

RCPP Proposal Frequently Asked Questions

Updated March 2024 to incorporate questions on the RCPP Improvement process and current notice of funding opportunity.

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General Questions

1. What are the key differences between RCPP Classic and Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFA's)

There are key differences—

- *All producers/landowners sign contracts with the lead or other partner and are reimbursed by the lead partner or other partner.*
- *With the exception of activities that cannot be delegated by NRCS, all technical assistance should be delivered by the lead partner or through an entity subcontracted by the lead partner.*
- *AFA awards are reserved for projects that cannot be carried out, or not as effectively carried out, under RCPP Classic.*
- *Implementation in AFA is faster: RCPP funding ONLY AVAILABLE during term of PPA; partner expected to deliver all FA and TA during term of project, as NRCS does not have authority to support any partner work after term of PPA (Unlike classic where post-project implementation can continue, where warranted by program contracts between NRCS and producer.)*

2. Who needs to get eAuth permissions and access to the RCPP portal to submit a proposal?

A separate eAuth account is no longer required. Users will need to establish a Login.gov account. Please see the RCPP Proposal Guide for partners on the RCPP Website for more information.

3. How is the NRCS lead state selected for multi-state projects, and is this selected by the partner?

The lead partner submitting the proposal must identify the lead State in the portal, typically the state in which the largest percentage of the FA work will be performed.

4. What is the role of NRCS service centers in RCPP projects?

Depends on project type: Classic: For projects carried out under RCPP Classic, local NRCS offices play a prominent implementation role. Once PPA is active, and appropriate delegations are in place NRCS staff in local offices enroll producers and landowners in RCPP contracts and easements, complete Highly Erodible Lands/Wetlands Conservation determinations, AGI compliance checks, and carry out other project management activities. Local offices are also responsible for completing implementation TA activities, such as planning, design, installation and checkouts of RCPP producer contracts, unless an approved supplemental TA agreement is in place for partner(s) to carry out some or all of these implementation TA activities. In AFA: lead and partner states determine how non-delegated NRCS responsibilities like NEPA and any necessary checkout activities are to occur; state offices or field office staff can potentially do either.

- 5. Is there a minimum amount of land a project needs to work on? Can pilot projects with a limited area coverage on individual but not geographically linked farmland be funded?**

There is not a minimum amount of land required for an RCPD proposal. Proposal must identify a specific project area, which could be limited to one or more specific parcels; however, practically speaking, partners are advised to identify “pre-selected” FA activity awards (easement, LMR etc.) for priority consideration as part of a proposal, vs. attempting to exclude all other areas. Including lands in same project area with similar resource concerns provides greater flexibility in event a targeted parcel encounters implementation or eligibility issues and supports greater potential for demonstrable project outcomes.

- 6. Can I submit a single proposal for both funding opportunities?**

No, each funding opportunity has different goals and requirements so to apply for both funding opportunities you will need to create and submit two separate proposals.

- 7. Can RCPD funding be used to support conservation research?**

No, RCPD funding supports implementation of on-the-ground conservation activities and not research. However, partners are welcome to include research activities funded through partner contributions as part of a proposed project.

- 8. How does NRCS define Historically Underserved Communities?**

HU definitions can be found on the NRCS website [here](#).

- 9. Who do we speak with if we have a problem or a concern specific to our local coordinator e.g. difficulty reaching a coordinator, concerns about quality of information, etc.?**

State coordinators are ultimately under direction of the local State Conservationist, while program policies are the purview the NHQ programs team. Generally, partner questions should be coordinated at the local level (e.g. state coordinator or State Conservationist), and program questions beyond coordinator expertise can be directed to headquarters.

- 10. Where do I look for current “renewal” guidance?**

Renewal opportunity will be announced via National Bulletin and possibly separate notices to potentially eligible partners; final details for this Fiscal Year are expected this summer.

- 11. Can a current RCPD awardee expand the geographic scope of their project by starting another RCPD project that mirrors an earlier project, but with a larger geographic scope?**

No. However, either renewal or a new separate proposal/project could achieve a comparable end...albeit under a different partnership agreement.

- 12. Are for-profit companies eligible as lead project partner?**

Please review list of eligible partners in NFO and statute; for-profit companies qualify in some instances as entities with a history of working collaborative with producers.

13. Can an RCPP project overlap in geography with another RCPP project?

Yes, though partner proposal should document cumulative (producer) demand in excess of cumulative (all program) funding if a new proposal overlaps with an existing project (or related similar projects funded by other programs e.g. Climate Smart Commodities projects), and NFO precludes identical projects, even if funded in different fund pools.

14. What is a producer? What is HU? Etc.

Many of the terms in RCPP NFO are common to the Farm Bill, and Farm Bill definitions apply. Partners with limited Farm Bill experience will need to familiarize themselves with both Farm Bill and NRCS standard operating procedures to best position themselves for success during the proposal and implementation phases of any RCPP project. RCPP coordinators are available to assist in this process.

Funding Pools

15. Is either funding pool (State/Multi-State & CCAs) more competitive?

Neither pool is consistently more competitive than the other, it has varied among different funding opportunities. However, some CCA's in particular are undersubscribed, and to date a higher percentage of CCA projects are funded in many states. Potential applicants are advised to discuss this issue in terms of local demand with RCPP program coordinators.

16. Can I apply to both funding pools with a single proposal?

No, the proposal must select a single funding pool which will then limit the resource concerns or conservation benefits that can be selected for proposals under the CCA.

17. How do I know if I'm applying for the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) or regular Farm Bill funds?

All proposals will be considered for IRA or regular Farm Bill funds. Partners should document if/how a proposal aligns with climate-smart priorities, and partner provided information will be considered in prioritized IRA funding.

18. How are funds allocated between funding pools?

Statute requires a 50/50 split between the State/Multi-State and CCA funding pools.

[State/Multi-State Funding Pool](#)

19. Is there any preference to single state versus multi-state proposals?

NRCS has no preference between single state or multi-state proposals, however projects are expected to provide a demonstrable impact to project resource concerns and can be addressed comprehensively on a significant portion of eligible lands in project area where they occur. As noted in the funding announcement, for multi-state proposals NRCS gives priority to proposals that include a manageable number of states. History has shown that projects carrying out activities in many states are difficult to manage.

Critical Conservation Areas (CCAs)

20. Can a proposal include multiple CCAs?

No, each proposal within the CCA funding pool may select only a one CCA.

21. If a county is partially within the boundaries of a CCA, can it be included within the RCPP project boundaries? Can I include land adjacent to the CCA?

Any county that falls entirely or partially within the CCA boundaries can be included in a RCPP proposal for the CCA funding pool. You cannot include any counties that are not partially within the CCA boundaries.

22. Can we propose changes to the CCA boundaries and priority resource concerns?

No, CCA boundaries and priority resource concerns cannot be modified for an individual proposal or project.

Contributions

23. Is there a required minimum contribution ratio?

There is not a minimum required contribution ratio, but contributions are statutorily required and part of the proposal evaluation process.

24. Can a federal agency provide contributions to an RCPP project?

Generally, Yes. However, USDA agencies (NRCS, Forest Service, etc.) cannot provide partner contributions. And only the lead partner can report contributions. So, Federal assistance provided by agencies outside of USDA can count as long as the contributions meet requirements included in the funding announcement and reported by the lead partner. Lead partner must secure express permission of the funding agency to include Federally funded contributions in an RCPP project.

25. Are there limits/requirements related to federal vs. not federally funded contributions i.e. could all contributions come from a federal agency?

There are no requirements in this regard; however, statute directs agency to prioritize projects which leveraging federal investments with partner contributions so if two projects were otherwise identical, including the physical nature of contributions, but only one included non-federally funded contributions, the project with non-federal funding would likely earn more points under the "impact" criteria.

26. Does financial or technical assistance funded by partner contributions need to adhere to NRCS standards and specifications?

If both the financial assistance and supporting technical assistance are partner contributions then they do not necessarily need to follow NRCS standards and specifications unless they are also tied to RCPP funding in a producer contract or SA. Additionally, 1) all contributions which would not occur but for the RCPP project must be addresses in a NRCS NEPA analysis, and 2) all contributions must meet NFO requirements, be included in negotiated deliverables, and be completed during the term of the PPA. Questions about specific examples should be directed to the appropriate state RCPP Coordinator.

- 27. Do contributions need to be expended in the same geographic area as the RCPP project? Or can they be used somewhere else as long as there is a nexus between project objectives and resource concerns?**

All partner contributions must be expended within the geographic boundary of the RCPP project and be completed per RCPP programmatic requirements (between date of announcement of proposal selections and prior to end of PPA, per terms documented in negotiated PPA).

- 28. Can non-lead partners count their indirect costs as contribution? What if a partner does not have a negotiated indirect rate (NICRA)?**

Partners providing technical assistance as a project contribution or with RCPP program support may count some or all of related indirect costs as contribution, consistent with NFO limits, including partners without a federally approved NICRA may use a 10% de minimis rate. To calculate the maximum amount of indirect costs, use the following formula.

Contribution Value = NICRA (or 10%) x Technical Assistance.

Where indirect costs are to be included in contribution deliverables, valuation method must clearly document how applicable limits will be maintained.

- 29. Can landowner in-kind and other contributions be used as project contribution?**

For RCPP Classic: Producer share of land management practices or US held easements cannot be counted as part of the project contribution.

For AFA: Yes, the AFA funding announcement states landowner actual expenses may be counted as partner contribution (e.g. the actual cost the landowner incurred to hire a contractor minus the amount reimbursed by NRCS or the partner). This does not include theoretical expenses such as cost-share or estimated labor expenses.

In both AFA and classic, landowner donations of easement value (which are donations by landowner to easement holding entity) are potentially creditable as RCPP project contribution if delivered per terms of PPA for entity-held easements (i.e. included in contribution table and easement closes during term of project agreement).

- 30. What is the earliest we can begin counting contributions?**

Partners may potentially count any contributions made after the date of the award; to be creditable they must be included in negotiated PPA, thus eligibility and valuation are subject to NRCS prior approval, and those determinations will not be “final” until PPA is finalized.

- 31. Can a Tribe or Tribal Conservation District partner with Bureau of Indian Affairs to improve efficiency on an existing BIA project where a majority of the producers are tribal members?**

RCPP funds cannot be used to “supplement another agency’s appropriation,” so there are definitely projects where this would NOT be allowable. However, depending on the specific BIA work needing improvement, and the terms of the BIA assistance contract used to fund it, there also could be instances where RCPP could assist. Please contact RCPP coordinator and discuss details.

32. Do private sector voluntary Carbon Credits “count” as contribution?

Contributions must go toward delivering conservation; they cannot merely record financial transactions. If partner will make direct payments to a producer to encourage producer to provide conservation benefits, then that payment may be credible as a contribution, if defensible argument made that work would not occur but for the added incentive of the credit payment. However, the mere existence of a carbon market or fact that RCCP funded work qualified a producer to receive a credit payment would, in and of themselves, not support such payments as contribution.

33. Would we be able to set up a trust fund to be utilized as a maintenance account. That would be spent over the life of the practice. However, be able to be counted as being spent within the 5 years?

No. Contributions must be expended during term of project to be credible as contribution.

Proposal Budgets

34. If we apply for a maximum award, are we limited to a maximum award or would we still be eligible for a lesser amount?

NRCS leadership may elect to make offers of award in any amount.

35. Can a partner request funding other than a 75/25 split between financial assistance (FA) and technical assistance?

Yes, you may note your intent to request a funding split other than 75/25 by including a variance request in your proposal, but proposal selection does not assure variance approval and approval must not assumed. Proposal deliverables must follow standard 75/25 split. Post-selection, lead state generally has initial responsibility for determining if a project will be viable with an atypical FA TA split. FA rates above 75% are more readily allowed than TA rates above 25%. TA rates above 25% involve substantially higher level of national review (a formal waiver), and are generally much more difficult to justify.

36. Can all of the Enhancement TA requested within a proposal fall under a single category (i.e. Project Management)?

The full Enhancement TA request can fall under a single activity, however, note that partners will be required to ultimately justify and provide supporting documentation for TA activities prior to reimbursement by NRCS. Documentation will need to track all RCCP reimbursable activity by specific cost and eligible expense (e.g. outreach will need to be tracked separately from outcome assessment etc.).

37. Is a project more competitive if the 18% negotiable TA is given to NRCS vs the partner?

Starting with FY 2023 Awardees, there is not a cap on the TA-I percentage of 18%; however, TA (TA-I and TA-E) together cannot exceed 25% TA.

For Classic: There is no preference for NRCS-delivered Implementation TA (TA-I) vs partner-delivered TA-I. However, proposals which include Partner TA and which do not demonstrate compelling evidence that proposed partner TA delivery model is reflect of NRCS program requirements should not expect to rank as well as proposal which include a well documented

approach to Implementation TA delivery. Additionally, TA-I requested by partners will only be awarded via Supplemental Agreement(s) (SA) when NRCS determines that TA-I SA awards are consistent with FA delivery requirements, and SA awardee partner(s) are qualified to provide TA-I in support of FA delivery.

For AFAs: Partners are expected to perform most, if not all TA (and proposal should document that readiness/capacity to deliver implementation TA consistent with National Planning Procedures Handbook requirements and NRCS practice standards), other than non-delegable activities such as eligibility determinations and NEPA approval. Proposals that require additional support from NRCS to deliver TA in support of FA activities will not score as highly.

38. Would an outreach event for landowners qualify as technical assistance?

Please see the NFO for a more complete list of allowable TA activities. Producer outreach activities can either fall under Enhancement TA (if reimbursed by NRCS) or partner contribution.

39. Which entities can receive a supplemental agreement to deliver technical assistance that is reimbursed by NRCS?

Any entity which meets the regulatory definition of a “partner” can potentially receive NRCS funding via a supplemental agreement.

RCPP Financial Assistance Activities (FA)

General FA Questions

40. What does “addressing” conservation benefits mean?

There are two related terms: conservation benefits are partner defined objectives of a project, which NRCS refines in terms of resource concerns. Expectation is that NRCS FA efforts must address local resource concerns, and typically do so via some combination of management practices, structural practices and or easements. Problems may or may not be completely resolved, or directly measurable, but NRCS planning procedures, and practice standards establish processes for determining acceptable treatments. Please discuss situational details and processes with your state coordinator. Outcomes must be assessed in terms of natural resource concerns addressed (i.e. conservation benefits provided).

41. Is there a limit to the amount of funding a landowner can receive under a farm bill? If so, what is the amount??

No. RCPP does not have “participant payment limitations” like some other NRCS programs. Contract limits do apply to Land Management and Rental, per program rules at time of contract execution.

42. In an AFA, if partner is trying to pay an incentive to producers to adopt a given land management practice, can that payment exceed 75% of typical cost?

NRCS has authority to pay up to 100% of actual costs (excluding partner administrative costs) incurred by partners to provide an eligible service. Generally speaking, NRCS will require partner to present compelling documentation for any proposed payment method which agency determines likely to result in cost which would exceed the “typical scenario costs” paid when delivering RCPP FA assistance in RCPP classic. AFA partners who meet and discuss proposed payment methods with lead state’s RCPP coordinator can expect to reduce the time needed to negotiate viable SA valuation methods, but should be advised that until a SA is negotiated and approved, proposed valuation methods (even if included in a proposal or a PPA) are actually final.

[Easements](#)

43. How do we determine the maximum amount NRCS will reimburse a landowner for a US-held easement or a partner/eligible entity for an entity-held easement?

NRCS pays for a portion of the value of the conservation easement. This value is determined by the difference in the appraised fair market value of the land with and without the easement applied.

For US-Held easements the maximum federal share of the easement value is based on the level of restrictions included in the minimum deed terms up to 100% as determined during PPA negotiations.

For Entity-Held easements the maximum federal share of the easement value is based on whether the deed includes a US Right of Enforcement and if the landowners qualify as Historically Underserved producers. Federal share (up to maximums allows in NFO) are set during PPA negotiations at the project level. See the relevant funding opportunity for more details on how US Right of Enforcement and HU ownership affect potential maximum federal shares.

44. Can the lead partner request a variance to eliminate the partner cash match requirement for each individual RCPP easement?

There is no partner cash requirement for RCPP easements, however NRCS only pays for a portion of the easement value depending on the type of easement and the deed terms (see question 43). Additionally, in the case of entity held easements, the balance of easement value and any additional acquisition costs i.e. surveys, appraisals and title costs, (which cannot be reimbursed by NRCS) can be covered by landowner donation, partner cash, or any combination of the two and for are potentially eligible as partner contribution.

45. What are the types of deed terms available in entity-held easements?

NRCS has three types of minimum deed terms (MDT) that may be used for Entity-Held Easements and may include a US-Right of Enforcement.

- *Easement for Agricultural Use (minimally restrictive)*
- *Easement for Compatible Agricultural Use (moderately restrictive)*
- *Easement for Conservation Values (highly restrictive).*

These MDT must be incorporated into the body of the entity’s deed without changes and in its entirety or attached to the entity’s deed. See the [Resources for Lead Partners](#) page for more information and to review the MDT documents.

46. If an entity has an approved ACEP-ALE conservation easement template, can the template be used for RCPP?

Yes, but not directly. An entity may propose using an easement template approved under ACEP-ALE with appropriate adjustments made for RCPP funding and project purposes. As part of their proposal, applicants may submit the proposed draft “template” deed which may accelerate project negotiations if project is selected for funding.

47. In states that do not offer HFRP, can an RCPP project include HFRP-like easements?

Yes. RCPP easements are not tied to a specific land use but instead based on the purpose of the deed (which could be “HFRP” like), how restrictive the deed terms are, who holds the easement, and whether or not it contains a U.S. government right of enforcement.

48. If an entity-held easement is a “contribution only” easement (i.e. not paid for by any NRCS FA funds), does that easement still need to meet the NRCS minimum deed requirements?

When non-NRCS-funded easements are part of a RCPP project (i.e., they are funded by partner contributions), partners must provide NRCS assurances and NRCS must agree that such easements are generating conservation benefits and consistent with project scope and goals, objectives and deliverables. Additionally, value of such “contribution only” easements must be based on defensible appraisal methods similar to RCPP assisted easements.

49. Can a proposal include an RCPP assisted easement that isn’t permanent?

No. RCPP assisted easements must be permanent (or the maximum allowed under state law). Shorter term easements (weather contribution or RCPP assisted) would be considered a “land rental” activity for an RCPP project and should be identified as such in the RCPP proposal.

50. Do RCPP easements have increased payment limits for Grasslands of Special Significance?

No, RCPP easements are not tied to specific land use and do not have special payment scenarios based on land use.

51. Would an entity’s certified status under ACEP-ALE carry over into RCPP?

No, certified entity status does not apply to RCPP. Statutory authority for certified entity status is specific to ACEP-ALE.

52. What are the requirements for counting landowner donation as part of the project contributions?

In both RCPP classic and AFA, Landowner donations toward the value of an entity held easement can count as part of the project’s contribution for entity-held easement so long as those contributions are delivered per terms of PPA.

53. Who is responsible for due diligence activities, and can the partner be reimbursed for any due diligence services they provide?

In US-Held Easements, NRCS is responsible for due diligence activities and would typically procure them via existing (federal) contracts; where existing federal contracts appear time or

cost prohibitive, agency may elect to engage a partner to procure NRCS due diligence products via a SA. In Entity-Held Easements, the participating partner/entity is responsible for providing most due diligence services. For entity- held easements, NRCS is responsible for procuring the appraisal technical review and can provide hazardous materials records search. RCPP funds cannot be used for any due diligence products that are responsibility of the partners.

- 54. Can RCPP funds be used to pay the “stewardship fees” collected by many entities, and/or can landowner paid stewardship feeds be counted as contribution?**

No.

- 55. How does RCPP address an increase in the value of a conservation easement from the time the application is submitted until the actual appraisal is completed?**

If the application and agreement are based on an estimate of the CE value - and the post agreement results in an increase in CE value - the federal share can be increased, but only to the extent that there are funds available in the project. Appraisal can be completed prior to obligation to reduce uncertainty.

- 56. Can an easement protect both riparian areas and working farmland in the same easement?**

The same Minimum Deed Term (MDT) can be used for multiple land uses, but they depend on how the land will be managed after the easement is in place. Please review the MDTs to see whether the land could be under one easement or would require multiple easements.

- 57. For RCPP U.S. held government easements, can another federal agency (other than NRCS) hold these?**

No. NRCS is the holder of all RCPP U.S. held easements.

Land Rentals

- 58. Where can a partner find NRCS land rental rates?**

RCPP rental awards will be based on one of two rental practice types: RFRN and RFRP. Each year, payments available in RFRN based producer contracts shall be limited to 100% of the state Agricultural Land Values and Cash Rents as determined by the National Agricultural Statistics Service for the most similar land uses (Irrigated Farmland, Non-Irrigated Farmland, or Range/Pastureland). Contract RCPP coordinator for recent examples of these RFRN rates. Payments available in RFRP based producer contracts shall be limited to 100% of project specific rates as proposed by state/partner based on the NRCS payment schedule methodology (which addresses factors such as labor, materials, forgone income etc.). Project specific RCPP rental rates (RFRP) can be negotiated per program policy (check with state RCPP coordinator for requirements.)

Watershed Projects

- 59. Can a RCPP proposal include a watershed project without an existing approved watershed plan?**

No, NFO requires an NRCS approved watershed plan as a pre-requisite for funding of RCPP watershed FA activity.

- 60. Can we design and build public irrigation facilities that become Federal Reclamation infrastructure? And design to U.S. Bureau of Reclamation standards rather than NRCS?**

No. RCPP cannot fund a project that would most likely be considered supplementing another Federal agency's appropriation.

- 61. Do watershed/public works activities or structures need to follow PL-566 policies and processes?**

Yes, however, NRCS has limited authority to consider waivers of specific PL-566 requirements, typically where such deviations would involve deviation from agency policy, vs. legal requirements applicable to all governmental activities (e.g. NEPA, Principles and Guidelines of Water Resource Projects) NRCS welcomes innovative approaches to watershed and public works activities. For AFA proposals (if selected) NRCS must ensure that the structure(s) comply with NEPA and other Federal laws and regulations and is engineered and constructed to agency standards.

- 62. Do Watershed Rehab projects qualify under the RCPP with PL 566?**

No; rehab authority is excluded from RCPP by statute.

- 63. Can a dam removal be considered as a watershed project?**

Yes, but removal must provide eligible benefits and be addressed in a PR&G compliant watershed plan.

- 64. How does the Build America, Buy America Act apply to PL-566 infrastructure projects funded by RCPP?**

Infrastructure projects funded by RCPP are subject to 2 CFR Part 184, "Buy America Preferences for Infrastructure Projects". For more information on these requirements, see [USDA Implementation of the BABA Act](#).

Payments

- 65. Can the lead partner request an advance payment rather than reimbursement?**

NRCS possesses limited authority for making some TA advances of RCPP funds; agency currently has not authority to advance FA. If a lead partner selected for an award identifies a need for an TA advance payment(s), the lead partner must notify the relevant State RCPP Coordinator to explore possibilities.

- 66. What is the difference between increasing rental payments to make them more market representative and an incentive payment there any maximum or minimum funding limits governing contracts between lead partners and producers?**

NRCS authority is limited to 100% of actual cost; so while we can "increase rental payments (up to 100% of actual cost to producer of the associated deferral)" we cannot exceed actual cost, as such an exceedance would require specific statutory authority.

67. I see that indirect costs are mentioned in NOFO – how/when are costs allowed?

RCPP funds cannot be used to reimburse partners for administrative expenses. Limited indirect costs are potentially eligible as contribution as outlined in NFO (see also question 28 above).

68. Can RCPP funds be used to fund a capital expense associate with development of a product like biochar?

No, generally not. RCPP FA is to fund full implementation of an activity to address a resource concern, not each step along the way: so site delivery of biochar would not likely be an eligible deliverable, but delivery and application might be, depending on project particulars, costs etc.

AFA-Specific Questions

69. Are there any maximum or minimum funding limits governing contracts between lead partners and producers?

NRCS does not anticipate issuing funding limits for contracts between the lead partner and producers or landowners, however, AFA rankings, contracting and payments must be consistent with federal civil rights and non-discrimination laws.

70. Are there some examples of a “pay for performance” conservation approach?

NRCS provides financial assistance to reimburse partners for actual costs to partners of ensuring producers implement eligible conservation activities.

Examples of a pay for performance approach:

- 1) a partner pays a Farm Bill eligible producer to change farm management system based on (modelled) tons of carbon sequestered by implementing specific partner planned, designed and checked-out NRCS practice standards. NRCS later re-imburses the partner in the amount of the producer payment.*
- 2) a partner pays a producer for pounds of nitrogen or phosphorous runoff avoided through implementation of specific partner planned, designed and checked-out nutrient management activities. NRCS later re-imburses the partner in the amount of the producer payment.*

A lead partner proposing a pay for performance approach must in its proposal describe the approach in enough detail to allow reviewers and NRCS an understanding of how producers would be compensated and for what actions, and how partner will maintain NRCS practice standards, or otherwise consistently address NEPA and necessity that RCPP funded FA provide meaningful conservation benefits.

71. Can the lead partner pay a contributing partner to negotiate contracts with eligible producers/landowners?

The lead partner may engage other partners or subcontracts to support the implementation of RCPP financial or technical assistance activities for the benefit of eligible producers/landowners. Important limits on this authority include, but are not limited to: 1) the lead partner is ultimately responsible for the delivery of RCPP FA financial assistance as agreed to in PPA, 2) TA-I can only be used to support delivery of RCPP FA, not contribution (only) contracts, 3) TA-I and TA-E costs

associated with contract delivery and project management respectively are only be reimbursable where included in an active SA, and 4) FA may not (ever) be used to pay for TA costs.

72. Do you use NRCS payment scenarios when determining TA-I?

Generally, no, most are instead tied to partner hourly staff costs, potentially with task specific caps as well (e.g. \$40/hr, not to exceed \$1,000 per plan...). Details are negotiated to recognize both Statutory limits on use of RCPP funds, and partners existing record keeping systems in effort to minimize (if not necessarily avoid) too much additional record keeping.

NEPA

73. Who is responsible for complying with NEPA/NHSA/ESA?

NEPA decision making is a non-delegable/inherently governmental function, for which NRCS must always retain TA-I. In AFA, and Classic Watershed activity SA, the lead partner is expected to provide all required information necessary to support NRCS's NEPA determinations. Conversely, in RCPP Classic Producer Contracts and EHE Parcel Contracts, NRCS is also responsible for managing TA-I (and partner contributions where applicable) to ensure the agency has the information needed to inform NEPA determinations.

74. Can a proposal include costs for a third-party to satisfy NHPA requirements?

NEPA, NHPA and other environmental costs may be included in a proposed budget to the extent that they can be accomplished within the funding limits for Implementation and Enhancement TA categories without adversely affecting potential implementation (i.e., a project budget that proposes Implementation TA be used to carry out extensive NHPA activities but does not account for the Implementation TA needed for project planning, design, installation and checkout is unlikely to be successful). Projects with extensive environmental or cultural resource needs may need to account for some or all those costs as partner contributions in order to be competitive.

RCPP Improvement Process and FY23 Notice of Funding Opportunity

75. What is the RCPP Improvement Effort?

NRCS is working to identify ways to streamline and simplify RCPP, ease the burden on employees and partners, and help maximize flexibility for partners. The RCPP Improvement Effort will identify and evaluate problems associated with RCPP and develop meaningful and actionable improvements. This effort represents a collaboration of partners, staff and USDA senior leadership.

76. Why are changes being made to the program?

NRCS is working to identify ways to streamline and simplify RCPP for employees and partners in response to internal and external feedback. NRCS is taking action to improve RCPP processes and implementation to better achieve the purposes of the program.

77. What are the key changes NRCS is looking to make?

Using guidance provided by leadership and information from partner listening sessions and employee and partner surveys, NRCS identified seven key focus areas for improvement. Each focus area has a dedicated team working to address identified issues and provide recommendations. The focus areas are:

1. *Simplifying and Reducing the Number of Agreements*
2. *Reducing Lengthy RCPP Easement Transactions*
3. *Improving the RCPP Portal*
4. *Consistent Guidance and Training for Employees and Partners*
5. *Simplifying Technical Assistance Structure*
6. *Improving the Conservation Desktop*
7. *Simplifying the Partner Reimbursement Process*

While we work on bigger changes to the program, we have already worked to improve the RCPP notice of funding opportunity to help immediately address identified concerns as much as possible.

78. How is NRCS determining what improvements are needed?

NRCS identified common themes from partner listening sessions and employee and partner surveys, which led NRCS to focus on seven areas of improvement.

79. How were these changes informed by partner feedback?

NRCS held listening sessions and conducted surveys to gather feedback from partners.

80. When will the changes be implemented?

Final recommendations will be delivered by September 1, 2023. Implementation of improvements are slated for fiscal year 2024 and beyond (software changes in particular may take many years to fully implement).

81. Where can I find more information?

Information about RCPP can be found on the [RCPP website](#).

82. Will the RCPP improvement effort impact this year's funding opportunity?

Yes, this year's notice of funding opportunity reflects some improvements, which include an increase of project funding ceilings, simplification of financial assistance and technical assistance structure, a stronger emphasis on locally led project negotiations, and easement deed flexibilities.

83. Has NRCS simplified its Technical Assistance (TA) allocations?

Yes, NRCS has simplified its TA allocations by reserving baseline NRCS TA for inherently governmental functions outside the project budget. Partners have flexibility to propose potential project specific TA delivery models in their proposals.

84. How will NRCS treat renewal or expansion of existing projects?

NRCS continues to offer project renewals of existing successful projects. The Chief has the discretion to expand existing projects and may do so based on the demand for, and availability of, funding.

85. How will NRCS evaluate proposals for IRA versus regular Farm Bill funds?

Please see the evaluation criteria in the NFO. For projects funded through IRA funds, NRCS will prioritize proposals that best meet IRA statutory intent on climate mitigation activities when making awards. For non-IRA funds, projects will be funded using evaluation criteria in the funding opportunity, which includes a broader suite of conservation and natural resource impacts.

86. How does information in the notice of funding opportunity relate to the RCPP Improvement Effort?

While we work on our bigger changes to the program, we have already worked to improve this year's RCPP notice of funding opportunity to help immediately address identified concerns as much as possible.

87. How will NRCS ensure that smaller projects can be competitive with the larger projects, especially with the maximum project amount being raised to \$25 million?

NRCS is size neutral in its proposal evaluation and funding allocation process. NRCS evaluates proposals based on impacts, partner contributions, and partnerships and project management.

88. How will NRCS increase capacity for technical assistance to implement the IRA?

NRCS is increasing its capacity by hiring new employees, entering into agreements with partners, and contracting for services. An amendment to the IRA statute removed the annual cap on AFA projects (15) for IRA funded projects; agency anticipates expanded use of AFAs where practical.

89. What kinds of conservation solutions and strategies are considered climate Smart?

Information can be found on the [Climate-Smart Mitigation Activities](#) webpage. Note that the list of climate-smart practices will be updated on a rolling basis.

90. How does this announcement support key Biden-Harris Administration priorities on climate and conservation?

Through its programs, NRCS works with landowners to identify solutions to key natural resource concerns. NRCS conservation efforts are an important strategy in supporting key priorities for the Biden Harris Administration, including the implementation of E.O. 14008 on Tackling the Climate.

91. Who is eligible to apply for an AFA? Are there other special considerations for AFA applicants?

RCPP AFA eligibility is the same as RCPP Classic. Potential applicants for AFA projects are reminded of the heightened partner responsibilities associated with AFA projects, most critically:

- 1) Expectation that partner, not NRCS, will deliver TA to ensure benefits to eligible producers/land are delivered in accordance with NRCS planning, design, installation and checkout requirements.*
- 2) Expectation that partner, not NRCS, will deliver FA per applicable NRCS practice standards or NRCS approved alternatives.*
- 3) All RCPP FA and TA in AFA projects must be delivered (installed/completed, not simply contracted) during the term of the PPA (i.e. unlike RCPP classic, NRCS cannot pay for ANY work completed after term of PPA.)*

92. Are tribal entities eligible for the \$50 million AFA funding?

Federally recognized Indian Tribes and Alaskan Native Corporations are eligible to apply for the AFA funding.

93. What kinds of conservation solutions are eligible through RCPP?

RCPP promotes coordination of NRCS conservation activities with partners that offer value-added contributions to expand our collective ability to address on-farm, watershed, and regional natural resource concerns.

94. Will there be more webinars?

Upcoming webinars will be announced and placed on the RCPP Website.

95. What type of large-scale infrastructure projects qualify for RCPP?

As with all investments under RCPP, infrastructure projects must be in service of a conservation outcome. Through the public works/watershed projects component of RCPP, eligible partners may receive financial assistance awards to support immediate or future implementation of structural works of improvement to address watershed-scale issues for the benefit of eligible land, similar to many projects completed under Public Law 83-566.

Proposal Evaluation

96. Can you help me understand how the Innovation Narrative Questions will be blended in with the other Narrative Questions? It was very confusing to see the Innovation Narrative Questions since it was no longer in the Selection Criteria.?

For the current NFO, "Innovation" is not considered inherently positive, but rather is considered among others with respect to impact, contribution, or partner experience. Consider a proposal from a partner with a proven track record implementing conservation contracting utilizing the innovation proposed within an RCPP project, as well as a detailed plan as to how the innovation will be realized within RCPP program structure (to ensure NEPA compliance or other affected requirements); clearly innovation would be a benefit and evaluation would capture that benefit in impact, contributions etc. But if partner is proposing an untried, innovative idea, and lacks a detailed vision of how to integrate it into RCPP structures, innovation could actually become a detriment to potential for project success.

Outcomes

97. Will Successful RCPP applicants in the past receive any sort of priority in future project rankings?

Depending on the specific conservation benefits targeted in a project, modelling is an acceptable way to assess outcomes. Model would need to be appropriate for project specific situation, and additional coordination with state coordinator is a recommended starting point.