Ranking Criteria for NRCS Programs – Fiscal Year 2023

Application Overview

Any applicant may submit an application for participation in ACEP, EQIP, CSP, or RCPP. The NRCS State Conservationist or Area Director, in consultation with stakeholders including the State Technical Committee, Tribal Conservation Advisory Councils, and Local Work Groups, has developed the following ranking criteria to prioritize and select applications that best address the applicable program purposes and priority natural resource concerns in Vermont.

The NRCS State Conservationist or Area Director will establish application batching periods and select the highest ranked applications for funding, based on applicant eligibility and the NRCS ranking process. In Fiscal Year 2023, NRCS will use its Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART) to assess and rank all eligible applications for NRCS conservation programs.

Inventory and Assessment in CART

CART is a decision support system designed to provide a consistent, replicable framework for the conservation planning process based on geospatially referenced information, client-provided information, field observations, and NRCS conservation planner expertise. CART is designed to assist NRCS conservation planners as they assess site vulnerability and existing conditions, and identify natural resource concerns on a unit of land.

In CART, assessments of existing management and conservation efforts are compared against conservation planning criteria thresholds to determine the level of conservation effort needed to address identified natural resource concerns. The results are then used to inform NRCS conservation planning activities for the client. NRCS also uses CART to consolidate resource data and program information to prioritize program delivery and report outcomes of NRCS investments in conservation.

In general, resource concerns fall into one of three categories for the assessment method used in CART to assess and document a resource concern:

- **Client Input/Planner Observation:** A streamlined list of options is presented to the planner to document the client input and/or planner observation of the resource concerns present. These observations are compared to the conservation planning criteria thresholds.
- **Procedural/Deductive:** A large group of resource concerns fall into this category and are assessed using a resource concern-specific tool or a list of inventory-like criteria. Due to variability in State tools, assessment questions and answers will be broad in nature to allow States to more carefully align them with State conditions.
- **Predictive:** The remaining resource concerns are assessed using a predictive interactive model simulation. The CART systems attempt to replicate the outcomes related to the assessment threshold being met or not compared to the model outputs.

After identifying resource concerns and describing existing conditions, planned conservation practices and activities can be added to the existing condition to determine the state of the proposed management system. Supporting practices that are needed to support primary conservation practices and activities are also identified, but do not add conservation management points to the total.

If the client is interested in financial assistance through an NRCS conservation program, the inventory and assessment information, along with client decisions related to conservation practice adoption, are directly and consistently transferred from the assessment portion of CART to the ranking portion of

CART. Based on the transferred assessment information and the conservation practices proposed for implementation, CART identifies the appropriate program ranking pool(s).

Ranking in CART

In general, NRCS program ranking criteria uses the following guiding principles:

- Degree of cost-effectiveness of the proposed conservation practices and activities;
- The level of performance of proposed conservation practices and activities;
- Treatment of multiple resource concerns or national priority resource concerns;
- Magnitude of the environmental benefits resulting from the treatment of resource concerns reflecting the level of performance of proposed conservation practices and activities; and
- Compliance with Federal, State, local or tribal regulatory requirements with regards to natural resources.

CART uses a set of National Ranking Templates developed for each NRCS program and initiative. The National Ranking Templates contain four parameters that are customized for each program to reflect the national level ranking criteria. The four parameters are:

1. **Land Uses** - NRCS has developed land use designations to be used by planners and modelers at the field and landscape level. Land use modifiers more accurately define the land's actual use and provide another level of specificity and help denote how the land is managed. Land use designations and modifiers are defined in Title 180, National Planning Procedures Handbook, Part 600.
2. **Resource Concerns** - An expected degradation of the soil, water, air, plant, or animal resource base to the extent that the sustainability or intended use of the resource is impaired. Because NRCS quantifies or describes resource concerns as part of a comprehensive conservation planning process, that includes client objectives, human and energy resources are considered components of the resource base.
3. **Practices** - A specific treatment used to address resource concerns, such as structural or vegetative measures, or management techniques, which are planned and implemented in accordance with applicable standards and specifications.
4. **Ranking Component Weights** – A set of five components comprise the ranking score for an individual land-based assessment. The five components are:
    a. **Vulnerability** - Site vulnerability is determined by subtracting the existing condition and existing practice scores from the thresholds. This score is weighted by ranking pool to address the resource concerns prioritized by that ranking pool.
    b. **Planned Practice Effects** - The planned practice effect score is based on the sum of the planned practice on that land unit which addresses the resource concern. This score is weighted by ranking pool to address the resource concerns prioritized by that ranking pool.
    c. **Resource Priorities** - National and State resource priorities are established to address the most critical land and resource considerations and are based on NRCS national and State priorities identified with input from National, State, and local stakeholders.
    d. **Program Priorities** - National and State program priorities are established to maximize program effectiveness and advance program purposes and are based on NRCS national and State priorities identified with input from National, State, and local stakeholders.
    e. **Cost Efficiency** – Summation of 'Planned Practice Points' divided by the log of the 'Average Practice Cost'.

NOTE: The points for vulnerability, planned practice effects, and cost efficiency are garnered from the assessment portion of CART.

Vermont created State-specific ranking pools within the above-described National Ranking Template parameters. The State ranking pools contain a set of questions that are divided into the following sections – applicability, category, program questions, and resource questions. Ranking pool customization allows States to focus funding on priority resource concerns and initiatives identified at the State level with input from NRCS stakeholders. Each eligible application may be considered for funding in all applicable ranking pools by program.

NRCS Resource Concerns

The following table lists the 47 Resource Concerns NRCS uses during the Conservation Planning process.

Categories	NRCS Resource Concerns
Soil	1. Sheet and rill erosion
	2. Wind erosion
	3. Ephemeral gully erosion
	4. Classic gully erosion
	5. Bank erosion from streams, shorelines, or water conveyance channels
	6. Subsidence
	7. Compaction
	8. Organic matter depletion
	9. Concentration of salts or other chemicals
	10. Soil organism habitat loss or degradation
	11. Aggregate instability
Water	12. Ponding and flooding
	13. Seasonal high-water table
	14. Seeps
	15. Drifted snow
	16. Surface water depletion
	17. Groundwater depletion
	18. Naturally available moisture use
	19. Inefficient irrigation water use
	20. Nutrients transported to surface water
	21. Nutrients transported to groundwater
	22. Pesticides transported to surface water
	23. Pesticides transported to groundwater
	24. Pathogens and chemicals from manure, biosolids, or compost applications transported to surface water
	25. Pathogens and chemicals from manure, biosolids, or compost applications transported to groundwater
	26. Salts transported to surface water
	27. Salts transported to groundwater
	28. Petroleum, heavy metals, and other pollutants transported to surface water
	29. Petroleum, heavy metals, and other pollutants transported to groundwater

	30. Sediment transported to surface water
	31. Elevated water temperature
Air	32. Emissions of particulate matter (PM) and PM precursors
	33. Emissions of greenhouse gasses (GHGs)
	34. Emissions of ozone precursors
	35. Objectionable odors
	36. Emissions of airborne reactive nitrogen
Plants	37. Plant productivity and health
	38. Plant structure and composition
	39. Plant pest pressure
	40. Wildfire hazard from biomass accumulation
Animals	41. Terrestrial habitat for wildlife and invertebrates
	42. Aquatic habitat for fish and other organisms
	43. Feed and forage imbalance
	44. Inadequate livestock shelter
	45. Inadequate livestock water quantity, quality and distribution
Energy	46. Energy efficiency of equipment and facilities
	47. Energy efficiency of farming/ranching practices and field operations

Program-Specific Information

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

States must include the following ranking question under the "program questions" for both the BFR and SDFR ranking pools. This question does not apply to any other ranking pool

- Does the applicant meet the NRCS definition of a veteran farmer or rancher (VFR)?
- Did the applicant participate in the CRP Transition Incentives Program (TIP), and land included in the CSP application has come out of CRP within the last two years?

At a minimum, States must develop the program questions and resource questions using the following criteria:

- How effectively and comprehensively the planned conservation practices or activities address the identified natural resource concerns.
- The magnitude of the expected conservation benefits resulting from the conservation practices or activities and the priority of the natural resource concerns.
- Use of approved conservation practices or activities that provide long-term conservation benefit.

States may include ranking questions to prioritize high priority practices based on the following conservation practice criteria:
Will practices be implemented that address specific causes of ground or surface water impairment relating to excessive nutrients?
Will practices be implemented that address the conservation of water and declining aquifers, and mitigate drought?
Will practices be implemented that will meet other environmental priorities and other priority resource concerns identified in habitat or other area restoration plans?
Are the practices geographically targeted to address a natural resource concern in a specific watershed?

Initiatives and Other Projects
National Air Quality Initiative –States will develop program questions and resource questions that address air quality.
National On-Farm Energy Initiative - States must offer at least one of the following for NOFEI: i. 120 - Agricultural Energy Design (DIA) ii. 228 – Agricultural Energy Assessment (CEMA) iii. 374 – Energy Efficient

Agricultural Operation iv. 449 - Irrigation Water Management v. 533 – Pumping Plant vi. 670 – Energy Efficient Lighting System vii. 672 – Energy Efficient Building Envelope
States may offer additional practices and activities that support: Efficient use of energy by having positive Conservation Assessment Practice Points (CAPP); and Reportable energy savings and the associated environmental benefits expected to be achieved from implementation of the practice.
States will use the "Energy Cost Efficiency Worksheet" to calculate the estimated energy cost efficiency value for the conservation practices in the EQIP plan/schedule of operations.
Is the estimated energy cost efficiency 50 percent or more?
Is the estimated energy cost efficiency between 30 and 50 percent?
Is the estimated energy cost efficiency less than 30 percent?
National Organic Initiative –
Example Questions – Does the EQIP schedule of operations include implementation of one soil health or enhancing practice that addresses soil tilth, crusting, water infiltration, organic matter, compaction, etc
Does the EQIP schedule of operations include practices that will result in reduction of erosion?
Does the EQIP schedule of operations include practices that will result in creation of buffer zones that will mitigate offsite contaminants from entering the farm.
Does the EQIP schedule of operations include implementation of nutrient management for management of soil fertility, plant nutrients, and soil amendments.
Does the EQIP schedule of operations include implementation of practices for the management of noxious and invasive species only on noncropland acreage.
Does the EQIP schedule of operations include practices with the intent of increasing habitat for pollinators, beneficial insects, or both.
Does the EQIP schedule of operations include practices that will improve wildlife habitat.
Does the EQIP schedule of operations include practices that will improve the efficiency of an existing irrigation system, conserve soil moisture, or both.
Does the EQIP schedule of operations include implementation of practices to improve the management of plant species, livestock, residues, feed, and other identified source needs.
Does the EQIP schedule of operations include implementation of practices that limit and manage domestic livestock access to streams, creeks, and other natural water bodies.
Does the EQIP schedule of operations include implementation of practices to ensure adequate domestic livestock drinking water sources (not including streams) are available in the treatment unit.
Climate Smart Agriculture and Forestry (CSAF) States may establish questions to incorporate and target local and State priorities related to CSAF based upon input from the State Technical Committee and Local Work Groups.
Example question –With regard to CSAF practices: The application contains three or more core practices. The application contains two core practices. The application contains one or less core practice.