



Overview of NRCS Projects Branch for the Nebraska Association of Resource Districts

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FARM PRODUCTION AND CONSERVATION
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Grants Programs





Conservation Innovation Grants

- CIG intends to stimulate the development, adoption, and evaluation of innovative conservation approaches and technologies in conjunction with agricultural production
- Projects range from \$300k to \$2M.
- Projects typically last 1-3 years.
- National and State funding opportunities





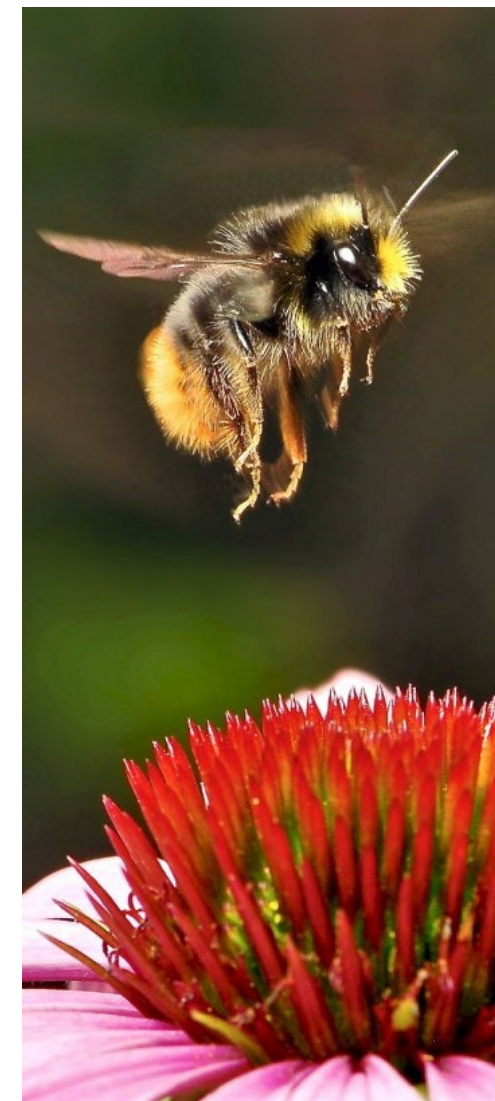
National CIG Programs

Classic

- Funds pilot tests and field trials to gather more information on innovative approaches and technologies to conservation.
- **\$15M** in Farm Bill funding annually.
- 1:1 non-federal match required.

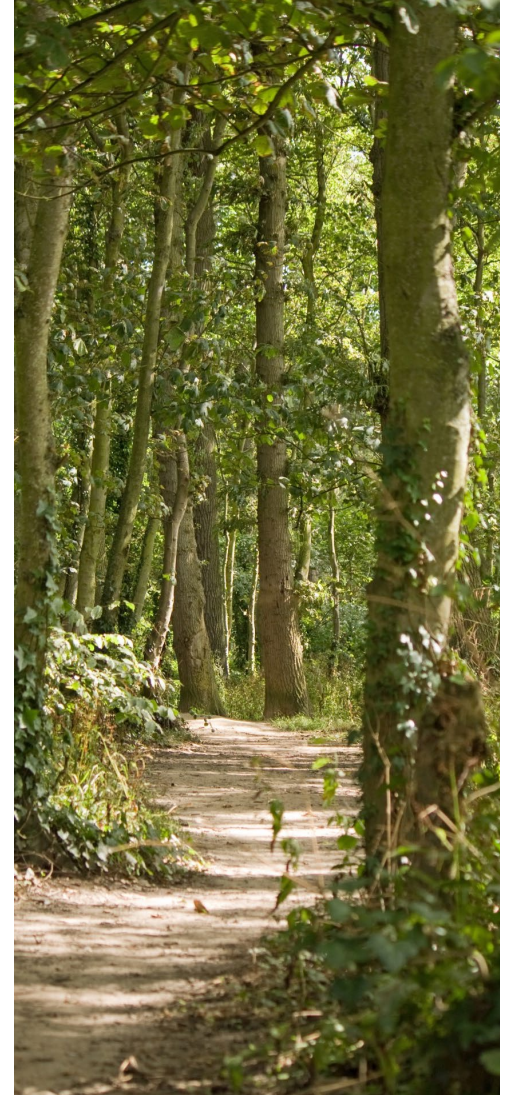
On-Farm Innovation Trials

- Funds farmer field trials and includes farmer incentive payments to incentivize innovative conservation approaches.
- **\$25M** in Farm Bill funding & **\$25M** in Inflation Reduction Act Funding.
- No match required.



Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program

- **Purpose:** Funding to help State and tribal governments encourage landowners to allow public access to their land for hunting, fishing, and other wildlife-dependent recreation.
- **Funding:** \$50M awarded at the start of Farm Bill 2018, and \$10M to be announced in FY 2024.
- **Eligible Applicants:** State and tribal governments.



Wetlands Mitigation Banking Program

- **Purpose:** Supports the development and establishment of wetland mitigation banks to make credits available for agricultural producers.
- **Funding:** \$10M annually
- **How it works:** Mitigation banks are established through the restoration, creation, or enhancement of wetlands. Producers buy credits to compensate for the impact of lost wetlands.





Natural Resources Conservation Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Regional Conservation Partnership Program



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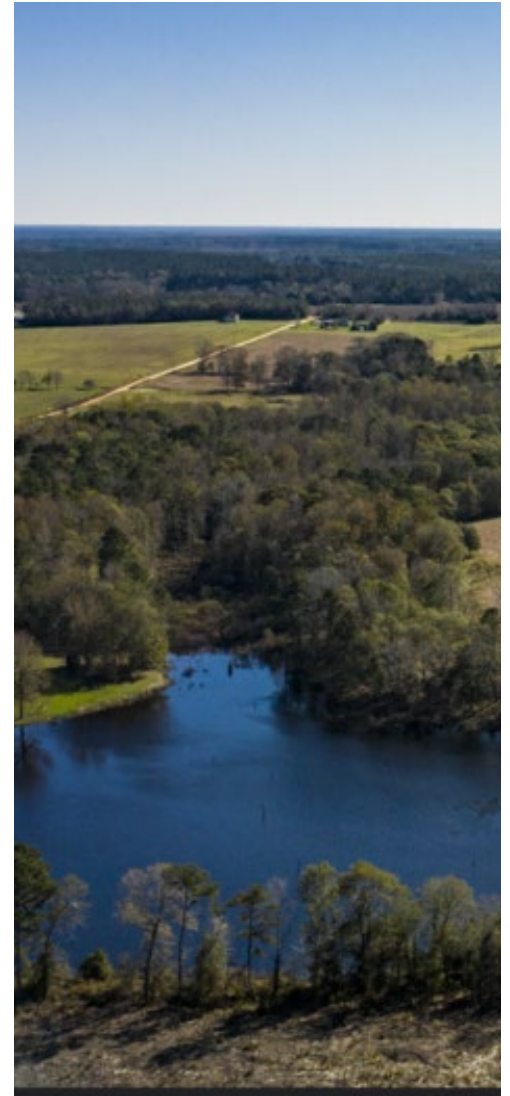
RCPP is a Partnership Program

- NRCS' goal is to help farmers help the land.
- NRCS and partners co-invest in conservation activities to address regional resource concerns.
- RCPP eligible activities are based on covered programs but not subject to covered program requirements or processes.



Overview of RCPP

- NRCS pays partners and producers to implement conservation activities on private agricultural land and non-industrial private forests.
- Projects range from \$250k to \$25M.
- Typical project duration is 5 years.
- In FY 2023 NRCS awarded **81 RCPP projects** investing **\$1B of NRCS funding**.



Project Types

Classic

- NRCS reimburses producers directly for FA activities.
- NRCS often delivers a majority of TA in support of producer contracts and easements.
- Partner's primary role is to provide outreach, measure impact, and deliver partner contributions to amplify NRCS funding.

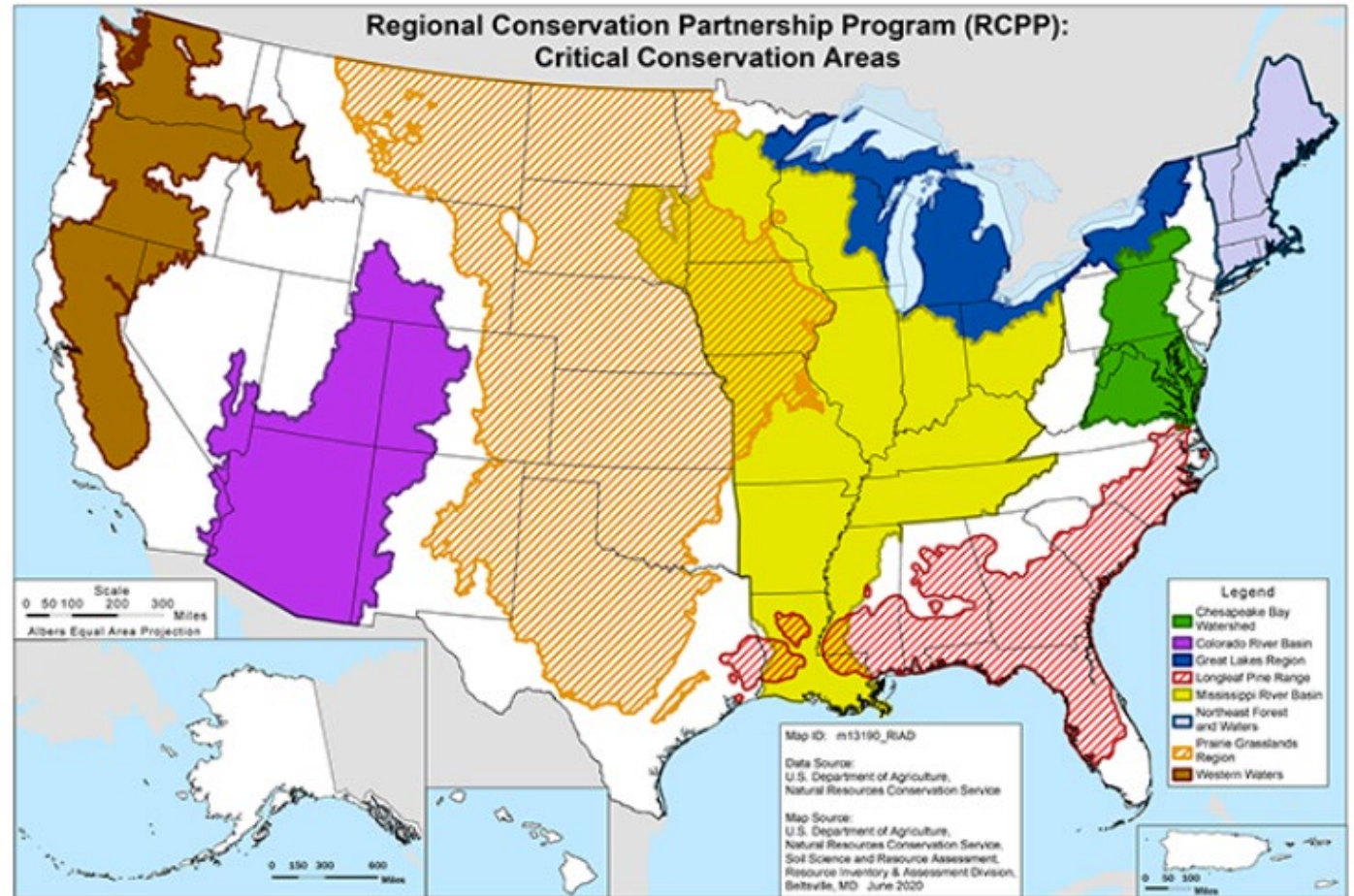
AFAs

- Partner installs practices for producers or reimburses producers for FA activities.
- Partner delivers all project TA in support of producer contracts and easements.
- NRCS support limited to non-delegable tasks such as confirming the eligibility of producers and land, AGI verification, and compliance with NEPA/HEL/WC.
- No limit on the number of AFA **IRA** projects



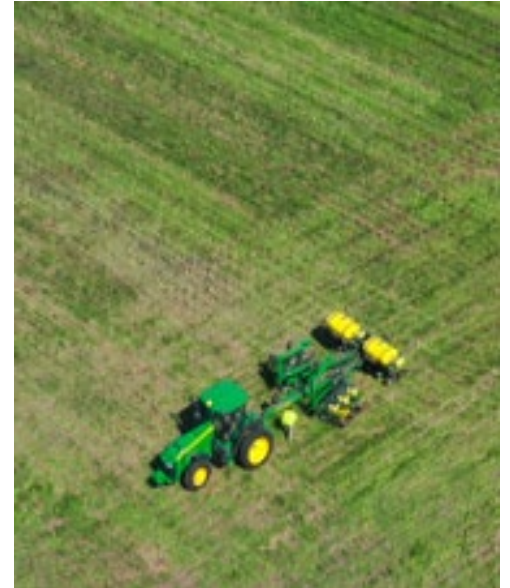
Funding Pools

- State/Multi-State (50%)
 - Can include any RCPP resource concern or conservation benefit.
 - Available in all states and territories
- Critical Conservation Areas (50%)
 - Project and producer contracts or easements under this project must address at least one CCA-specific priority resource concern.
 - A single proposal cannot include multiple CCAs.
 - See the [RCPP website](#) for more information.



How does RCPP funding work?

- **Financial Assistance (FA) – 75%**
 - These funds are used to implement eligible activities on eligible land.
- **Technical Assistance (TA) – 25%**
 - Supporting conservation activities (planning, design, installation, and checkout).
 - Supporting the project (outreach, outcomes assessment, and project management).



Eligible Land

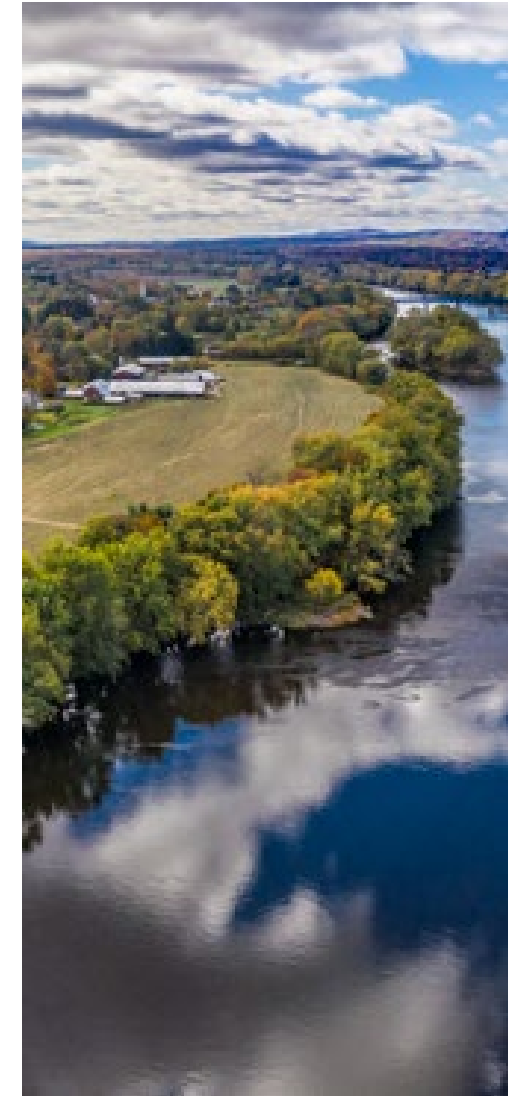
1. The land is private or Tribal agricultural land, nonindustrial private forest land, or associated land on which an eligible activity would help achieve the conservation benefits defined for an approved project; or
2. The land is publicly owned agricultural land or associated land and the enrollment of such land is
 - i. Appropriate for the type of eligible activity, and
 - ii. The eligible activity to be implemented on the public land is necessary and will contribute meaningfully to achieving conservation benefits consistent with an approved project.

Source: 7 CFR 1464.5 (b)



Eligible Activities

RCPP Activity Type	Covered Program Authorities
Land Management	EQIP & CSP Enhancements ACEP-ALE/WRE – restoration activities PL-566 – land treatment activities
Rental	CRP
US-Held Easement	ACEP-ALE/WRE & HFRP – easement acquisition
Entity-Held Easement	ACEP-ALE/WRE & HFRP – easement acquisition
Watershed Project	PL-566



Land Management

- What – Land treatment practices including restoration of land in easements
- Roles & Responsibilities
 - In Classic FA is typically delivered by NRCS through producer contracts.
 - In AFAs FA is delivered by the lead partner on behalf of producers or by partner-producer contracts.
- RCPP can propose variances to existing practices, new scenarios, or conduct an environmental analysis for new and innovative practices



US-Held Easements

- RCPP Easements are not restricted to specific land uses.
- No match is required for US-Held Easements.
- NRCS is responsible for most due diligence activities.
- Available deed types
 - **Highly Restrictive** - Restoration/protection of native habitats in natural/historic condition. No agricultural use.
 - **Moderately Restrictive** - Management of specific habitats to provide conservation benefits with some agricultural uses allowed.
 - **Minimally Restrictive** - Protection of agricultural uses, including grazing.



Entity-Held Easements

- RCPP Easements are not restricted to specific land uses.
- Match can be provided by partner or through landowner donation.
- Match requirements range from 25-75%.
- Entity holding the easement is responsible for most due diligence activities, as a partner contribution.
- Partner may use existing minimum deed templates or use model templates based on covered programs.



Other Eligible Activities (<5%)

- **Land Rental** – Short term protection of land, payments typically based on foregone income until a conservation activity can be implemented.
- **Watershed Project** – Infrastructure projects based on PL-566 that require an NRCS approved plan and design prior to construction.



Who Can Apply for RCPP?

1. An agricultural or silvicultural producer association or other group of producers;
2. A State or unit of local government, including a conservation district;
3. An Indian Tribe;
4. A farmer cooperative;
5. An institution of higher education;
6. A water district, irrigation district, acequia, rural water district or association, or other organization with specific water delivery authority to producers on agricultural land;
7. A municipal water or wastewater treatment entity;
8. An organization or entity with an established history of working cooperatively with producers on agricultural land, as determined by the Secretary, to address -
 - i. Local conservation priorities related to agricultural production, wildlife habitat development, and NIPF management; or
 - ii. Critical watershed-scale soil erosion, water quality, sediment reduction, or other natural resource concerns; or
9. An eligible entity as identified by NRCS pursuant to [7 CFR part 1468](#).

Source: 7 CFR 1464.5 (b)



Role of the Lead Partner

- Submits the proposal.
- Recipient of a single agreement between NRCS and Lead Partner, which outlines roles & responsibilities.
- Manages relationship & coordination among all other project partners.
- Responsible for all contributions (including tracking other partner contributions).
- Completes and submits reports on all partner deliverables including outcomes.



Environmental Responsibilities

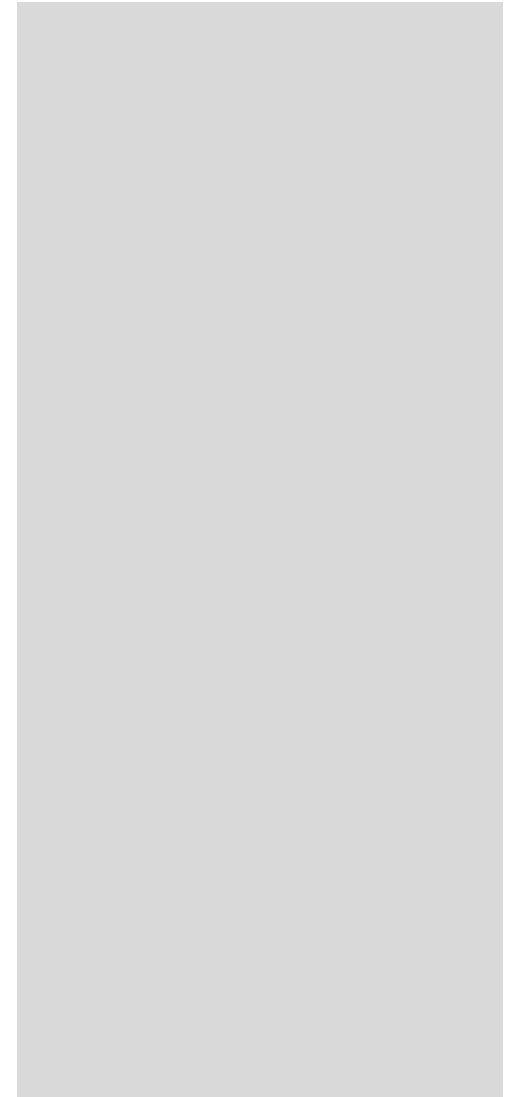
- NRCS conservation practice standards form the environmental and scientific basis for the majority of NRCS land improvement and land management activities.
- To use innovative methods outside of existing NRCS practices or for watershed projects, NEPA analysis is required at the RCPP project level.

Note: An environmental assessment or environmental impact statement is likely to be required.

- Proposals that include watershed projects or innovative practices should account for the time and cost of a NEPA analysis.
- NRCS is responsible for compliance with section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and section 7 of the Endangered Species Act and may not delegate these responsibilities to partners.

How RCPP Payments Work

- RCPP is not a grant.
- For financial assistance provided to producers/landowners, payments are made after activities are completed and based on NRCS cost schedules.
- Partners are reimbursed for completed work based on contracting amounts and the contracted costs per unit, not to exceed actual costs.
- Payments to partners cannot include administrative costs.



How are RCPP Proposals Evaluated?



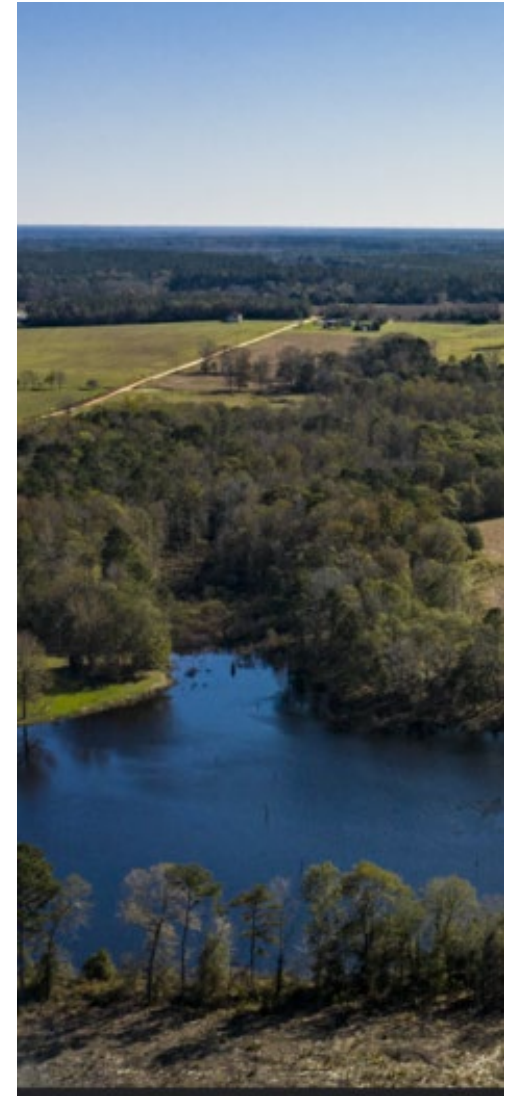
Proposal Evaluation Criteria

- **Impact** – How will the project address resource concerns in the proposed geographic area?
- **Partner Contributions** – How will contributions amplify the impact of NRCS funding?
- **Partnership & Project Management** – How effectively can the experience and resources of the partners support this project?

50%

20%

30%



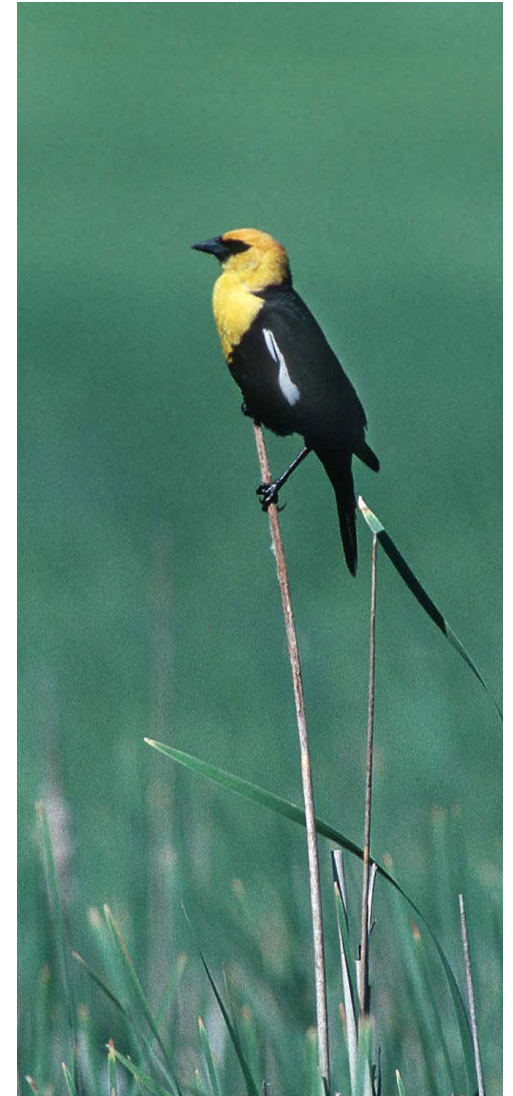
Proposal Evaluation

- **For Classic**

- Each proposal is reviewed by an NRCS state office.
- An award slate is based on state ranking, balancing funding pools, and NFO priorities.

- **For AFA**

- All proposals are reviewed by a national review team of technical and program experts.
- An award slate is based on the review team scores.



Inflation Reduction Act Funding

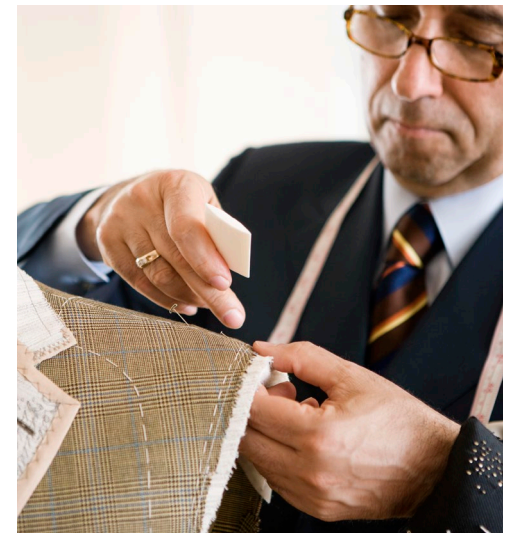
- To be considered for IRA funding proposals must receive an “A” or “B” for their climate smart index.
 - **A** – Projects that provide **climate mitigation** benefits such as reduced greenhouse gas emissions or carbon sequestration.
 - **B** – Projects that help producers and landowners **adapt** to the impact of climate change.
- For easements, will consider the potential carbon stored (e.g. grasslands and wetlands have greater storage potential).
- \$1.2 billion of the funding available in FY 2024



Flexibility vs Speed

Implementation Plan	Strengths	Challenges
Use a covered program process or model deed (covered program like)	Faster and easier	How is this meeting needs that aren't already covered by other Farm Bill programs?
Use an RCPP-specific process or template	Addresses needs that other programs can't address, may bring in new customers	Is the partner prepared for a more challenging ramp up period?

Note: Neither option is better, but your proposal must leverage the strengths and plan for the challenges with a given implementation style.





NFO Highlights for FY 2024

- \$1.5 billion total for Classic and AFA projects
 - \$300 million from Farm Bill
 - \$1.2 billion from IRA
- Simultaneous execution of PPA & SAs with Lead Partner starting with FY 2024 awards
- Working to add in model deeds based on the covered program templates.
 - For US-Held easements - WRE, HFRP, or other deed templates for US-held easements
 - For Entity-Held easements - ACEP-ALE template



Questions?

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