



# Regional Conservation Partnership Program

**Fiscal Year (FY) 2021**

**Regional Conservation Partnership Program  
Alternative Funding Arrangement (AFA)  
National Funding Opportunity (NFO)**

**No. USDA-NRCS-NHQ-RCPPAFA-21-NOFO0001096**

**Date Issued: March 16, 2021**





**United States  
Department of  
Agriculture**

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**Natural Resources Conservation Service**

Programs Deputy Area  
Financial Assistance Program Division  
Projects Branch

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## Summary Information

**Federal Awarding Agency Name:** U.S. Department of Agriculture - Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC)

**Funding Opportunity Title:** Notice of Funding Opportunity for NRCS's Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) – RCPP Alternative Funding Arrangement for Federal fiscal year (FY) 2021.

**Funding Opportunity Number:** USDA-NRCS-NHQ-RCPPAFA-21-NOFO0001096

**Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance Number:** 10.932, Regional Conservation Partnership Program

**DUE DATE:** Applications must be received by NRCS by 11:59 p.m. Eastern Time on May 28, 2021.

NOTE: This announcement is for the **RCPP Alternative Funding Arrangement (AFA) competition**, through which NRCS can make up to 15 awards per fiscal year, providing RCPP funding directly to eligible partners using a grant-like approach.

The FY 2022 RCPP Classic funding announcement is scheduled for release in summer 2021. For RCPP Classic, a majority of RCPP funding is provided by NRCS to producers and landowners through contracts and conservation easements. Through AFAs, NRCS provides RCPP funds to a lead partner, which in turn is responsible for working with and providing funding to producers and landowners for eligible conservation activities.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) promotes coordination of NRCS conservation activities with partners that offer value-added contributions that expand our collective ability to address on-farm, watershed, and regional natural resource concerns. NRCS seeks to coinvest with RCPP partners to implement projects that demonstrate innovative solutions to conservation challenges and provide measurable improvements and outcomes tied to the resource concerns they seek to address.

Through RCPP, partners propose projects—using guidance contained in this notice—that generate conservation benefits by addressing specific natural resource objectives in a state/multistate area or address one or more primary resource concerns within a critical conservation area (CCA). NRCS and partners design, implement and evaluate RCPP projects on agricultural and non-industrial private forest land. NRCS coinvests in RCPP projects selected through a competitive application process that evaluates applications based on four criteria: impact, partner contributions, innovation, and partnerships and management.

The RCPP AFA component is intended to support project structures and approaches that cannot be carried out as effectively through RCPP Classic. RCPP AFA applicants must describe the innovative nature of the conservation approach they are proposing to justify potential funding through an RCPP AFA rather than RCPP Classic. Additionally, applicants should consider the additional administrative and technical assistance responsibilities that accompany receipt of an RCPP AFA award.

The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (2018 Farm Bill) amendments to RCPP provides examples of project types that might be implemented through RCPP AFA:

- Projects that use innovative approaches to leverage the Federal investment in conservation;
- Projects that deploy a pay-for-performance conservation approach;
- Projects that seek large-scale infrastructure investments that generate conservation benefits for agricultural producers and nonindustrial private forest owners.

Although RCPP AFA provides flexibilities to partners, these projects share the overarching focus of RCPP — engaging with producers and landowners to implement conservation practices, systems and approaches on or for the benefit of agricultural and nonindustrial private forest lands.

This notice announces the availability of funding for up to 15 RCPP AFA projects in FY 2021. Applications are accepted from all 50 States, the Caribbean Area (Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands), and U.S. territories in the Pacific Island Areas (Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands).

**SUBMISSIONS:** Applications must be submitted through the [Programs Portal](#).

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:** A webinar for interested RCPP applicants is scheduled for 3 p.m. Eastern Time on April 1st. Information on how to tune into the webinar, along with all other RCPP application information, is housed on the [national RCPP webpage](#). Partners may email the RCPP inbox -- [rcpp@usda.gov](mailto:rcpp@usda.gov) - - questions about this announcement.

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## **SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION**

### **I. FUNDING OPPORTUNITY DESCRIPTION**

#### **A. Legislative Authority**

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is authorized by Subtitle I of Title XII of the Food Security Act of 1985 (the 1985 Farm Bill), as amended by Sections 2701 through 2707 of the Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018 (the 2018 Farm Bill). The Secretary of Agriculture has delegated the authority to administer RCPP to the Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). NRCS is an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

#### **B. Delivering Assistance through Alternative Funding Arrangements**

Through RCPP Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFAs), NRCS provides funding to partners to support conservation activities with eligible producers and landowners on (or benefitting) eligible land. RCPP AFA funding flows directly from NRCS to a lead partner and not directly from NRCS to producers, landowners, or other entities as in RCPP Classic.

Federal agencies use grant agreements as the financial instrument to award funding when the awarding agency does not have “substantial involvement” in the grant activity. For RCPP AFA projects, NRCS will not use grant agreements because the agency will be substantially involved through the provision of prescribed technical assistance activities to producers. NRCS will implement RCPP AFAs through programmatic partnership agreements and associated supplemental agreements.

Through this announcement, NRCS gives substantial preference to lead partners that can provide producers the technical assistance necessary to implement the conservation activities that are part of an RCPP AFA project. NRCS intends to provide non-delegable technical assistance for each project--completing National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), and Endangered Species Act (ESA) section 7 compliance requirements and ensuring that participating producers receiving RCPP funding comply with the 1985 Farm Bill’s (as amended) adjusted gross income (AGI), highly erodible lands (HEL) and wetlands conservation (WC) provisions.

RCPP AFA applicants are encouraged to work with appropriate NRCS State RCPP Coordinators during the application process to determine if proposed projects align with RCPP goals and policies. See section IX for link to the State RCPP Coordinators. Awardees must collaborate with designated NRCS staff during project implementation to ensure project goals are met and successful results are considered for incorporation into NRCS technical and programmatic operations.

#### **C. Vision and Goals of the Program**

RCPP is an innovative program that has as its critical feature a co-investment approach through which NRCS and partners collaborate to implement natural resource conservation activities. Following are four key principles of RCPP:

- **Impact.**— RCPP applications must propose effective solutions that address one or more natural resource priorities to help solve natural resource challenges that are limited in geographic scope. Partners are responsible for evaluating a project’s impact and results.
- **Partner Contributions.**— Partners are responsible for identifying any combination of direct and in-kind value-added contributions to leverage NRCS’s RCPP investments. Partners must provide substantial contributions and the magnitude of contributions is considered in the RCPP application evaluation criteria.
- **Innovation.**— NRCS seeks projects that integrate multiple conservation approaches, implement

innovative conservation approaches or technologies, build new partnerships, or effectively take advantage of program flexibilities to deliver conservation solutions.

- **Partnerships and Management.**— Partners must have experience, expertise, and capacity to manage the partnership and project, provide outreach and technical assistance to producers, and quantify the environmental (and when possible, economic and social) outcomes of an RCPP AFA project. NRCS gives preference to partnerships that engage historically underserved farmers and ranchers.

Successful RCPP applicants will bring an array of financial and technical capabilities to projects, will demonstrate experience working effectively and collaboratively with agricultural producers and nonindustrial private forest landowners across the landscape, and will present innovative and measurable approaches to achieving important conservation goals.

RCPP AFA supports partners in carrying out the goals and vision of RCPP through innovative project frameworks and payment mechanisms. RCPP AFA applications must include conservation approaches or payment mechanisms that are not as effectively implementable through RCPP Classic. RCPP AFA applications must propose one of the following project types:

- Projects making infrastructure investments relating to agricultural or nonindustrial private forest production that benefit multiple producers or landowners and address natural resource concerns such as drought, wildfire, or water quality impairment on the land covered by the project.
- Projects addressing natural resources concerns through targeted coordination with producers and landowners, including the development and implementation of watershed, habitat, or other area restoration plans (note that a proposal focused solely or largely on planning is unlikely to be competitive). Projects may use sophisticated targeting tools to identify priority areas for conservation or use innovative mechanisms to aggregate and streamline contracts for producers, all in service of maximizing conservation impacts at a watershed or regional scale.
- Projects that use innovative approaches to leverage the Federal investment in conservation with private financial mechanisms, in conjunction with agricultural production or nonindustrial private forest resource management. These projects may include pay-for-performance, pay-for-success, and environmental market approaches.
- Any other project consistent with RCPP program goals and objectives that cannot be effectively carried out through RCPP Classic.

NRCS intends to award a significant portion of the available AFA funding to proposals that address Climate Smart Agriculture and Forestry approaches, systems, and practices. Such proposals must be consistent with one of the project types above and may address carbon market approaches, approaches that create new markets for agricultural commodities produced with climate smart technologies and practices, other innovative agricultural conservation approaches or technologies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and/or sequester carbon, and activities that increase agricultural resiliency and adaptation.

NRCS also strongly encourages the submission of RCPP proposals addressing the conservation needs of urban farmers in metropolitan areas. Interest in urban agriculture continues to grow and there is a common need to address complex natural resource concerns related to energy conservation, water conservation, soil health and the long-term protection of land. Additionally, RCPP provides opportunities to help partners and urban farmers meet the growing demand for access to healthy fresh food in historically underserved populated communities.

## D. Overview of the RCPP Application and Selection Process

Applicants submit a full application in response to this funding announcement, following the guidance in part V of this notice. NRCS evaluates proposals following the guidance in part VI of this notice.

## E. Final Rule

The RCPP final rule was published in the *Federal Register* on January 14, 2021. RCPP regulations are found at 7 CFR part 1464.

## II. FUNDING AVAILABILITY

NRCS may select up to 15 projects through this RCPP AFA funding announcement. NRCS intends to spend up to \$75 million on RCPP AFA projects in fiscal year (FY) 2021.

The maximum funding (combined financial and technical assistance) available for any project selected under this RCPP AFA announcement is \$10 million. The minimum funding amount is \$250,000.

RCPP AFA awards will be executed through programmatic partnership agreements with lead partners. Terms of agreements will be negotiated and signed following the announcement of awards. Project management and producer outreach expenditures carried out by RCPP project partners between the time of award announcement and agreement execution can be counted as partner contributions if identified as such in the proposed project budget and approved by NRCS.

RCPP funds, at the time of agreement execution, remain available for the duration of the project, generally not to exceed 5 years from the date of partnership agreement execution. Partners may request an agreement term of longer than 5 years in exceptional circumstances (see section V). For all RCPP awards, a single 1-year no-cost extension is available at the discretion of NRCS.

### A. Fund Pools and Funding Priorities

RCPP AFA applicants must identify whether they are applying to the critical conservation area (CCA) or State/multistate fund pool. Proposals may only be submitted for competition in one fund pool.

#### 1. CCA Fund Pool

There are eight CCAs that represent landscapes with common resource concerns. For each CCA, NRCS has identified priority resource concerns. CCA applications must address at least one of the relevant CCA's priority resource concerns. CCAs and associated priority resource concerns for the FY 2021 RCPP AFA competition are:

RCPP Critical Conservation Areas	Priority Resource Concerns
Great Lakes Region (IL, IN, MI, MN, NY, PA, OH, WI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Water quality degradation</li><li>Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates</li></ul>
Chesapeake Bay Watershed (DE, MD, NY, PA, VA, WV)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Water quality degradation</li><li>Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates</li></ul>
Mississippi River Basin (AR, KY, IA, IL, IN, LA, MN, MO, MS, OH, SD, TN, WI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Water quality degradation</li><li>Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates</li><li>Excess/insufficient water/drought</li></ul>



RCPP Critical Conservation Areas	Priority Resource Concerns
Longleaf Pine Range (AL, FL, GA, LA, MS, NC, SC, TX, VA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates</li> <li>• Degraded plant condition</li> <li>• Water quality degradation</li> </ul>
Western Waters (ID, OR, WA, CA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excess/insufficient water/drought</li> <li>• Water quality degradation</li> <li>• Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates</li> </ul>
Northeast Forests and Waters (CT, MA, ME, NH, NY, RI, VT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Water quality degradation</li> <li>• Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates</li> <li>• Degraded plant condition</li> </ul>
Prairie Grasslands Region (CO, KS, IA, MO, MN, MT, ND, NE, NM, OK, SD, TX, WY)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates</li> <li>• Degraded plant condition</li> <li>• Excess/insufficient water/drought</li> </ul>
Colorado River Basin (AZ, CA, CO, NM, NV, UT, WY)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excess/insufficient water/drought</li> <li>• Water quality degradation</li> <li>• Soil quality degradation</li> <li>• Inadequate habitat for fish, wildlife, and invertebrates</li> </ul>

CCA projects must take place wholly within a CCA (counties traversed by a CCA border are considered within the CCA boundary). For more information about CCAs, including the maps of CCA boundaries, visit the [RCPP website](#).

## 2. State/Multistate Pool

Proposals in the State/multistate category must be carried out either within a single State or in multiple States. For multistate projects, priority consideration is given to applications identifying a reasonable and manageable number of States.

### B. Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) Waivers

The RCPP statute (16 U.S.C. § 1271B(f)) explicitly states that the AGI limitation, provided in 1985 Farm Bill (7 U.S.C. § 1308–3a), does not apply to RCPP partners. AGI does apply, however, to producers and landowners participating in RCPP projects. A lead partner may request to waive the applicability of AGI for the entire RCPP project during the agreement negotiation. A producer or landowner who is participating under a project-level AGI applicability waiver would not need to obtain an individual AGI determination.

If the RCPP lead partner does not request or receive a project-level waiver, a participating producer or landowner may seek a waiver of the AGI limitation upon receiving an AGI determination. An individual producer or landowner waiver of the AGI limitation may be granted if it would result in the protection of environmentally sensitive land of special significance in accordance with 7 CFR part 1400.

While AGI waivers are not requested and processed until after RCPP projects begin, proposals should indicate whether approval of a waiver(s) is critical to the success of a project.

## III. ELIGIBILITY INFORMATION

### A. Partner Eligibility

The lead partner for an RCPP project is the entity that submits a project proposal, and if selected for an award, negotiates and executes an RCPP PPA with NRCS. The lead partner is ultimately responsible for ensuring

completion of project deliverables, delivering all partner contributions, and assessing and reporting project outcomes. Lead partner entities must qualify as one of the following:

- An agricultural or silvicultural producer association or other group of producers;
- A State or unit of local government;
- An Indian Tribe;
- A farmer cooperative;
- A water district, irrigation district, rural water district or association, or other organization with specific water delivery authority to agricultural producers;
- A municipal water or wastewater treatment entity;
- An institution of higher education; and
- An organization or entity with an established history of working cooperatively with producers on agricultural land, as determined by NRCS, to address:
  - Local conservation priorities related to agricultural production, wildlife habitat development, or nonindustrial private forest land management; or
  - Critical watershed-scale soil erosion, water quality, sediment reduction, or other natural resource issues.
- An entity, such as an Indian Tribe, State government, local government, or a nongovernmental organization, as identified by NRCS pursuant to 7 CFR Part 1468.
- A conservation district.

Individual producers and landowners are not eligible to submit project applications under this notice.

## **B. Contributing Partners**

In addition to any contributions coming from the lead partner, RCPP projects may include direct or in-kind contributions from other entities, known as “contributing partners.” Contributing partners may be an eligible partner (i.e., entities described in the list above) or may be a third-party individual, organization, or agency (including a non-USDA Federal agency) that would not qualify as an eligible partner by the statutory definition. Note, however, that the lead partner is ultimately responsible for delivery of all partner contributions.

## **C. Producers and Landowners**

Agricultural producers or private landowners receiving funding as part of RCPP AFA projects must—

- Provide a tax identification number. Where applicable, American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Pacific Islanders may use another unique identification number for each individual eligible for payment;
- Where applicable, provide the percent interest share in a payment consistent with operation or ownership shares;
- Comply with the HEL and WC provisions found in 7 CFR Part 12; and
- Comply with the AGI provision or receive a waiver as described in section II.B of this announcement.

Given that RCPP AFA projects are designed to use alternative implementation approaches, NRCS anticipates that partners awarded RCPP AFA funding will have access to producer and landowner networks to identify prospective project participants. Proposals must describe how RCPP AFA partnerships plan to identify and engage with producers and landowners.

Lead partners are responsible for working with NRCS to ensure that any producer or landowner receiving RCPP funding through an AFA project is in compliance with HEL and WC provisions and the AGI limitation. These checks of producer or landowner eligibility must be completed prior to executing individual enrollment contracts or agreements and prior to issuing payments. Lead partners must furnish the data required for NRCS to complete compliance checks.

## **D. Eligible Activities**

### **1. Covered Program Authorities**

The RCPP statute includes several USDA programs for NRCS to use as a guide for determining eligible RCPP activities. The “covered programs” are the:

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program
- Conservation Stewardship Program
- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program
- Healthy Forests Reserved Program
- Public Law 83-566 Watershed Program
- Conservation Reserve Program

While RCPP AFA is designed to provide partners with flexible implementation approaches, RCPP AFA (like RCPP Classic) projects must implement conservation practices, systems and activities like those authorized under the covered programs listed above. RCPP AFA projects, therefore, can carry out any combination of land improvement/management/restoration, land rental, conservation easement, or watershed/public works activities. RCPP AFA projects need not carry out these activities in the same way NRCS implements them under the RCPP Classic, but authorized conservation activities are defined by 7 CFR part 1464.

If partners intend to carry out land improvement activities using existing NRCS conservation practice standards or enhancements, the amount of financial assistance provided to producers must not exceed amounts NRCS would provide for those activities. If partners, however, intend to carry out land improvement activities but not use existing NRCS program approaches, applications must describe their alternative approach in enough detail to give NRCS confidence that the project will be successful. For example, if a lead partner intends to implement a pay-for-performance approach for land management activities, as opposed to paying for established conservation practices as NRCS traditionally does, the lead partner must describe in detail the pay-for-performance approach and how the partner intends to safeguard the financial and scientific integrity of the approach and project. RCPP AFA applicants must consult with State RCPP Coordinators to ensure that proposed project activities are authorized under the covered programs.

### **2. RCPP AFA Entity-Held Easements**

U.S.-held easements are not available under the RCPP AFA component. Under RCPP AFA, all easements must be acquired and held by a qualified eligible entity. Partners are invited to propose innovative conservation easement approaches in agricultural settings, however, eligibility requirements (outlined in this section above and below) associated with entities (that hold AFA easements), the lands under easement, and each landowner must be met.

For RCPP AFA entity-held easements, NRCS will provide up to 25 percent of the fair market value of the easement, as determined by a before-and-after appraisal. Entity-held easements acquired through an RCPP AFA project will not include a United States Right of Enforcement held by USDA and thus will not be included in NRCS’s easement stewardship portfolio. NRCS will not perform easement deed or appraisal review prior to closing but may conduct such reviews prior to payment or as part of a post-closing quality assurance review.

NRCS will include in the AFA PPA and/or relevant supplemental agreement a set of minimum deed requirements\*, and applicable appraisal, eligibility, and easement acquisition requirements. Eligible entities are responsible for ensuring that the conservation easement deed addresses the RCPP minimum deed requirements and have the option, but are not required, to use the non-US Right of Enforcement version of the RCPP minimum deed terms available under RCPP Classic.

\*The RCPP Classic minimum deed terms are posted on the RCPP [How to Apply web page](#). The AFA minimum deed

requirements (which will be based on the posted minimum deed terms) are scheduled to be posted on the same page by April 1, 2021.

### **3. Environmental Compliance**

AFA partners must analyze the NEPA, NHPA, and Endangered Species Act implications of their proposed projects for NRCS consideration. For easement or land rental activities, or any land management activities using existing NRCS conservation practice standards, an NRCS-completed Environmental Evaluation (EE) will suffice (in most cases) as these activities are covered by categorical exclusions. For any ground-disturbing activities that do not follow NRCS's conservation planning process or use existing conservation practice standards, additional NEPA, NHPA and/or Endangered Species Act analysis (including potentially an Environmental Analysis or Environmental Impact Statement) may be required and should be factored into project timelines and budgets. See section VII. B, "Environmental Review Requirements," for additional information.

#### **E. Land Eligibility**

RCPP projects must be carried out on agricultural or nonindustrial private forest land or on associated land on which NRCS determines an eligible activity would help achieve conservation benefits. Generally, eligible land must be shown in Farm Service Agency records as private or Tribal land and be used for agricultural or forestry purposes.

"Associated land" is defined as land associated with farms and ranches that is not purposefully managed for food, forage, or fiber and is typically associated with nearby production and/or conservation lands. This could include incidental areas such as: idle center pivot corners, odd areas, ditches and watercourses, riparian areas, field edges, seasonal and permanent wetlands, and other similar areas.

Below are the two limited circumstances in which public lands may be eligible to be part of an RCPP project:

- A watershed/public works structure is constructed on public lands but the benefits (e.g., flood control, water supply) accrue to private agricultural lands.
- A producer who has demonstrated control of a patchwork of private and public lands seeks to apply a land management activity across the full acreage of the operation.

RCPP funding cannot be used to place conservation easements on land already protected by virtue of being owned by a land trust or other entity that is required by statute or organizational intent to protect land from development.

When atypical land eligibility scenarios are proposed, NRCS may consider information provided by a lead partner in determining eligibility. Land eligibility is discussed in more detail in the RCPP regulations at 7 CFR Part 1464.

#### **F. Historically Underserved Producers**

NRCS gives priority consideration to RCPP AFA projects that propose to engage historically underserved farmers, ranchers, and landowners. The definition of "historically underserved" includes beginning, limited resource, socially disadvantaged, and veteran producers. The definitions for these terms are at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/people/outreach/slbfr/>. The narrative question section of the Programs Portal application provides an opportunity for applicants to explain how their project will substantively engage historically underserved producers.

#### IV. RCPP AFA Project Funding

RCPP funding provided by NRCS is divided into two categories, financial assistance (FA) and technical assistance (TA). Each AFA partnership agreement will receive a commitment of funding, in accordance to the description in A1 below, as follows:

- At least 70 percent FA—these funds are provided directly to producers/eligible entities to implement eligible RCPP activities.
- Up to 30 percent TA—these funds are used to support implementation of the RCPP project.

All application budgets submitted by partners must be consistent with this funding breakdown.

##### A. NRCS Technical Assistance, Partner Technical Assistance and Partner Contributions

AFA project funding is comprised of a combination of NRCS funding and partner contributions. It is NRCS's goal that partner contributions at least equal the NRCS investment in a RCPP project. Partner contributions consist of any combination of direct funding and in-kind support. NRCS strongly recommends that partners propose value-added contributions that elevate and enhance the overall impact and efficacy of an RCPP project. The magnitude and significance of partner contributions factors into the project evaluation criteria listed in section V.

**IMPORTANT**—official approval of a project budget included in a RCPP application does not occur at the time of award announcement. Budget proposals are subject to negotiation and technical assistance provider qualification verification prior to execution of the RCPP AFA agreement.

The following provisions apply to RCPP AFA funding:

- Entities receiving RCPP awards are required to submit annually to NRCS the amounts of RCPP funding provided to individual producers.
- NRCS prohibits duplicative payments. Entities receiving a RCPP award are responsible for ensuring that RCPP AFA payments are not provided to a producer for a conservation practice, system or approach for which the producer has already received, or is contracted to receive, funding through another NRCS or USDA source.

##### 1. Financial Assistance (FA) and Technical Assistance (TA)

RCPP AFA awards may be awarded for both FA and TA. See the table below for examples of reimbursable FA and TA activities. All of these example FA and TA activities could also be counted as partner contributions if partners are not reimbursed by NRCS. Project FA may take the form of conservation practice/system, easement, land rental, incentive, pay-for-performance, ecosystem services or other similar payments. AFA proposals must describe the estimated amount and composition of FA payments destined for agricultural producers.

C=Partner contributions

I=Implementation TA

E=Enhancement TA

Sample Financial Assistance Activities	Sample Technical Assistance Activities
Incentive or other payments to producers to undertake conservation activities	Management of the RCPP partnership agreement (and any sub-agreements) (E, C)
Payments to producers to fund the implementation of land management or structural practices or systems	Inventories and data to support required NEPA activities (E, I, C)
Conservation easement payments to landowners	Outreach and education, including inventories, analyses and tools needed to inform outreach (E, C)

Sample Financial Assistance Activities	Sample Technical Assistance Activities
Watershed structure design and implementation	Technical assistance to producers for planning directly related to installation or management of eligible conservation activities (I, C)
Payments to producers for short-term land rental	Easement contract support services (e.g. securing and managing contracts for 3 <sup>rd</sup> party services like engineering studies, surveys and appraisals) (I, C)
Pay-for-performance or ecosystem services credit payments	Communications activities (E, C)
	Environmental monitoring to support partner responsibility to track and report on project outcomes (E, C)
	Development and calculation of quantifiable project outcomes (E, C)
	Leveraging other funds related to the RCPP Project goals and objectives (E, C)
	Development of innovative conservation approaches (e.g., pay-for-success, market-based approaches) (E, C)
	Project management and partnership development to accomplish project goals (E, C)
	Staff Training/Capacity Building (C)
	Developing/maintaining connections to related conservation efforts (E, C)
	Watershed planning activities (I, C)

\*\*Note that administrative (indirect) costs associated with the implementation of RCPP projects cannot be reimbursed by NRCS, by statute.

The TA for each RCPP project is allocated as follows:

- Implementation TA: 23 percent, fixed
  - 5 percent (percentage fixed)—retained by NRCS for RCPP project, contract and agreement management and required HEL/WC, AGI eligibility, and environmental compliance activities. This is non-negotiable.
  - 18 percent (percentage fixed)—allocated for TA associated with implementation of RCPP eligible activities, including watershed planning, field-level planning, practice design, installation and verification, and easement support activities (e.g., title reviews, due diligence, valuation and survey reviews, and closing and monitoring responsibilities).
- Enhancement TA (E) (7% maximum)—available for partner-led activities directly related to management and enhancement of the approved RCPP project. Eligible to be earned by partners for outreach to producers and landowners, project management, environmental monitoring, communications activities, development and calculation of quantifiable project outcomes, and development of innovative conservation approaches. Applicant requests for project management and enhancement TA are subject to negotiation and verification during development of the partnership agreement.

If applicants do not intend to request project enhancement TA, that TA funding will be folded back into program funding as determined by NRCS. Further, it is not anticipated that all enhancement items potentially eligible for RCPP funding will be funded for selected projects, due to the 7% cap on enhancement funding. Partners are expected to provide contributions for any enhancement TA activities that cannot be covered by RCPP funding.

**The RCPP AFA criteria in section V of this notice make clear that NRCS gives preference to partner entities that can wholly supply the TA to implement the conservation activities proposed for RCPP AFA projects, either on their own or through working with certified Technical Service Providers (TSPs) or**

**other qualified entities and individuals. NRCS encourages applicants to consider the use of third-party providers for TA services on AFA projects.**

Proposals must identify the individuals or entities providing TA services and furnish their qualifications. If these individuals or entities are not certified Technical Service Providers or NRCS-certified conservation planners, proposals must provide enough evidence that the individuals or entities are qualified to carry out implementation activities.

Partners who do not intend to provide all the TA to implement an AFA project must furnish a justification that describes why NRCS is better suited to provide implementation TA. In such cases, partners must describe in detail the TA activities that NRCS would carry out. This information will be used to negotiate a TA amount for NRCS.

Funding from non-USDA Federal agencies can be counted as partner contribution, provided it is expended in support of RCPP project purposes in the project area. Note, however, that non-USDA Federal contributions may be discounted in comparison to non-Federal contributions as part of the proposal evaluation process.

Consistent with the RCPP statute, expenditures for project development, including outreach activities in the project area carried out by RCPP project partners between the time of project selection announcement and partnership agreement execution can be counted as partner contributions if identified as such in the proposed project budget and approved by NRCS during execution of the partnership agreement.

There may be rare circumstances for which a higher TA percentage than 30 percent is justified for RCPP AFA projects. Similarly, there may be rare circumstances in which partners would prefer flexibility in TA percentages between enhancement and implementation TA. Partners requesting any deviations from the TA amounts or allocated percentages described in this section must provide justification as part of their proposal for consideration by NRCS.

**Note on Administrative Costs:** The RCPP statute prohibits NRCS from reimbursing partners for any administrative costs. Sometimes referred to as overhead or indirect costs, administrative costs are expenses such as rent and utilities, durable equipment and software acquisitions, space used by staff, copiers, phones, information technology support, etc. While not reimbursable by NRCS, indirect costs may be counted as partner contributions (these are known as unrecovered indirect costs). Organizations that have an active Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement (NICRA) with the Federal Government must use the rate identified in that agreement in determining indirect costs to be included in a proposal as contributions. Entities without a NICRA may use a 10-percent indirect cost rate. To determine the amount of administrative costs that may be counted as proposed partner contribution for RCPP, either the NICRA rate or the de minimis rate may be charged only against any partner TA contributions. If indirect costs are included as partner contributions in a proposal, the lead partner's current NICRA (if they have one) must be uploaded as part of the RCPP project application in the Programs Portal.

## **2. NRCS Project Oversight and TA Responsibilities**

NRCS will participate in each RCPP AFA project. At a minimum, NRCS is required to verify that participating producers comply with the Farm Bill's AGI, HEL and WC provisions, using information provided by the lead partner. NRCS is also responsible for making reimbursement payments to lead partners, tracking project reporting and ensuring that project outcomes and deliverables are being achieved and documented.

In addition, NRCS is responsible for ensuring that adequate information is collected to ensure that RCPP AFA projects and activities comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other Federal, State, and local laws and regulations. NRCS is not necessarily responsible for data collection, which can be negotiated, but the agency cannot delegate analytical and decision-making responsibility for these items.

## **B. Partner Contributions**

While a specific amount of partner contributions is not required, it is NRCS's goal that partner contributions at least equal the NRCS investment in an RCPP project. Contributions can be any combination of direct funding and in-kind support. Magnitude and significance of partner contributions factor into the project evaluation criteria listed in section VI. Examples of value-added contributions include additional partner-provided FA for conservation activities, environmental monitoring, evaluation of economic and social outcomes, and communications activities. A more extensive list of activities that could count as partner contributions is found in the table in section IV.A.

Partner contributions must be directly related to the conservation goals and objectives of the project and support the generation of conservation benefits and conservation implementation activities carried out by producers and landowners. For partner expenditures to count as contributions, they must be expended during the life of the RCPP partnership agreement (i.e., from the day the agreement is executed until it expires) and expended in the project's geographic area. Contributions also may be expended between the time of award announcement and partnership agreement execution, with NRCS's approval.

The stated value of contributions must be supported by a credible valuation method/cost basis. Lead partners, if selected for an award, must maintain auditable records of partner contributions.

The non-reimbursed cost incurred by a producer or landowner associated with implementation of an RCPP contract for land management activities or rentals cannot be counted as partner contribution. However, for entity-held easements (and some public works activities included in a watershed plan), the entirety of the non-Federal share provided by the eligible entity for the purchase of the easement (which may include a landowner donation) may be included in the amount considered the partner contribution.

Partner contributions are a critical component of every RCPP project. If contributions are not delivered according to the schedule included in the partnership agreement, NRCS may delay payments or take other actions up to and including cancelling a supplemental agreement or AFA partnership agreement.

## **V. RCPP AFA Project Proposals**

### **A. Format and Instructions**

RCPP AFA proposals must be submitted through the Programs Portal by the deadline in this notice. NRCS evaluates proposals according to the criteria in section VI of this notice.

At least 4 weeks prior to the proposal deadline, and before starting to enter a proposal in the Programs Portal, entities interested in applying for an RCPP AFA project are advised to request a meeting with the appropriate NRCS State RCPP coordinators. Communication with State RCPP coordinators is critical to help partners—

- Frame conservation benefits in terms of NRCS resource concerns;
- Understand RCPP AFA-eligible activities and which activities are best suited to treat NRCS resource concerns within the project area;
- Develop their approach for measuring conservation (and potentially economic and social) outcomes of RCPP projects;
- Establish mutual understanding of program and partner capacities and rules (for both NRCS and partners).

A list of State RCPP coordinators, as of the date of this announcement's posting, is on the [RCPP website](#).

**NOTE:** RCPP proposals become the property of NRCS for use in the administration of the program and will not



be returned to the applicant. Proposal details will not be shared publicly, but summary data of successful proposals, such as project title, RCPP funding requested, total contribution proposed, geographic target area, and proposed project activities and benefits will be made publicly available.

## **B. RCPP AFA Proposal Content**

The RCPP AFA project application must adhere to the guidance below, which is consistent with the design of the application entry screens of the NRCS Programs Portal. Any materials not specifically required below will not be considered in the review process.

- **Basic Project and Contact Information.**—Lead partners must list a primary and alternate contact to help ensure effective communication with NRCS RCPP staff. It is recommended that the primary contact is the project director (i.e., the individual coordinating project activities) and the alternate contact is the administrative contact (i.e., the individual managing the administrative components of the project, including program payments, etc.).
  - Lead partners must select the primary (and secondary, if relevant) natural resource concern addressed by the project. For CCA projects, the primary resource concern must be a priority resource concern category listed in section II of this notice.
  - Though RCPP partnership agreements for funded projects in general are 5 years in length, the Programs Portal allows applicants to request a partnership agreement length longer or shorter than 5 years and provide a justification for longer requests. Applicants must be aware that such requests will be granted only in exceptional circumstances.
- **List of Project Partners.**—Identify the lead partner (the only party with which NRCS will execute an RCPP partnership agreement) and all non-lead partners that are providing partner contributions or are proposed to earn RCPP implementation or enhancement TA funding. Briefly describe the role of each partner.
- **Project Questionnaire.**—In the Programs Portal, applicants must provide answers to questions related to the evaluation criteria found in section VI of this notice. These questions require the applicant to describe the compelling conservation need for the project, the goals and objectives, the geographic focus, estimated number of participating producers, and the project management capacity of the partnership, among other items. The Programs Portal restricts answers to a set amount of characters. Character limitations include spaces.
- **Project Outcomes.**—All RCPP lead partners are responsible for developing and reporting on conservation outcomes (and, to the extent possible, economic and social outcomes) of their projects. A guidance document for developing outcomes is posted on the [RCPP website](#). Lead partners submitting RCPP proposals must review the guidance and understand their responsibilities for developing, measuring/estimating and reporting outcomes.
- **Deliverables and Contributions.**—The Programs Portal guides applicants to fill out two tables—one connects project deliverables with the funding requested (both FA and TA) and the other table collects partner contribution information.
  - In the deliverables table, applicants must request RCPP funding by year and describe anticipated RCPP AFA activities. If an application is selected for funding, final budgets of selected projects will be negotiated during the partnership agreement development phase, with proportional changes required if either contributions or RCPP funding amounts change.
  - In the partner contributions table, applicants must list the lead partner and any contributing partners providing a contribution and identify contributions as cash or in-kind. Contributions also must be listed by activity type.
- **Contribution Commitment Letters.**—Provide a commitment letter from each non-lead partner or other third-party providing contributions, including cash and in-kind services. Dollar amounts must match figures provided in the Programs Portal. If any discrepancies are noted, NRCS will use the lower of the

two amounts. Project support letters will not be considered and should not be submitted through the Programs Portal.

While contributions from non-lead partners and other third parties are encouraged and should be included in a partner's proposal when integrally related to proposed project success, the lead partner (the only party with which NRCS will execute a partnership agreement) assumes full responsibility for ensuring that all contributions are delivered as included in the partnership agreement.

- **Project Map.**—Lead partners must upload a jpg. or pdf. that clearly delineates the geographic scope of the project. If a project is selected for an award, lead partners will work with the appropriate RCPP State coordinator to develop a more sophisticated project map using GIS.
- **DUNS Number.**—A Dun and Bradstreet (DUNS) number is a unique nine-digit sequence recognized as the universal standard for identifying and keeping track of over 70 million businesses worldwide. All RCPP applicants must have or 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 DUNS registration may take up to 14 business days to complete.
- **SAM Registration.**—All RCPP applicants must also have or obtain a current System for Award Management (SAM) registration. SAM is the official U.S. Government system that consolidated the capabilities of the Central Contractor Registration, Federal Register, Online Representations and Certification Application, and Excluded Parties List System. To register, go to <https://www.sam.gov/portal/public/SAM/>. SAM registration must be renewed annually. Applicants should allow ample time to obtain or renew a SAM registration.

## **VI. PROPOSAL EVALUATION**

### **A. Evaluation Criteria**

RCPP AFA proposals are evaluated against four criteria that applicants should use as a guide during application development. Each application is scored on a 100-point scale.

#### **1. Impact (25 points)**

- Does the proposal describe a compelling conservation need and clear project goals and objectives (for CCA projects—is the project addressing one or more priority resource concerns)?
- Does the lead partner propose to generate substantial conservation benefits, and are those benefits likely to be achieved based on proposed project methods and approaches?
- Is the project area the appropriate scale for the resource concern(s) and goals identified?
- Does the proposal describe an approach to measure and report on achievable environmental project outcomes? What about economic and social outcomes?

#### **2. Partner Contributions (25 points)**

- What percentage of the overall project cost will come from non-USDA partner resources?
- To what extent are partner contributions value-added and bringing unique and qualified expertise or resources to the project to enhance project outcomes (e.g., cash vs. in-kind, FA vs. TA, TA skills and expertise)?
- Do proposed contribution deliverables, contribution commitment letters, and valuation methods demonstrate a clear and compelling relationship to project deliverables and outcomes?
- Are contribution deliverables and valuation methods clearly documented?

#### **3. Innovation (25 points):**

- Does the lead partner propose an innovative approach that is better suited for RCPP AFA than RCPP

Classic? Does the project take advantage of the programmatic and implementation flexibilities afforded by RCPP AFA?

- Is the innovative approach likely to be successful and transferable to other partnerships or geographies?

#### **4. Partnerships and Management (25 points):**

- Does the partnership propose to carry out all TA required to implement the RCPP AFA project, excluding TA items NRCS is exclusively responsible for?
- Do the partners have a history of collaboration and engagement with agricultural producers and forest landowners to ensure high levels of participation. Does the application include a strategy for producer outreach and education to recruit project participants?
- Does the proposal encourage or include the participation of historically underserved producers, including socially disadvantaged, beginning, limited resource and veteran farmers and ranchers, or include as a partner(s) organizations working with or representing those groups of producers?

#### **B. Proposal Evaluation Process**

All AFA applications will be thoroughly evaluated using the criteria outlined above. Proposals are reviewed by a NRCS national review team and by NRCS staff in the States in which AFA project work is proposed. An NRCS leadership review board evaluates the results of the technical and programmatic review and makes recommendations for funding to the Chief of NRCS. The NRCS Chief makes the final AFA award decisions.

### **VII. AWARD INFORMATION AND ADMINISTRATION**

#### **A. RCPP Partnership and Supplemental Agreements**

After a project proposal is selected to become a AFA project, the lead State Conservationist will initiate negotiations with the lead partner to define the final scope and responsibilities of the AFA partnership agreement. This process will include detailed discussions on the roles of the lead partner, contributing partners, and NRCS in implementing the project, including the provision of FA and TA funding.

The RCPP partnership agreement serves as the agreement guiding the project. There is no funding obligated through the RCPP partnership agreement. Rather the RCPP partnership agreement includes lead partner deliverables, timelines, and expectations for future RCPP awards and partner contributions based on the negotiated terms of an approved project, available RCPP funding, and other program considerations. RCPP AFA applicants should anticipate a project start date of December 1, 2021.

Following execution of the RCPP AFA partnership agreement, the obligation of RCPP funds will be made through a supplemental agreement(s) to the lead partner. The lead partner, in turn, will carry out project TA and FA activities directly with landowners and producers, and make requests for reimbursement to NRCS.

Prior to the execution of any RCPP supplemental agreements, NRCS and the lead partner will negotiate documentation requirements for reimbursement, based on the agreement deliverables and activities. For example, if the lead partner requests reimbursement for an enhancement TA task such as producer outreach activities, then the submission of meeting agendas and a list of participants may be required for reimbursement. For a FA activity such as paying a producer under a pay-for-performance conservation approach, the lead partner would need to submit sufficient documentation to justify the expenditure and show that the anticipated level of conservation performance has been attained. These are just two examples. Specific documentation requirements must be agreed to by NRCS and the lead partner prior to execution of any supplemental agreement. Advance payments may be allowed at NRCS's discretion. Guidance on advance payments will be provided in relevant supplemental agreements.

RCPP lead partners are also required to maintain documentation of both reimbursable expenses and partner

contribution expenditures for 3 years beyond the expiration of a supplemental agreement. NRCS intends to audit a random sample of RCPP projects annually. If a lead partner fails to produce documentation of reimbursable and partner contribution expenditures, NRCS may require the lead partners to take remedial action. If lead partners are unable to satisfy NRCS's requirements, the RCPP AFA partnership agreement or supplemental agreements may be suspended or terminated.

## **B. Environmental Review Requirements**

Some RCPP conservation activities may require Federal, State, Tribal, or local permits or consultation with Federal, State, Tribal, or local agencies. All required permits must be acquired, and consultations completed prior to initiation of project activity. Applicants should consider required permit and consultation activities when establishing a project timeline. NRCS requires that applicants provide appropriate documentation of any relevant permitting and consultation requirements as part of the application packet. NRCS cannot provide RCPP funding until the environmental review requirements demonstrating how compliance with NEPA, NHPA, ESA, and other Federal, State, Tribal and local laws and regulations will be met are satisfied. NRCS may choose not to approve, or may withdraw, funding for projects that it determines do not realistically account for the time or expense of addressing environmental concerns, or where project may result in unacceptable adverse environmental impacts.

Once an RCPP partnership agreement is executed, NRCS is responsible for ensuring that site-specific EEs are completed during the planning phase of all individual awards (e.g. producer contracts or easements) for land improvement/land management, rental, and easement activities to ensure compliance with NEPA, NHPA, ESA, and other Federal, State, Tribal, and local laws and regulations and NRCS policy. In addition, where the NRCS conservation planning process or conservation practice standards are to be supplemented or replaced with innovative measures, or public works/watershed activities are included in a RCPP application, NEPA analysis is required at the RCPP project level, and an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement is likely to be required. Project-level consultations under section 106 of the NHPA and section 7 of the ESA may also be required for projects not using NRCS conservation practice standards.

Project proposals should incorporate explicit acknowledgment of any NEPA, NHPA, ESA, or other environmental compliance needs, and the project timeline and budget should reflect them. Expense of such analyses shall be included in total project costs as either a partner TA contribution, or (to the extent approved as during project negotiations) as a potentially reimbursable implementation TA item (see TA description in section IV). NRCS is responsible for compliance with section 106 of the NHPA and section 7 of the ESA and may not delegate these responsibilities to partners. Subject to NRCS-approved processes and review, partners may arrange and pay for any cultural resource or species occupancy surveys needed for NRCS to assess project effects and be involved in required consultations.

Partner contributions to the RCPP project that would not occur *but for* RCPP funding received from NRCS (i.e., connected actions) must be analyzed in any relevant site-specific EEs conducted during the NRCS conservation planning process, and/or evaluated in a project-level NEPA analysis as deemed necessary by NRCS in collaboration with the lead partner or designee. Any costs and project delays associated with such analyses shall be the responsibility of the partner unless otherwise agreed to in project negotiations.

## **C. Reporting Requirements**

Reporting requirements are included in RCPP partnership agreements. Lead partners are required to submit annual progress reports through the Programs Portal. These reports include information on any subcontracts awarded, the use of RCPP funding, progress on project deliverables and outcomes, partner contribution expenditures and deliverables, producer and landowner outreach and participation, and the names of producers receiving funding through the project. Lead partners also are responsible for submitting a final report and fact sheet that can be shared with the public. Failure of a RCPP lead partner to stay current with reporting requirements, project timelines, or contribution expenditures may result in NRCS requiring additional project

oversight, adjustments to enhancement or implementation TA, or ultimately terminating a partnership agreement.

RCPP requires NRCS to provide to RCPP partners an annual report describing how NRCS used TA associated with RCPP AFA projects.

#### **D. Notifications**

All RCPP AFA applicants receive notification of selection or non-selection. Upon notification of selection, the lead NRCS State Conservationist contacts the lead partner to initiate development of a RCPP partnership agreement. Lead partners not selected for an award will receive feedback from proposal reviewers.

#### **E. Withdrawal of Applications**

Lead partners looking to withdraw their RCPP application after the submission deadline may do so by emailing a letter signed by a duly authorized partner representative on official organization letterhead to the [national RCPP inbox](#) with a copy to the lead State's RCPP coordinator. The letter should include the reason for withdrawal.

### **VIII. SUBMISSION INFORMATION**

Applicants must submit applications through the NRCS Programs Portal at <https://nrcs-sites.secure.force.com/>.

Applicants must have eAuthentication (eAuth) level-2 credentials to access the Programs Portal. This is a Departmental requirement and is non-negotiable. The steps for obtaining eAuth permissions to submit a proposal are—

- Identify a single system user for your organization.
- Establish a USDA level-2 e-Auth account (designated user only) following the guidance accessed at the following web address <https://www.eauth.usda.gov/mainPages/index.aspx>.
- After an eAuth credential is secured, request Programs portal system access (designated user only) (<https://nrcs-sites.secure.force.com/>) under “New Users” Click “Start Here.”
- Develop full application in Programs Portal.

The Programs Portal automatically sends applicants an email to acknowledge receipt at the time of submission. Applicants are solely responsible for ensuring timely submission through the Programs Portal and are strongly advised to allow sufficient time to obtain eAuth and Programs Portal access, and to complete the application in the Programs Portal. Difficulties related to these or other application processes will not result in an extension of the application deadline.

NRCS will not consider applications that do not meet the application requirements, are incomplete, submitted after the deadline date listed in this notice, submitted through registered or certified mail, submitted by facsimile, or delivered by courier.

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication (e.g., Braille, large print, audio tape) should contact the USDA TARGET Center at: (202) 720–2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339.

### **IX. AGENCY CONTACTS**

Partners with questions are encouraged to contact the appropriate NRCS State RCPP coordinator with proposal-related questions. State coordinators are often the person best suited to answer partner questions about proposals and RCPP in general. The [RCPP website](#) maintains a list of NRCS State RCPP coordinators updated for each funding opportunity.

Potential applicants may also contact national RCPP staff by email at [rccp@usda.gov](mailto:rccp@usda.gov) with questions.