

The United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service and the American Bird Conservancy Improving Forest Health for Wildlife Resources in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan (IFHWR) Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Land Management (LM) Signup.

Background

Improving Forest health for Wildlife Resources will promote voluntary, incentive-based conservation on private and Tribal lands. ABC's RCPP project supports the creation of high-quality GWWA breeding habitat using science-based best management practices (BMPs), and, as part of a comprehensive regional initiative, has delayed consideration for federal listing. The goal is to maintain progress to sustain a diverse and healthy mosaic of forest types and age classes across the landscape. This project also expands to include young jack pine management to increase Kirtland's Warbler (KIWA) habitat. KIWA is a conservation-reliant Species of Greatest Concern recently federally listed as endangered with focus in WI and MI through this project. **KIWA will not be part of the MN project in FY 2024.**

RCPP offers financial assistance to agricultural producers to implement on-farm Land Management (LM) activities. Eligible land is determined by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and is based on an identified resource concern. Eligible producers may apply for financial assistance on conservation practices that will address the identified resource concerns in the project area.

Application Period

Applications may be taken at any time. Producers must submit an RCPP application on or before **December 15, 2023** to be considered for funding.

Eligible Project Area

Producers located within the Improving Forest Health for At Risk Wildlife Resources project area are eligible to participate in the project's RCPP sign-up. The conservation practice(s) identified in the application must be located within the project area to be eligible for financial assistance consideration through the RCPP sign-up.

MN Counties included in the project area include (map below): Beltrami, Itasca, St. Louis, Cass, Becker, Hubbard, Crow Wing, Carlton, Pine, Mille Lacs, Lake of the Woods, Clearwater, Wadena, Roseau, Lake, Kanabec, Morrison, Koochiching, Aitkin, Mahnommen

Eligible Activities and Payment Rates

LM activities include NRCS-approved conservation practices and enhancements. "FY24_2245 RCPP LM Payment Schedule & Eligible Activities" provides the activities

eligible for RCPP LM-#2245 IFHWR project and payment rates.

Project specific cost list in CD: **Minnesota RCPP18 2245 2677-1**

Applications must include at least one of the applicable core practices, or must be completing conservation system that supports core practices that are documented as already implemented on the land proposed for the applications.

FY2024- Land Management Activities:

Core Practices

647	Early Successional Habitat Development and Management
666	Forest Stand Improvement

Supporting Practices

314	Brush Management
315	Herbaceous Weed Control
327	Conservation Cover
338	Prescribed Burning
384	Woody Residue Treatment
394	Firebreak
490	Tree/Shrub Site Preparation
560	Access Road
612	Tree/Shrub Establishment
655	Forest Trails and Landings

Eligible Land Uses

- Crop
- Forest
- Pasture
- Associated Agricultural Lands

Eligible Resource Concerns and Resource Concern Categories

Terrestrial Habitat

- Terrestrial Habitat for Wildlife and Invertebrates

Note: supporting practices may require linkage to another resource concern if they are not associated with Terrestrial Habitat, in this instance they would need to be linked to a core practice addressing Terrestrial Habitat.

Prioritization Worksheet

No prioritization will be used.

Ranking

All rankings will be conducted in CART. The efficiency score calculated in the CART ranking must be used when a tie breaker is needed between one or more RCPP-LM applications. When using the tie breaker, NRCS will select the application with the highest efficiency score first.

CART Ranking Pool: 2245 LM Producer FY 2024

Funding

Available RCPP-LM #2245 IFHWR funds will be allocated based on the numerical ranking system set forth on the web site. All ranking will be conducted in CART. If insufficient funds are available to fund all eligible applicants, applications will be held and may be funded with extra RCPP-LM #2245 IFHWR funds if available or deferred to the next ranking period.

Payment Limitations

Each RCPP- LM contract with a person or legal entity is limited to \$450,000 over the term of the contract, and each RCPP-LM contract with a joint operation (Farm Service Agency business type 2 or 3) or group projects may have a contract limit of up to \$900,000.

Program Ranking Questions (200 Points Max)

1. Will this application increase acres of early successional habitat for GWWA through the implementation of (647) Early Successional Habitat or (666) Forest Stand Improvement? **40 points**
2. Did the applicant self- certify as a Historically Underserved participant on the NRCS-CPA-1200 Application? **40 points**
3. The applicant has worked with a conservation planner through the conservation process to the extent that;
 - a. All job sheets for all activities included in the application are complete and final **48 points**
 - b. At least 1 practice in the application has a job sheet that is complete and final **7 points**
 - c. No job sheets are complete and final **0 points**
4. Did the applicant self-certify as a Veteran farmer or rancher on the NRCS-CPA-1200 "Conservation Program Application"? **32 points**

Resource Concern Ranking Questions (200 Points Max)

1. Wildlife Habitat – Will the proposed project improve wildlife habitat by implementing one or more of the following conservation practices: 612- Tree/Shrub Establishment (planting scenarios), 647 - Early Successional Habitat Development & Management, 666 - Forest Stand Improvement? **45 points**

2. Will the application result in the implementation of conservation practices that occur in a RCPP GWWA identified priority area? **45 points**

3. Will practices in the application result in a treatment area consisting in three or more age classifications? **10 points**

4. Conservation Implementation -Does the proposed project schedule all conservation practices in the contract on the CPA-1155 within 3 years of date of obligation? 10points

5. Wildlife Habitat – The application is within the State Specific Priority Area, and will create early successional habitat, for the Golden Winged Warbler resulting in: (Choose one of the following)
 - a. HSI post treatment score equal or greater than .75 **45 points**

 - b. HSI post treatment score equal or greater than .625 and less than .75 **25 points**

 - c. HSI Post treatment greater than .5 but less than .625 **8 points**

 - d. HSI Post treatment will be .5 or less **0 points**

6. Wildlife Habitat – Percent of the application treatment acreage that involves deciduous trees or shrub management: (Choose one of the following)
 - a. 75% and greater **45 points**

 - b. 50% and greater, but less than 75% **25 points**

 - c. 33% and greater, but less than 50% **15 points**

 - d. Less than 33% **0 points**

CONTRACT POLICY GUIDANCE RCPP LM # 2245 CRSL

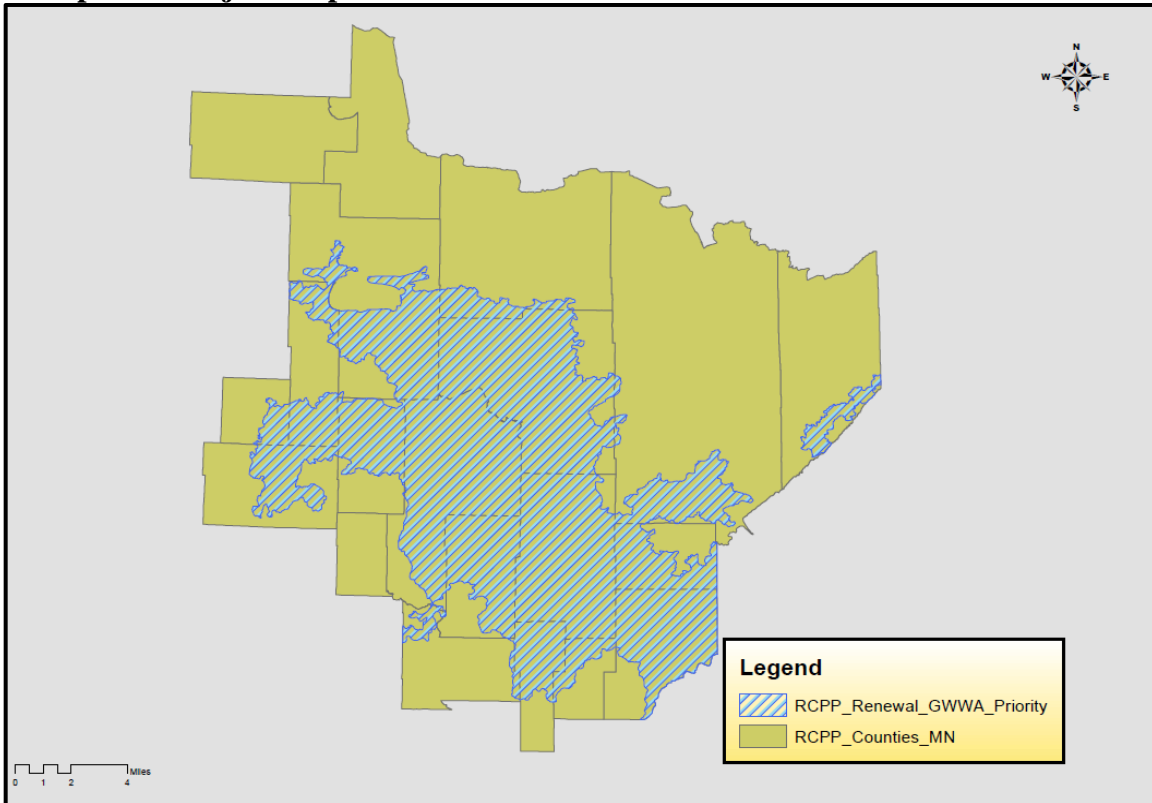
Management Practices (1-year lifespan):

- a. 314 and 338 are limited to a maximum of 5 separate payments during the term of the contract.
- b. No payment caps on any of the eligible activities.

Project Map



MN specific Project Map



NRCS and Partner Roles

The American Bird Conservancy negotiated the project to perform most of the Technical Assistance work. NRCS will reserve the duties that are inherently governmental. NRCS in general will conduct and process eligibility determinations, complete the final steps of NEPA, process contract obligations and modifications, make payments, and conduct status reviews. In some cases, both NRCS and ABC may perform a role, such as continuously accepting project applications. Most of the time ABC will accept and load applications into Conservation Desktop (CD). The rest of the work associated with applications, planning, contract development, practice installation and checkout should be conducted by ABC staff. Communication between field offices and ABC is critical to meeting deadlines and managing applications, contracts, and payments.

NRCS Roles:

- NRCS Field Office (FO) will conduct producer eligibility determinations by pulling the FSA Subsidiary Business File, and communicating eligibility needs with the applicants,
- NRCS FO may accept applications and load them into CD, however NRCS must communicate those applications to ABC field staff,
 - Note: If an office accepts an application, send the application to ABC staff with a Farm and Tract number. If such information is not available, send the applicant to FSA to set up FTE and all other USDA eligibility so the case file can be created. Communication will also avoid duplicate entries of applications into CD.
- NRCS FO will ensure NEPA is completed accurately, including that T&E, Cultural Resources, and CART information is entered, and sign the NEPA as the RFO,
- NRCS State Office (SO) will work with ABC staff to determine how far down the ranking list to preapprove applications,
- NRCS FO will send Preapproval Letters and begin working on the 1155, 1202, and verify we have recent and accurate 1199a and Vendor Codes,
- NRCS FO will acquire the participant obligation signatures (including signatures on Conservation Plan and Map, Implementation Requirements, and contract), perform obligations, and put together the bulk upload packages for CD-Documents Management System,
- NRCS will process contract modifications, which may be initially communicated to the field office from ABC staff,
- NRCS will accept ABC red-lined Implementation Requirements, photos, and maps, and ABC staff documentation that the practices are installed to meet NRCS standards and specifications,
- NRCS will complete the 1245 – Payment Application and all payment processes,
- NRCS FO will complete contract Status Reviews,
- NRCS will work to fund projects through EQIP that are similar to or in support of ABC projects when they cannot be obligated through RCPP,

ABC Roles:

- ABC will conduct producer outreach to promote the project and solicit applications,
- ABC may accept applications and load them into CD, and communicate the applications to NRCS for eligibility determinations,
- ABC will complete the Conservation Planning Process, including implementation requirement designs, conservation plan, conservation plan maps, HSI, Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART) assessment,
- ABC will answer the CART Ranking questions, complete the estimated cost worksheet, enter the estimated costs, and submit the ranking into CART,
- ABC will complete all NEPA parts through section R on the CPA-52 form, including entering the CART information,
- ABC will have project implementation oversight, including red lining the Implementation Requirements and Map, and providing the information/documentation to NRCS,
- ABC will make the field office aware if a contract modification is needed prior to practice implementation,
- ABC may work on old RCPP projects and EQIP projects they may have started before the new RCPP project #2245
- ABC will provide their own transportation to project sites and will not use NRCS vehicles

Project Contacts

- RCPP Project Coordinator/LM Agreement: Michelle Legatt – Acting RCPP Coordinator, (507)-591-4258, michelle.legatt@usda.gov
- NRCS Contract Management/Implementation Coordinator: Yara Gonzalez- EQIP Program Manager, (651) 602-7883, yara.gonzalez@usda.gov
- ABC Private Lands Forester: Duane Fogard, (218) 349-8544, duane.fogard@usda.gov or dfogard@abcbirds.org
- ABC Private Lands Forester: John (Jack) Haben, (952) 388-8431, JHaben@abcbirds.org or John.Haben@MN.nacdnet.net
- ABC Great Lakes Private Lands Director: Linnea Rowse, (715) 362-5941, ext 107, linnea.rowse@usda.gov or lrowse@abcbirds.org

-Please route all questions through Area Office staff