

Ranking Criteria for NRCS Programs

Application Overview

Any interested Eligible Entity may submit an application to participate in the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Wetland Reserve Easements (ACEP-WRE). The NRCS State Conservationist, in consultation with the State Technical Committee, local work groups, and other stakeholders, have developed the following ranking criteria to prioritize and select applications that best address ACEP-WRE program purposes and priority natural resource concerns in California.

The State Conservationist 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.

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- 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 conditions 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.

California created state-specific ranking pools within these national ranking template parameters. The state ranking pool includes questions that are divided by sections:

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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)
- Soil 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 gases-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)

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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)

ACEP-WRE Ranking Weights

Factors		Weight %
Vulnerability	Site vulnerability is determined by subtracting the existing condition and existing practice scores from the thresholds.	10
Planned Practice Effects	The planned practice score will be based on the sum of the planned practice on that land unit which addresses the resource concern. These two scores will be weighted by a ranking pool to address the resource concerns prioritized by that ranking pool.	10
Resource Priorities	National and State Program Priorities are set through the Farm Bill, Secretary and Chief Priorities and Locally Led Input from the State Technical Committee which address land and resource considerations.	60
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.	20

ACEP-WRE Resource Concern Categories

Category	Category Weight %	Resource Concern	Resource Concern Weight %
Animals (Aquatic Habitat)	10	Aquatic Habitat (Aquatic habitat for fish and other organisms)	67
		Aquatic Habitat (Elevated water temperature)	33
Soil (Concentrated erosion)	2	Soil Erosion (Bank erosion from streams, shorelines or water conveyance channels)	70
		Soil Erosion (Classic gully erosion)	15
		Soil Erosion (Ephemeral gully erosion)	15
Plants (Degraded plant condition)	5	Plant Health (Plant productivity and health)	50
		Plant Health (Plant structure and composition)	50
Water (Field sediment, nutrient and pathogen loss)	2	Water Quality (Nutrients transported to groundwater)	35
		Water Quality (Nutrients transported to surface water)	28
		Water Quality (Pathogens and chemicals from manure, biosolids or compost applications transported to groundwater)	4
		Water Quality (Pathogens and chemicals from manure, biosolids or compost applications transported to surface water)	4
		Water Quality (Sediment transported to surface water)	29
Long term protection of land	35	Loss of functions and values	85
		Threat of conversion	15
Plants (Pest pressure)	1	Plant Health (Plant pest pressure)	100
Water (Source water depletion)	2	Water Quantity (Groundwater depletion)	40
		Water Quantity (Surface water depletion)	60
Water (Storage and handling of pollutants)	1	Water Quality (Nutrients transported to groundwater)	50
		Water Quality (Nutrients transported to surface water)	50

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Animals (Terrestrial habitat)	25	Terrestrial Habitat (Terrestrial habitat for wildlife and invertebrates)	100
Water (Weather resilience)	15	Water Quantity (Ponding and flooding)	45
		Water Quantity (Seasonal high water table)	45
		Water Quantity (Seeps)	10
Soil (Wind and water erosion)	2	Soil Erosion (Sheet and rill erosion)	85
		Soil Erosion (Wind erosion)	15

Program Priorities
1. Restoration Cost Effectiveness
Average WRPO restoration cost is less than \$2000/acre.
Average WRPO restoration cost is \$2000-\$4000/acre.
Average WRPO restoration cost is greater than \$4000/acre.
2. Partnership Points for Restoration
Landowner or other conservation partner will contribute > 75% or greater cost-share to the WRPO restoration.
Landowner or other conservation partner will contribute 50% - 74% cost-share to the WRPO restoration.
Landowner or other conservation partner will contribute < 50% cost-share to the WRPO restoration.
Not Applicable
3. Partnership Points for Easement Acquisition
Landowner is willing to contribute > 50% of per-acre easement cost.
Landowner is willing to contribute 25-49% of per-acre easement cost.
Landowner is willing to contribute < 25% of per-acre easement cost.
Not Applicable
4. Extent to Which ACEP-WRE Purposes are Achieved
High probability of restoring wetland functions and values that benefit migratory birds and other wetland-dependent wildlife on > 50% of the offering.
High probability of restoring wetland functions and values that benefit migratory birds and other wetland-dependent wildlife on 25-50% of the offering.
High probability of restoring wetland functions and values that benefit migratory birds and other wetland-dependent wildlife on <25% of the offering.
5. What amount of the land offering is classified as prime, unique, statewide or locally important farmland?
0-25%
26-50%
51-75%
76-100%
6. Are current production practices on the offered land creating on-site or off-site environmental impacts (e.g. sedimentation, pesticide drift, water quality impacts) that could be alleviated by easement acquisition and restoration?
Yes
No

<u>Resource Priorities</u>
7. Will the restoration project restore a diversity of habitat that benefits the full life-cycle needs of migratory birds and other wetland-dependent wildlife?
Project will restore wetlands, grasslands, AND riparian habitat and benefit the FULL life-cycle needs of migratory birds and other wetland-dependent wildlife, including providing summer water.
Project will restore wetlands, grasslands, OR riparian habitat and meet MOST of the life-cycle needs of migratory birds and other wetland-dependent wildlife.
8. Threatened & Endangered Species Use of Protected & Restored Habitats
Protection and restoration activities are specifically focused on the recovery of 5 or more listed State or Federal T & E species.
Protection and restoration activities are specifically focused on the recovery of 4 listed State or Federal T & E species.
Protection and restoration activities are specifically focused on the recovery of 3 listed State or Federal T & E species.
Protection and restoration activities are specifically focused on the recovery of 2 listed State or Federal T & E species.
Protection and restoration activities are specifically focused on the recovery of 1 listed State or Federal T & E species.
Protection and restoration activities are not specifically focused on the recovery of State or Federal T & E species.
9. At-risk Species Use of Protected & Restored Habitats
Protection and restoration activities are specifically focused on the recovery of more than 10 at-risk species.
Protection and restoration activities are specifically focused on the recovery of 6-10 at-risk species.
Protection and restoration activities are specifically focused on the recovery of 4-5 at-risk species.
Protection and restoration activities are specifically focused on the recovery of 2-3 at-risk species.
Protection and restoration activities are specifically focused on the recovery of 1 at-risk species.
Protection and restoration activities are not specifically focused on the recovery of at-risk species.
10. Will the project protect or restore rare or unique native plants that are considered at-risk or serve to meet the life-cycle needs of at-risk wildlife?
Restoration will specifically protect and restore rare or unique native plants that are at-risk or serve to meet the life-cycle needs of at-risk wildlife.
Restoration will include native plants but won't specifically focus on at-risk plants or wildlife.
Not applicable.
11. Habitat Diversity and Complexity to be Restored.
Forested Wetland: All habitat elements to be restored (choose from open water, submergent, trees/shrubs, associated uplands).
Forested Wetland: All but 1 habitat element to be restored (choose from open water, submergents, trees/shrubs, associated uplands).

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Forested Wetland: All but 2 habitat elements to be restored (choose from open water, submergents, trees/shrubs, associated uplands).
Seasonal Herbaceous Wetland: All habitat elements to be restored (choose from mud flat, open water, emergents, trees/shrubs, associated uplands).
Seasonal Herbaceous Wetland: All but 1 habitat element to be restored (choose from mud flat, open water, emergents, trees/shrubs, associated uplands).
Seasonal Herbaceous Wetland: All but 2 habitat elements to be restored (choose from mud flat, open water, emergents, trees/shrubs, associated uplands).
Semi-Permanent Herbaceous Wetland: All habitat elements to be restored (choose from mud flat, open water, submergents, trees/shrubs, associated uplands).
Semi-Permanent Herbaceous Wetland: All but 1 habitat element to be restored (choose from mud flat, open water, submergents, trees/shrubs, associated uplands).
Semi-Permanent Herbaceous Wetland: All but 2 habitat elements to be restored (choose from mud flat, open water, submergents, trees/shrubs, associated uplands).
Coastal/Tidal Wetland: All habitat elements to be restored (choose from mud flat, open water, submergents, emergents, trees/shrubs, associated uplands).
Coastal/Tidal Wetland: All but 1 habitat element to be restored (choose from mud flat, open water, submergents, emergents, trees/shrubs, associated uplands).
Coastal/Tidal Wetland: All but 2 habitat elements to be restored (choose from mud flat, open water, submergents, emergents, trees/shrubs, associated uplands).
Vernal Pool Wetland: All habitat elements to be restored (choose from mud flat, submergents, associated uplands).
Vernal Pool Wetland: All but 1 habitat element to be restored (choose from mud flat, submergents, associated uplands).
Vernal Pool Wetland: All but 2 habitat elements to be restored (choose from mud flat, submergents, associated uplands).
12. Proximity & Connectivity to Protected Areas
Land is adjacent to an existing conservation easement, refuge, or other protected area.
Land is within less than a 1/2 mile of an existing conservation easement, refuge, or other protected area.
Land is between a 1/2 mile to 1 mile of an existing conservation easement, refuge, or other protected area.
Land is further than 1 mile from an existing conservation easement, refuge, or other protected area.
13. Extent of Beneficial Adjacent Land Uses
Land is adjacent to wildlife-friendly habitat of three or more types, or wetlands making up >75% of adjacent land use.
Land is adjacent to wildlife-friendly habitat of two types, or wetlands making up >50% of adjacent land use.
Land is adjacent to wildlife-friendly habitat of one type, or wetlands making up >25% of adjacent land use.
Land is adjacent to wildlife-friendly habitat of one type, or wetlands making up <25% of adjacent land use.
Land is not adjacent to wildlife-friendly habitat or wetlands.

14. Will the project protect and restore a wetland habitat type that has experienced a disproportionately higher rate of loss in California, such as a vernal pool, wet meadows, riparian habitat, coastal wetland, or delta wetland?
Yes
No
15. Will the restored wetland have the potential to filter pollutants or sediments from floodwaters or agricultural return flows?
Yes
No
16. Will the restored wetland have the potential to increase water storage or contribute to groundwater recharge through attenuation of floodwaters?
Yes
No
17. Is the land offered for enrollment within or adjacent to an impaired water body identified on the Clean Water Act 303(d) list for California?
Yes
No
18. Will the restoration result in a significant land use change that restores carbon sequestering native plants such as trees, shrubs, sedges, and grasses?
Project restores cropland to wetland habitat.
Project restores pasture or rangeland to wetland habitat.
Project enhances existing, but degraded wetland habitat.
19. Will the restoration provide benefits to urban or agricultural areas by reducing storm surge through floodwater attenuation or by creating space for wetland migration in coastal areas?
Yes
No
20. Amount of Wetland Restoration
Restored wetland acres will be greater than or equal to 75% of offered acres.
Restored wetland acres will be less than 75% of offered acres.
21. Extent of Hydrology Restoration
Hydrology Functions Absent (high): Land has significant hydrologic modifications, and the restoration of hydrology will result in a significant increase in wetland functions and values.
Hydrology Functions Degraded (moderate): Land has moderate hydrologic modifications and the restoration of hydrology will result in a moderate increase in wetland functions and values.
Hydrology Functions Degraded (minor): Land has minored hydrologic modifications and the restoration of hydrology will result in a minor increase in wetland functions and values.
22. Reliability of Hydrology Restoration
Natural hydrology can be passively restored and is not dependent on managed water supplies.
Hydrology is partially dependent on existing managed water supplies and water rights.
Hydrology is entirely dependent on existing managed water supplies and water rights.

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23. Flooding Potential: Temporary Inundation by Flowing Water
Frequent flooding potential (>50 events in 100 years) OR high-water table (0-12”) OR high-density vernal pool complexes with intact hardpan.
Occasional flooding (5-50 events in 100 years) OR medium to high density vernal complexes within the offer.
Rare (1-5 events in 100 years) or no flooding potential OR low-density vernal complexes within the offer.
None.
24. Drainage Class (Determined by Permeability)
Very Slow.
Slow.
Moderate.
Moderately Rapid.
Excessive.
25. Saturation (Depth to Water Table)
0 to 1 foot.
2 to 3 feet.
Greater than 3 feet.
26. What is the size of land offered for ACEP-WRE enrollment?
Greater than or equal to 100 acres.
Less than 100 acres.