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 New Jersey.

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.

New Jersey 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

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Wetland Reserve Easement (ACEP-WRE)

The following national ranking criteria are included in the Program Questions section of ranking pools for ACEP-WRE, with the weighting of each question based on state-level priorities:

1. Cost effectiveness of enrolling the land to maximize the environmental benefits per dollar expended; applications that have a lower cost per environmental benefit ratio will receive higher rankings.
2. Whether the landowner (or another person or entity) is offering to contribute financially to the cost of the easement or other interest in the land to leverage federal funds.
3. The extent to which ACEP-WRE purposes would be achieved on the offered land.
4. The productivity of the offered land.
5. The on- and off-farm environmental threats if the land is used to produce agricultural commodities.

The following state ranking criteria are included in the Resource Questions section of ranking pools for ACEP-WRE, with the weighting of each question based on state-level priorities:

1. Habitat that will be restored for the benefit of migratory birds and wetland-dependent wildlife, including diversity of wildlife that will be benefitted or life cycle needs that will be addressed.
2. Extent and use of habitat that will be restored for threatened, endangered, or other at-risk species or number of different at-risk species benefitted.
3. Protection or restoration of native vegetative communities.
4. Habitat diversity and complexity to be restored.
5. Proximity and connectivity to other protected habitats.
6. Extent of beneficial adjacent land uses.
7. Extent of wetland losses within a geographic area, including wetlands
8. generally or specific wetland types.
9. Capacity of the wetland to improve water quality.
10. Water quantity benefits through increased water storage in the soil profile or through groundwater recharge attenuation of floodwater flows.
11. Proximity to impaired water bodies.
12. The extent to which the original hydrology can be restored
13. The extent to which the potential hydrology restoration or enhancement practices will successfully provide hydrologic conditions that are suitable for the needs of the native wetland-dependent wildlife species that occurred in the area and are appropriate to support the wetland functions and values being restored or enhanced on the site
14. Soil properties, such as soil texture, soil structure, and soil drainage classes
15. Landscape features, such as geomorphic position, slope, and water table depths
16. Flooding characteristics, including frequency, timing, duration, depth, and sources
17. The source of the hydrology, the degree and type of hydrologic manipulation, and the existing connectivity and barriers to connectivity with hydrology sources