
 - Summary of progress, including the results to date and a comparison of actual accomplishments with proposed goals (milestones) for the period and, where project output can be quantified, a computation of the costs per unit of output
 - Current problems or unusual developments or delays
 - Reasons why goals and objectives were not met, if appropriate
 - Additional pertinent information including, where appropriate, analysis and explanation of cost overruns or high unit cost
 - Any time extensions
 - Any changes to the project's original objectives, methods, or timeline with a summary of the justification for the changes
 - Lessons learned that inform future project activities or broader efforts in the project's topic area

- Work to be performed during the next six month period
- Project Results
 - Any preliminary results that can be used by NRCS for practice-standard revisions, policy changes, program revisions and training opportunities.
 - Products/software tools and/or technologies currently ready for adoption and/or transfer
 - Potentially promising products/software tools and/or technologies not yet ready for adoption and/or transfer, and a description of what is needed to reach that maturity.
 - Identification of new data or research needs to inform broader efforts in the project's topic area
 - Project activities that have been featured on recipient or partner Web sites and success stories that could be amplified by NRCS
- EQIP Requirements
 - Provide the following in accordance with the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and CIG agreement provisions:
 - A listing of EQIP-eligible producers involved in the project, identified by name and social security number or taxpayer identification number;
 - A self-certification statement indicating that each individual or entity receiving a direct or indirect payment for any structural, vegetative, or management practice through this grant is in compliance with the adjusted gross income (AGI) and highly-erodible lands and wetlands conservation (HEL/WC) compliance provisions of the Farm Bill.

The final report is due to the NRCS program, technical, and administrative contacts 90 days after completion of the project. This report is distinct from the performance progress reports described above. The final report will summarize the project and describe methods, quality control, findings, and recommendations. Additional information, forms, and templates can be found at

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/programs/financial/cig/?cid=stelprdb1045412>

E. Freedom of Information and Privacy Act

Applicants should be aware that some or all of the information submitted in their application may be subject to public disclosure through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). Applicants are advised to mark confidential information, such as proprietary information, to prevent disclosure.

VIII. AGENCY CONTACTS

A. CIG Program Contact

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Additional information about CIG, including fact sheets and frequently asked questions, is available on the CIG Web page at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/cig/index.html>.

Signed this 21 day of January in Washington, D.C.

Leonard Jordan, for

Jason Weller

Vice President, Commodity Credit Corporation and
Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Attachments

IX. OTHER INFORMATION

CONSERVATION INNOVATION GRANTS FISCAL YEAR 2015 PRE-PROPOSAL PACKAGE CHECK LIST

Important: Pre-proposals Missing Any of These Required Items Will Not Be Considered

- 1. **Application Form:** Submit Standard Form 424 Application for Federal Assistance
- 2. **Project Summary:** Submit a description including the information below (Three (3) pages maximum in length).
 - a. Project title;
 - b. Funding pool, primary category and topic for consideration (refer to page 3) and why;
 - c. Project duration (anticipated project start date of September 30, 2015, not to exceed three years);
 - d. Project director name, and contact information (including address, email, and telephone number);
 - e. Names and affiliations of project collaborators;
 - f. Project background (describe the issue or problem and how the project addresses it innovatively as defined in Section I.C. - one paragraph)
 - g. Project objectives (purpose and goals);
 - h. Project methods (methodology, tools, and processes)
 - i. Project geographic area/location;
 - j. Project deliverables/products; and
 - k. Description of EQIP eligible producer involvement.
- 3. **Budget Information:** Submit Standard Form 424A Budget Information Non-Construction Programs.
 - a. Complete SF-424A, and
 - b. One page narrative

CONSERVATION INNOVATION GRANTS
FISCAL YEAR 2015 FULL APPLICATION PACKAGE CHECK LIST

Important: Proposals Missing Any of These Required Items Will Not Be Considered

- 1. Application Form:** Submit Standard Form 424 Application for Federal Assistance.
- 2. Project Executive Summary**—in one page or less, **provide the project title, applicant entity name, funding requested, funding pool, primary category and topic for consideration (refer to page 3), and** describe in non-technical language the issue or problem and how the project addresses it innovatively through its objectives (one paragraph), methods, environmental outcomes, participating partners, deliverables, and any potential negative impacts.
- 3. Project Description:** (15 pages maximum, single-spaced, single-sided, 12 point font)
 - a. Project background
 - b. Project objectives
 - c. Project methods
 - d. Geographic location and size of project area (include a map if possible)
 - e. EQIP eligible producer participation (Note: Producers receiving direct or indirect payments through participation in a CIG project must also meet the EQIP eligibility requirements)
 - f. Project action plan and timeline
 - g. Project management
 - h. Project deliverables/products
 - i. Benefits or results expected and transferability
 - j. Project evaluation
- 4. Assessment of Environmental Impacts**
- 5. Budget Information:** Submit a completed Standard Form 424A (SF-424A) Budget Information-Non-Construction Programs.
 - a. Complete SF-424A
 - b. Detailed budget narrative
- 6. Indirect Costs:** Submit documentation of federally approved indirect cost rate or indirect cost rate proposal if claiming indirect costs.
- 7. Matching:** Submit written verification of commitments of matching support from non-Federal third parties.
- 8. List of Letters of Support:** Include entity name, location, and if a commitment of cash or in-kind support has been made, the type (cash vs. in-kind) and value.
- 9. Declaration of Previous CIG Projects Involvement and Past Performance**
- 10. Declaration of Historically Underserved and Veteran Farmers or Ranchers):** If an applicant wishes to compete in the 10 percent set-aside funding pool, applicants must make a declaration in writing of their status as a Historically Underserved Producer, Veteran Farmer or Rancher, or a community-based organization comprised of or representing these entities.

- 11. Documentation of Submission to State Conservationist:** Include documentation showing that the proposal was sent to the State Conservationist(s) or delegate(s).
- 12. Certifications:** Complete Standard Form 424B (SF-424B) Assurances-Non-Construction Programs.

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USDA
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Or by email at program.intake@usda.gov.

Individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing or have speech disabilities and you wish to file either an EEO or program complaint please contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339 or (800) 845-6136 (in Spanish).

Persons with disabilities who wish to file a program complaint, please see information above on how to contact us by mail directly or by email. If you require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) please contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD).

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