

Ranking Criteria for NRCS Programs – Fiscal Year 2026

Ranking Criteria for NRCS Programs

Application Overview

An applicant may submit an application to participate in the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), or Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). The NRCS state conservationist or area director, in consultation with the State Technical Committee, Tribal Conservation Advisory Councils, local workgroups, and other stakeholders, 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 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 2026, NRCS will use the 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 that provides 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 helps NRCS conservation planners assess site vulnerability and existing conditions and identify natural resource concerns.

CART assessments of existing management and conservation efforts are compared against conservation planning criteria thresholds to determine the additional level of conservation efforts needed for addressing natural resource concerns. NRCS uses the results to identify conservation planning activities for the client. CART consolidates 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 used 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's activities and the planner's observation of the resource concerns.
- **Procedural/Deductive:** A large group of resource concerns fall into this category and are assessed using a resource concern-specific evaluation tool or a list of inventory-like criteria. Due to the variability in state tools, assessment questions and answers will be broad in nature to allow states to align them with state conditions.

- **Predictive:** The remaining resource concerns are assessed using a predictive interactive model. The CART system attempts to replicate the outcomes related to the assessment threshold outcomes 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. Practices needed to support primary conservation practices and activities are also added but do not increase conservation management points.

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 transferred from the assessment portion to the ranking portion of CART. CART identifies the appropriate program ranking pools based on the transferred assessment information and the conservation practices proposed for implementation.

Ranking in CART

In general, the 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 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 the proposed conservation practices and activities; and
- Compliance with federal, state, local, or tribal regulatory requirements for natural resources.

CART uses national ranking templates developed for each NRCS program and initiative. The templates have four parameters that are customized for each program. 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 how it is managed. Land use designations and modifiers are defined in Title 180 National Planning Procedures Handbook, Part 600.
2. **Resource Concerns.** The resource condition that does not meet minimum acceptable condition levels of the resource planning criteria. This implies an expected degradation of the soil, water, air, plant, or animal resource base that will impair the sustainability or intended use of the resource. Because NRCS quantifies or describes resource concerns as part of a comprehensive conservation planning process, which includes client objectives, human and energy resources are considered components of the resource base.
3. **Practices.** A specific treatment used to address resource concerns, or management techniques that are planned and implemented per applicable standards and specifications.
4. **Ranking Component Weights.** A set of five components that form 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 based on 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 addressing the resource concern on a land unit. 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.** Sum of planned practice points divided by the log of the practice efficiency factor, which is assigned for each asset-narrative.

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

Vermont created state-specific ranking pools within these national ranking template parameters. The state ranking pools include questions that are divided by 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.

NRCS Resource Concerns

The NRCS resource concerns for conservation planning are:

Soil

- Soil Erosion (Sheet and rill erosion)
- Wind erosion)
- Soil Erosion (Ephemeral gully erosion)
- Soil Erosion (Classic gully erosion)
- Soil Erosion (Bank erosion from streams, shorelines, or water conveyance channels)
- Soil Health (Subsidence)
- Soil Health (Compaction)
- Soil Health (Organic matter depletion)
- Soil Health (Concentration of salts or other chemicals)
- Soil Health (Soil organism habitat loss or degradation)
- Soil Health (Aggregate instability)

Air

- Air Quality (Emissions of particulate matter (PM) and PM precursors)
- Air Quality (Emissions of greenhouse gasses-GHGs)
- Air Quality (Emissions of ozone precursors)
- Air Quality (Objectionable odors)
- Air Quality (Emissions of airborne reactive nitrogen)

Plants

- Plant Health (Plant productivity and health)

- Plant Health (Plant structure and composition)
- Plant Health (Plant pest pressure)
- Wildfire Hazard (Wildfire hazard from biomass accumulation)

Animals

- Terrestrial Habitat (Terrestrial habitat for wildlife and invertebrates)
- Aquatic Habitat (Aquatic habitat for fish and other organisms)
- Aquatic Habitat (Elevated Water Temperature)
- Livestock Health (Feed and forage imbalance)
- Livestock Health (Inadequate livestock shelter)
- Livestock Health (Inadequate livestock water quantity, quality, and distribution)

Energy

- Energy Use (Energy efficiency of equipment and facilities)
- Energy Use (Energy efficiency of field operations)

Water

- Water Quantity (Ponding and flooding)
- Water Quantity (Seasonal high-water table)
- Water Quantity (Seeps)
- Water Quantity (Drifted snow)
- Water Quantity (Surface water depletion)
- Water Quantity (Groundwater depletion)
- Naturally available moisture use
- Water Quantity (Inefficient irrigation water use)
- Water Quality (Nutrients transported to surface water)
- Water Quality (Nutrients transported to groundwater)
- Water Quality (Pesticides transported to surface water)
- Water Quality (Pesticides transported to groundwater)
- Water Quality (Pathogens and chemicals from manure, biosolids, or compost applications transported to surface water)
- Water Quality (Pathogens and chemicals from manure, biosolids, or compost applications transported to groundwater)
- Water Quality (Salts transported to surface water)
- Water Quality (Salts transported to groundwater)
- Water Quality (Petroleum, heavy metals, and other pollutants transported to surface water)
- Water Quality (Petroleum, heavy metals, and other pollutants transported to groundwater)
- Water Quality (Sediment transported to surface water)

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?

States must not exceed 200 total points total for each category—resource and program questions.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Ranking Guidance

A. Ranking Pools

1. States must create ranking pools in CART based on the national ranking templates in CART and guidance found in 440 M Part 530, Subparts D and R. States must publish the program ranking criteria for each ranking pool on the state’s website.
2. States must determine the minimum number of geographic ranking pools necessary to support program delivery.
 - a. At minimum, states must establish ranking pools using the EQIP ranking template. States are limited to five pools unless it is documented that vast variation in criteria for geographic boundaries calls for more pools. Consult national headquarters for direction.
 - b. States must create ranking pools that do not overlap to reduce the potential for partially funded applications and aid workload reduction for staff.
3. States will decide the categories necessary for funding applications based on program administrative and resource needs. Allow multiple answers when configuring the category survey to let an application compete in various funding categories as appropriate.
 - a. States must establish the following categories with these names to meet the 5 percent statutory requirement:
 - i. Beginning Farmer/Rancher (BFR)
 - ii. Socially Disadvantaged Farmer/Rancher (SDFR)
 - b. States must offer conservation activities (CPAs, DIAs, CEMAs) in ranking pools. States may establish a separate category to consider applications that involve only planned conservation

activities. For more guidance, see 440 NI 320, “Guidance for Implementing Conservation Planning Activity, Design and Implementation Activity, and Conservation Evaluation and Monitoring Activity.”

- c. States that receive an EQIP allocation for initiatives must establish one or more categories in ranking pools that overlap the initiative boundary. States must follow the guidance in 440 NI 307, “Instructions for Implementing National Program and Landscape Conservation Initiatives.”
 - i. Landscape Conservation Initiatives (LCI)
 - The category name must begin with the initiative abbreviation provided in the applicable exhibit to 440 NI 307 followed by a hyphen, for example “NWQI-”. After the hyphen, states may include the project name or other language to distinguish between multiple initiative categories. Consistent use of this naming convention will enable reporting and accountability for initiative investments.
 - States must use the initiative-specific criteria under Initiatives and Other Projects to determine if an application will be sorted into a category.
 - ii. Program Initiatives
 - States must use the initiative name as the category name for reporting purposes.
 - iii. States must create a category with the name Regenerative Agriculture to support the pilot initiative, which prioritizes opportunities for beginning and intermediate regenerative agriculture producers.
 - iv. To meet the 10 percent EQIP allocation for wildlife, states may create a category that includes the term “wildlife” in the name.
 - The list of practices and initiatives that count towards the wildlife target and the methodology can be found in the state allocation letter.
- d. States must establish at least 3 reserve categories to allow for special priorities, such as disaster assistance, and future funding consideration if the need arises. States will not allocate funds to a reserve category until necessary.
- e. Each category must have at least one question or resource priority identified that justifies its need in the ranking pool.
4. States that receive EQIP allocations for initiatives or other projects not addressed elsewhere in this national instruction should follow the guidance in this exhibit.

B. Applicability and Ranking

1. Applicability Questions

- a. States are encouraged to establish a geospatial applicability question to automate the final step for ranking pool matching.

2. Ranking Questions

- a. States must include the following ranking questions under the program questions for both the BFR and SDFR categories.
 - i. Does the applicant meet the NRCS definition of a veteran farmer or rancher (VFR)? (Yes/No) (10 to 20 points)
 - ii. Did the applicant participate in the CRP Transition Incentives Program (TIP), and has the land in the EQIP application come out of CRP within the last 2 years? (Yes/No) (5 to 20

points)

- b. At minimum, states must develop the program questions and resource questions using the following criteria.
 - i. How effectively and comprehensively the planned conservation practices or activities address the identified natural resource concerns.
 - ii. The magnitude of the expected conservation benefits of the conservation practices or activities and the priority of the natural resource concerns.
 - iii. Use of approved conservation practices or activities that provide long-term conservation benefit.
- c. States may include ranking questions to prioritize high priority practices based on the following conservation practice criteria.
 - i. Will practices be implemented that address specific causes of ground or surface water impairment related to excessive nutrients? (Y/N)
 - ii. Will practices be implemented that address the conservation of water and declining aquifers and mitigate drought? (Y/N)
 - iii. Will practices be implemented that will meet other environmental priorities and priority resource concerns in habitat or other area restoration plans? (Y/N)
 - iv. Are the practices geographically targeted to address a natural resource concern in a specific watershed? (Y/N)
- d. States must not exceed 200 total points total for each set of program questions and resource questions.

Initiatives, Other Projects and Congressionally Authorized Programs

3. Regenerative Agriculture Initiative

- a. States must use the following criteria to determine applicability for the category:
 - i. The applicant must be willing to develop a whole farm plan and include soil testing by planning CEMA 216 in the first and last year of the contract.
- b. States must give priority emphasis, through points, for addressing soil quality and water quality resource concerns. A list of regenerative management practices will be available through separate guidance.

4. Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership (JCLRP) Program (16 U.S.C. § 6592d)

- a. States that may submit a new proposal for funding should establish reserve categories (see A(3)(e) above) in case the proposal is selected for funding after the ranking pool has been created.
- b. States must use the following criteria and may add more criteria for sorting applications into a category:
 - i. The planned land units (PLU) included in the application intersects the boundary of a selected and active JCLRP project. States will use the national geodata layer for JCLRP that includes the individual shapefiles of all selected and active projects, and
 - ii. practices in the application are predominantly practices which are identified in the project proposal.

- c. States with a JCLRP category must include the following conditional ranking questions in the resource questions:
- i. Does the EQIP contract leverage the management of natural resources across land ownership (public-private) boundaries? Maximum 50 points. Only choose one answer:
 - The PLU is located in an area that is bordering land management treatments on public land as identified in the selected JCLRP project proposal. (50 points)
 - The PLU is located in an area near, but not bordering, land management treatments on public land as identified in the selected JCLRP project proposal. (40 points)
 - The PLU is located in an area bordering public land that is identified in the selected JCLRP project proposal, even though the public land is not under active land management treatments. (20 points)
 - The PLU is located in an area near, but not bordering, public land that is identified in the selected JCLRP project proposal, even though the public land is not under active land management treatments. (10 points)

Yes (10 points) / No (0 points)

- ii. Does this application pertain to land with a forest management plan that includes prescribed burning in an established longleaf pine stand (not for site prep burning)? Yes (15 points) / No (0 points)
- iii. States may also include additional questions under the Resource Priorities Factor to prioritize funding for applications that also meet the planning criteria for any related resource concerns.
- iv. States may also include questions under the Program Priorities Factor to address program related issues.

5. National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI)

- a. States must use the following criteria and may add more criteria when developing questions for sorting applications into an NWQI category:
 - i. The PLUs included in the application intersect the NWQI national layer of watersheds by at least 50%, and
 - ii. practices in the application are predominantly practices which are identified in the NWQI watershed assessment.
- b. States with an NWQI category must include the following conditional ranking questions in the resource questions.
 - i. Do the PLUs intersect the critical source areas identified in the NWQI watershed assessment?
 - No intersection (0 points)
 - Intersects (50 points)

Note: Critical source areas may also include linear features (e.g., streambank reaches). If there is no GIS spatial data layer available for critical source areas, states should use the critical source area maps in the watershed assessment to determine if the application is within or intersects the critical source areas. In this case, use text instead of geospatial question to determine if there is an intersection based on available maps.

- ii. States may develop additional conditional ranking questions addressing the available

ranking points for each category that are tailored to support the specific project watershed assessment including the emphasis on using a systems approach in focused areas to:

- Improve water quality in priority water bodies.
- Address threats to source water.
- Measure the benefits of conservation implementation and promote adaptive management.
- Promote high-level conservation using innovative technologies.

6. Working Land for Wildlife (WLFW) Golden Winged Warbler (GWWA)

- a. States must use the following criteria and may add more criteria when developing questions for sorting applications into a GWWA category:
 - i. The PLUs included in the application intersect the GWWA geodata layer,
 - ii. the application includes at least one of the applicable core practices or completes a conservation system that supports core practices documented as already applied on the land under contract, and
 - iii. practices in the application are predominantly practices which contribute to the establishment, improvement, or maintenance of GWWA actions on the PLUs as described in [Golden Winged Warbler – NRCS Conservation Practices and Conservation Measures](#).
- b. States with a GWWA category must include the following conditional ranking questions in the resource questions.
 - i. Habitat priority. Does the PLU intersect the priority area for conservation (PAC) filename “WLFW_Golden-Winged_Warbler_PriorityArea_FY21” in the CART geoportal? Choose one answer (20 points max).
 - PLU intersects a PAC (20 points)
 - PLU is within 4 miles of a PAC (10 points)
 - PLU is within 9 miles of a PAC (5 points)
 - PLU is within 15 miles of a PAC (3 points)
 - Any other answer (0 points)
 - ii. Direct Target Species Benefits. Has a site survey/database documented GWWA on or near the PLU in the past 3 years? Choose one answer (7 points max).
 - GWWA occurrence documented on the PLU within 3 years (7 points)
 - GWWA occurrence documented within 1 mile of the PLU (6 points)
 - GWWA occurrence documented within 2 miles of the PLU (5 points)
 - Any other answer (0 points)
 - iii. Threats Addressed. Are primary threats being addressed on the PLU? (Threats may be estimated using aerial images.)
 - Threat 1. Loss of young forests habitat within eastern deciduous forests. Choose one answer (6 points max).
 - Within 1.5 miles of the PLU, the landcover is more than 75 forested and more than 90 percent deciduous (6 points)

- Within 4 miles of the PLU, the landcover is more than 75 forested and more than 90 percent deciduous (5 points)
- Within 9 miles of the PLU, the landcover is more than 5 forested and more than 90 percent deciduous (4 points)
- Within 15 miles of the PLU, the landcover is more than 75 forested and more than 90 percent deciduous (3 points)
- Any other answer (0 points)
- Threat 2. Lack of management in active, seasonally occupied breeding habitat. Choose one answer (10 points max).
 - Habitat conditions on the PLU are degrading below GWWA nesting state (i.e., closed canopy sapling or shrub layer present and thus minimal or lack of herbaceous ground cover intermixed among shrub and sapling cover) (10 points)
 - Habitat conditions within 1.5 miles of the PLU are degrading below GWWA nesting state (i.e., closed canopy sapling or shrub layer present and thus minimal or lack of herbaceous ground cover intermixed among shrub and sapling cover) (7 points)
 - Does not apply (0 points)
- iv. Landscape position of the PLU. Does the larger landscape surrounding the PLU have other young forest habitat, old fields, natural shrub wetlands, or a regeneration timber harvest? Choose one answer (7 points max).
 - Yes, within 4 miles (7 points)
 - Yes, within 9 miles (5 points)
 - Yes, within 15 miles (3 points)
 - No, (0 points)
- v. States may develop additional conditional ranking questions for each category that are tailored to support the specific project, including the emphasis on using GWWA Implementation guidance to:
 - Improve GWWA habitat in areas identified as priority or that establish connectivity corridors between existing habitats or populations.
 - Implements GWWA conservation practices on no less than 10ac, either 10ac of new habitat, or 5ac of improvements to existing habitat and 5ac of new habitat, or a combination equaling 10ac of GWWA habitat improvements.

C. Tie Breaker

1. States should customize each ranking pool to focus on priority resource concerns and initiatives and minimize duplicate ranking points.
2. Use the efficiency score calculated in the CART ranking to break a tie between EQIP applications. The application with the highest efficiency score must be selected first.
3. If the efficiency scores are tied, states must fund all or none of the tied assessments.

D. Funding Selection Considerations

1. States are encouraged to be strategic when making fund selections by preapproving HU and prescriptive categories first. Then, proceed through order of preference based on fund availability

in other categories.