Opportunities for Organic Farming Innovation
Conservation Innovation Grants Proposals Due Feb. 26, 2018

Invest in Organic System Conservation Innovation

The Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) Program, managed by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), supports market-based solutions to resource challenges and the tools, technologies and strategies for next-generation conservation efforts on America’s working lands.

For more than a decade, CIG projects have addressed a wide diversity of topics and resource concerns including soil health, irrigation efficiency, wildlife and pollinator habitat, water and air quality, greenhouse gas markets, on-farm energy use and conservation finance.

This year NRCS is seeking CIG applications in three CIG focus areas: organic systems, soil health and grazing. The agency will invest up to $10 million in Fiscal Year 2018. Application deadline is Feb. 26, 2018.

Because organic farming is a production system, it is not addressed by a single NRCS conservation practice standard. It is part of many standards that address natural resources concerns for soils, water, air, plants, animals, and energy across all land uses and agricultural sectors.

This fiscal year, NRCS is requesting proposals that help organic producers establish, obtain, maintain and evaluate practices at the farm and ranch scale to support organic management systems. Proposals must address one or more of the following priorities:

• Organic cropping and tillage systems that build soil health and overcome negative effects of tillage.

• Demonstration of no-till or reduced tillage systems for organic crops for improved weed and erosion control. Systems must note how nutrient management goals are met.

• Demonstrations of organic farms or ranches using edge of field water quality monitoring.

• Innovative crop rotations for organic transition to build soil health and lead to organic certification. Systems should match the three-year transition period and may or may not include cash crops.

• Intercropping systems including cash crops, insectaries, and cover crops to increase biodiversity and manage pests.

Organic CIG Success Stories

Pollinator Habitat for Organic Agricultural Producers

The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture established a demonstration area to showcase the benefits of pollinator habitat for organic producers with the help of CIG in Oklahoma. The project team installed a stabilized stream crossing using native pollinator habitat. They also integrated native pollinator habitat on Kerr Center’s organic horticulture farm.

The project results have been shared at field days, workshops, and numerous meetings across the state to showcase the benefits of habitat construction. To extend the range of the project impact and encourage further adoption.

CIG Program Eligibility

All US-based entities and individuals are eligible to apply, with the sole exception of Federal agencies.

Proposed projects must conform to the parameters published in the annual funding notice posted on grants.gov.

The maximum CIG award in FY18 is $2 million. An applicant’s CIG funding request must be matched at least 1:1 with non-federal funding. Matching funds can be any combination of cash and in-kind contributions.

Up to 20 percent of national CIG funds is set aside for applicants who are beginning or limited resource farmers and ranchers, American Indian tribes or community-based organizations that include or represent these producers and private forest landowners.

The grantee is also responsible for providing the technical assistance required to successfully complete the project. NRCS will provide technical oversight for each project receiving an award.
of pollinator habitat, the team developed a publication that was provided to landowners and NRCS field offices.

**Integrating Organic Agriculture into NRCS Programs**

With the support of a 2010 CIG award, the National Center for Appropriate Technology worked with ten leading sustainable and organic agriculture organizations to better integrate organic production systems into NRCS programs and to make NRCS programs more accessible to organic farmers.

After surveying hundreds of farmers and working with consulting experts and NRCS staff, the group developed recommendations resulting in changes to 15 Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) conservation enhancements and the addition one new CSP conservation enhancement. The team also hosted ten webinars, five in person trainings and a published guidebook for NRCS field staff working with organic and transitioning-to-organic farmers and ranchers.

**National Application Process**

A CIG funding notice is announced each year. Funds for single- or multi-year projects, not to exceed three years, will be awarded through a nationwide competitive grants process.

Projects may be watershed-based, regional, multi-state, or nationwide in scope. The priority areas eligible for funding through CIG are identified in the funding announcement and may change annually.

Applications are evaluated by a technical peer review panel against criteria identified in the funding notice. The peer panel recommendations are reviewed by an NRCS Grants Review Board that makes funding recommendations to the NRCS Chief. The NRCS Chief makes the final award selections.

**More Information**

A CIG funding notice is posted on www.grants.gov, the federal e-Grants portal. A link to this funding notice is also posted on the NRCS website: www.nrcs.usda.gov. The funding notice details CIG requirements and the information required from applicants.

Complete applications must be submitted through www.grants.gov and e-mailed to the NRCS National Office at nrcscig@wdc.usda.gov by February 26, 2018.

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An Iowa organic producer plants soybeans directly into roller crimped rye.