

Indiana State Office

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SUBJECT: LTP Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Classic Applications and Contracts

DATE: February 25, 2026

FILE CODE: 300-26-04

TO: Indiana NRCS Employees

ACTION REQUIRED BY THE DATES LISTED BELOW

EQIP Deadlines Sign-up 1	Application Deadline	January 15, 2026
	Ranking Deadline	April 17, 2026
	Obligation Deadline	July 2, 2026

Purpose. To provide guidance and deadlines for the FY2026 EQIP-Classic sign-up.

Expiration Date. September 30, 2026

Background. On December 15, 2025 the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service issued a [news release](#) announcing the establishment of a national January 15, 2026 batching deadline for the first funding round of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). This bulletin provides additional deadlines and guidance for completing actions necessary to process EQIP applications received by that deadline.

Accepting and Processing Applications

- All NRCS staff involved in processing EQIP applications must understand and adhere to the policies and procedures outlined in [Title 440 Part 530](#) Working Lands Conservation Programs Manual as amended December 2025.
 - This bulletin provides only sign-up specific information and notable changes from previous fiscal years.
- The most current version of the NRCS CPA-1200 should be used, but Designated Conservationists may proceed with the assessment and processing of any applications received regardless of the form version provided by the applicant.
 - **Applications must be entered in ProTracts within two business days of receipt.**
 - Applications received after the National January 15, 2026 application deadline must be entered in ProTracts under sign-up 2 for future consideration.
- Applicants that may be eligible for both RCPP and EQIP-Classic will require an application to be entered in CD for RCPP and ProTracts for EQIP. However, only one CART assessment is needed to complete ranking in multiple ranking pools and/or categories if the same practices will be planned on all acres.
- Applications facilitated by any third-party consultant are required to

- follow guidance in [NI 440-306, “Guidance for Working with Private Consultants”](#) and have a signed [NRCS-CPA-1270, “Consent to Release or Receive Information”](#) form.
 - The designated conservationist must review the NRCS-CPA-1270, NRCS-CPA-1200, and Appendix with the applicant directly **before proceeding with processing any third-party application**. Applications should not be processed until after direct communication with the applicant.
- All NRCS programs participants must establish farm records with FSA and complete all necessary eligibility paperwork. Designated conservationists should encourage applicants to start this process as soon as an application is received.
- The Workload Prioritization Tool must be completed in Conservation Desktop (CD) for all applications received by the above Application Deadline.
 - **Low priority applications should not be assessed, ranked, or considered for funding during this sign-up** unless all high priority applications have been submitted prior to the current ranking deadline and the designated conservationist’s workload allows for the processing of low priority applications.

Planning and Application Assessment

- Refer to the [FY2026 Indiana Practice User Guide](#) for a list of priority conservation practices, payment rates and applicable maximum payment caps. This document also contains planning and implementation requirements for each practice.
- Refer to the “Indiana Conservation Planning Tool” in the Indiana [FOTG -> Section 3 -> Resource Concern List and Planning Criteria](#) for more information on conservation planning and CART.
- In addition to applicant and land eligibility requirements found in 440 CPM Part 530.20, an assessment must include at least one eligible priority practice that results in an increase in planned practice points over the existing conditions to be eligible for EQIP.
- **Only one assessment may be created per EQIP application**. Assessments must be named using the program acronym and the last five digits of the application number. Optionally, additional identifiers may be added at the end.
 - Example: “EQIP26XXX” // “EQIP26XXX_Cropland” // “EQIP26XXX_MRBI”

Ranking Applications

- Refer to the [FY2026 EQIP Ranking and Initiatives Guidance](#) document for guidance on all available ranking pools and categories, including applicable practices, eligible watersheds, and other eligibility requirements, as well as guidance for interpreting CART results and answering ranking questions.
- The [FY2026 EQIP Payment Estimator](#) must be used to determine the cost estimate entered in CART for all applications submitted for funding consideration in FY2026.
 - **The Payment Estimator and all subsequent required tabs should be completed before beginning the ranking process in CART.**
 - County Specific Cost of Living Adjustments (COLA) will no longer be in effect for the FY2026 sign-ups and are not reflected in the Payment Estimator.
 - When the Payment Estimator *CRTE_Assessment* determines that additional review is required:

- Cultural Resources: When a project must be elevated for Cultural Resources review, the completed Payment Estimator will be emailed to SM.NRCS.IN.Cultural_Resources@USDA.GOV
 - Maps are not required at time of submission, although FSA Tract Maps may be submitted in lieu of completing Section 5 on the CRTE_Assessment.
 - If the application is preapproved, planning may proceed but the application may not be obligated until the cultural resource review is completed, and notification to Proceed is received from the State Office.
 - NOTE: External consultation with the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology (DHPA) or Tribes may take 30-60 days from submission.
 - Additional information, including details about practice location, design, and installation methods may be requested by the State Office to complete the cultural resources review.
- Threatened Endangered Species: When a project must be elevated for Threatened and Endangered Species review, the completed Payment Estimator will be emailed to IN.TandE.Species@usda.gov
 - Maps are not required at time of submission, although FSA Tract Maps may be submitted in lieu of completing Section 5 on the CRTE_Assessment
 - If the application is preapproved, planning may proceed but the application may not be obligated until the threatened and endangered species review is completed, and notification to Proceed is received from the State Office.
 - NOTE: External consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) may take 30-60 days from submission.
 - Additional information, including details about practice location, design, and installation methods may be requested by the State Office to complete the review.
 - If external consultation is required, the participant is required to sign a data sharing authorization form.
 - NOTE: External consultation with USFWS may take 30-60 days from submission.
- Effective FY2026 there is a national limit on the number of ranking pools states are permitted to create for each program, Indiana ranking pools have been adjusted in compliance with the directive.
 - An FY2025 to FY2026 Ranking Pool Crosswalk can be found in the FY2026 EQIP Ranking and Initiative Guidance document.
- The following Ranking Pools and Categories will be available for FY2026.

Indiana EQIP 2026 Northwest Area Indiana EQIP 2026 Northeast Area Indiana EQIP 2026 Southwest Area Indiana EQIP 2026 Southeast Area
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|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cropland • Forestland • Livestock |
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- Wildlife – Habitat Only
- Wildlife – Invasive Species
- Activity Plans (CPAs, DIAs, CEMAs)
- Beginning Farmer/Ranch (BFR)
- Socially Disadvantaged Farmer/Rancher (SD)
- On-Farm Energy
- Specialty and Small Farms
- Regenerative Pilot Program (RPP)

Indiana EQIP 2026 Initiatives

- MRBI – Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watershed Initiative
- NWQI – National Water Quality Initiative
- WLEB – Western Lake Erie Basin
- Northern Bobwhite (NOBO) Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW)
- Monarch Butterfly (MOBU) Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW)
- Joint Chief’s Landscape Restoration Partnership (JCLRP) Ready-Set-Fire

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- The designated conservationist is responsible for ensuring each application is properly considered for all applicable funding sources.
 - Applications must be ranked in all applicable ranking pools and categories.
 - Applications must be eligible for any ranking category they are submitted to.
- **If an application’s assessment does not meet all requirements for an available category that application must not be ranked in that category.** This includes planning requirements, applicable practices, eligible geospatial area, etc.
 - The FY2026 Ranking Pool Applicability Worksheet housed in the FY2026 EQIP Cost Estimator must be completed to ensure that all planned practices included in the assessment are eligible for all ranking categories selected.
 - The [FY2026 EQIP Practice Applicability Matrix](#) may optionally be used a tool to determine which ranking categories may be best suited to an application.
- Designated conservationists should rank applications in the ranking pool associated with their administrative county and should select all categories in that ranking pool that are applicable to the application.
 - Example: A cropland management application submitted by a Beginning Farmer should select, at a minimum, both the Cropland and Beginning Farmer/Rancher (BFR) categories.
- Applications applicable to one of the Indiana watershed or landscape initiatives must be ranked in the Indiana EQIP 2026 Initiatives ranking pool.
 - Applications submitted in this ranking pool must have assessments that **ONLY** included land units and practices applicable to the target initiative.
 - The Indiana EQIP 2026 Initiatives ranking pool prohibits the selection of multiple categories. Designated conservationists with applications that are eligible and suitable for more than one initiative in this ranking pool must contact their Area Program Specialist who will contact the State Conservation Program Funding Specialist for assistance.

- All EQIP applications determined to be High Priority by the Workload Prioritization Tool must be ranked using CART and submitted **by close of business on April 17, 2026**.
 - Changes may be made as necessary to submitted CART cost estimate and ranking until ranking deadline passes, after which point the original cost estimate value entered in CART may not be changed for any reason and the processes outlined below for cost change requests must be followed
- State and Area Program Specialists should be informed of any eligible applications with rankings not submitted by the above date. **Late submissions will not be assessed for funding or preapproved without an approved extension.**

Preapproval, Approval, and Obligation

- All EQIP application preapprovals will be completed by the State Conservation Program Funding Specialist in the Conservation Desktop Select Applications Tool (CD-SAT).
 - Designated conservationists will receive notice via email of any preapproved applications in their administrative county.
 - Designated conservationists may access CD-SAT to monitor the status of applications at any time; however, applicants should NOT be notified that their application has been preapproved until the after notice has been given by the State Conservation Program Funding Specialist or the Area Program Specialist.
- **Any changes in application status, including application preapproval, deferral, ineligibility, and cancellation, must be reflected in ProTracts within 5 business days.**
- [530.141C, "Intent to Proceed Letter"](#) will be sent within 5 business days of preapproval as detailed in the EQIP Application to Contract Checklist.
 - If there are outstanding eligibility requirements they should be indicated on the required information [530.142E "Conservation Program Application Checklist"](#) and enclosed with the Intent to Proceed Letter.
- Any necessary changes or corrections to the submitted CART assessment, cost estimate or ranking after the ranking deadline are subject to the appropriate notification process.
 - Area Program Specialist must be informed of any changes to the ranking score greater than 1 point. Any changes to the ranking score that are exclusively caused by a change in the efficiency score do not require notification.
 - Necessary cost estimate increases greater than \$10,000 must be submitted for approval on the [Application Cost Change Tracker](#).
 - Approval is not required for cost estimate decreases of any kind, however designated conservationists are encouraged to submit a cost change request for significant decreases so that funds may be reallocated to other applications.
 - The application cost estimate should be updated in ProTracts as soon as feasible once adjustments and/or corrections have been completed.
- **Approval deadlines and associated Quality Assurance targets will be determined by the Area Program Specialist as appropriate for their Area's workflow.**
- Application Approval may take place at any time after Preapproval.
- Application Obligation should be completed no more than two weeks after Approval.
- The [530.420A, "EQIP Preobligation Checklist"](#) must be used to ensure the contract meets quality assurance requirements.
- All preapproved EQIP applications must be Obligated by July 2, 2026.
- Planned conservation practices must not be initiated until after contract obligation.

- **Early Start Waivers will not be offered for FY2026 EQIP sign-up 1.**
- Any preapproved applications that will not be Obligated must be updated in ProTracts to a status of Deferred, Ineligible, or Cancelled prior to the Obligation deadline in accordance with guidance provided in [Program Tip Sheet 8 “The process for application cancellation, deferral or ineligibility”](#).

Delegation of Authority

- Delegation of authority for EQIP for Indiana is granted according to 530.3 and 530.143N and is consistent with the ProTracts and Fund Manager roles currently assigned to state and area office staff. See [IB 300-26-01](#) for Indiana’s delegation of authority designations.
- If you have any questions regarding EQIP or the content of this bulletin, please contact Curtis Knueven, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs at 317-295-5811 or Katelyn Fagan, State Conservation Program Funding Specialist at 317-295-5851.

Sincerely,

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MEADOWS

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Date: 2026.02.25
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(Acting) Indiana State Conservationist