

# Ranking Criteria for NRCS Programs – Fiscal Year 2024

Any applicant who has eligible land may apply for participation in ACEP, EQIP, CSP, or RCPP. The State Conservationist, in consultation with the State Technical Committee and Local Work Groups, has developed the following ranking criteria to prioritize and subsequently fund applications addressing priority natural resource concerns in Alabama.

In Fiscal Year 2024, NRCS will use the Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART) for all program ranking. The CART is designed to assist NRCS conservation planners as they assess site vulnerability, existing conditions, and identify potential resource concerns on a unit of land. CART results are then used to support conservation planning activities for the client.

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 as appropriate, and planner expertise. Site evaluations for existing management and conservation efforts are then compared to the quality criteria threshold to determine what level of conservation effort is needed to address resource concerns on the participant's land.

If the client is interested in financial assistance, CART will directly and consistently transfer inventory and assessment information, along with client decisions related to conservation practice adoption, to the ranking tool to avoid duplication, increase prioritization on critical areas based on geospatial priorities and site-specific data, and provide better outcomes and a framework for continuous improvement.

CART will identify applicable financial assistance ranking pools to provide the most advantageous situation for the client and to help planners prioritize workload toward those clients who are most likely to receive funding.

CART Ranking Criteria will use the following guiding principles:

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

CART will utilize a set of National Ranking Templates created by National Program Managers for all NRCS programs and initiatives. The National Ranking Templates contain four parameters that will be customized for each program to reflect the national level ranking priorities. 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 GM180, Part 600 National Planning Procedures Handbook.
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, such as a structural or vegetative measure, or management technique, commonly used to meet specific needs in planning and implementing conservation, for which standards and specifications have been developed.
4. **Ranking Component Weights** – A set of five components that comprise the ranking score for an individual assessed practice schedule. The components include vulnerability, planned practice points, program priorities, resource priorities, and efficiency. The points for vulnerability, planned practice points, and efficiency are garnered from the assessment portion of CART.

Alabama will create state specific ranking pools from the parameters established in the National Ranking Templates. Ranking pool customization allows states to focus funding on priority resource concerns and initiatives identified by the State Technical Committee and Local Work Groups.

The state ranking pools contain a set of questions that includes the following sections – applicability, category, program questions, and resource questions. Program participants will be considered for funding in all applicable ranking pools by program.

CART Ranking Pools are customized to incorporate locally led input and will evaluate the participant's assessed practice schedule for five main areas:

1. **Vulnerability** - Site vulnerability is determined by subtracting the existing condition and existing practice scores from the thresholds.
2. **Planned Practice Effects** - The planned practice score will be based on the sum of the planned practice on that land unit which address the resource concern. These two scores will be weighted by a ranking pool to address the resource concerns prioritized by that ranking pool.
3. **Resource Priorities** - National and State Program Priorities are set through the Farm Bill, Secretary and Chief Priorities and Locally Led Input from Local Work Groups and State Technical Committee which address land and resource considerations.
4. **Program Priorities** - National and State Program Priorities are set through the Farm Bill, Secretary and Chief Priorities and Locally Led Input from Local Work Groups and State Technical Committee which address program purposes.
5. **Cost Efficiency** – Summation of Planned Practice Points divided by the log of the summation of Average Practice Cost.

The 2018 Farm Bill requires that NRCS dedicate financial assistance dollars in the following categories:

Livestock – 50%

Source Water Protection – 10%

Wildlife – 10%

Socially Disadvantaged Farmers or Ranchers – 5%

Beginning Farmers or Ranchers – 5%