

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 Hampshire**.

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 Hampshire 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

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

- Percent of prime, unique, and important soils in the parcel to be protected.
- Percent of cropland, pastureland, grassland, and rangeland in parcel to be protected.
- Ratio of the total acres of land in the parcel to be protected to average farm size in the county according to the most recent USDA Census of Agriculture.
- Percentage decrease of acres of farm and ranch land in the parcel's county since the last USDA Census of Agriculture.
- Percent population growth in the county as documented by the U.S. Census.
- Population density (population per square mile) as documented by the most recent U.S. Census.
- Existence of a farm or ranch succession plan or similar plan for addressing agricultural viability for future generations.

- Proximity of the parcel to other protected land.
- Proximity of the parcel to other agricultural operations and agricultural infrastructure.
- Maximizing the protection of contiguous or proximal acres devoted to agricultural use.
- Land is enrolled in a Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contract that will expire within one-year and is grassland that would benefit from protection under a long-term easement.
- Land is grassland of special environmental significance that would benefit from protection under a long-term easement.
- Decrease in the percent of acreage of permanent grassland, rangeland, and pasture (other than cropland and woodland pasture) in the county the parcel is in between the last two USDA Censuses of Agriculture.
- Percent of the fair market value of the agricultural land easement that is the eligible entity's own cash resources for payment of easement compensation to the landowner and comes from sources other than the landowner.

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

- The location of a parcel in an area zoned for agricultural use.
- The eligible entity's performance in managing and enforcing easements.
- Multifunctional benefits of farm and ranch land protection, including:
 - Rural communities, economic, historic, and archaeological benefits;
 - At-risk species protection;
 - Reduction in nutrient runoff and improvement of water quality; and
 - Other related conservation benefits.
- Geographic regions where enrolling particular lands may help achieve national, state, and regional agricultural or conservation goals and objectives or enhance existing government or private conservation projects.
- Diversity of natural resources to be protected or improved.
- Score in the land evaluation and site assessment system of 7 CFR Part 658 or equivalent measure for grassland enrollments, to serve as a measure of agricultural viability (access to markets and infrastructure).
- Measures that will maintain or increase agricultural viability, such as succession plans, agricultural land easement plans (not including required highly erodible land (HEL) conservation plans), or entity deed terms.
- Specific criteria for prioritizing parcels within designated ranking pools that will best achieve ACEP-ALE purposes and maximize the federal investment.

USDA Ranking Pool Report

Ranking Pool NH FY26 ACEP ALE General
v2

Program ACEP

Pool Status Active

Tags

Template ACEP-ALE (ProTracts)

Template Status Active

Existing Practice Included No

Last Modified By Kimberly Bakker

Last Modified 02/09/2026

National Pool No

Include States NH (Admin)

Land Uses and Modifiers

Land Use	Grazed	Wildlife	Irrigated	Hayed	Drained	Organic	Water Feature	Protected	Urban	Aquaculture
Associated Ag Land	--	--	--	--	N/A	--	--	--	--	--
Crop	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Developed Land	N/A	--	--	N/A	N/A	--	--	--	--	--
Farmstead	--	--	--	N/A	N/A	--	--	--	--	--
Forest	--	--	--	N/A	N/A	--	--	--	--	--
Other Rural Land	--	--	--	N/A	N/A	--	--	--	--	--
Pasture	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Range	--	--	N/A	--	N/A	--	--	--	--	--
Water	N/A	--	N/A	N/A	N/A	--	--	--	--	--

Resource Concern Categories

Categories			
Category	Min %	Default %	Max %
Animals (Livestock production limitation)	0	5	50
Animals (Terrestrial habitat)	0	--	40
Long term protection of land	35	45	75
Plants (Degraded plant condition)	0	5	50
Plants (Pest pressure)	0	5	40
Soil (Concentrated erosion)	0	5	30
Soil (Soil quality limitations)	0	5	50
Soil (Wind and water erosion)	0	5	40
Water (Field pesticide loss)	0	5	20
Water (Field sediment, nutrient and pathogen loss)	0	5	50

Categories

Category	Min %	Default %	Max %
Water (Salt losses to water)	0	5	20
Water (Source water depletion)	0	5	40
Water (Storage and handling of pollutants)	0	5	40

Animals (Livestock production limitation)

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Livestock Health (Feed and forage balance)	0	40	100
Livestock Health (Inadequate livestock shelter)	0	15	100
Livestock Health (Inadequate livestock water quantity, quality and distribution)	0	45	100

Animals (Terrestrial habitat)

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Terrestrial Habitat (Terrestrial habitat for wildlife and invertebrates)	0	100	100

Long term protection of land

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Threat of conversion	100	100	100

Plants (Degraded plant condition)

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Plant Health (Plant productivity and health)	0	50	100
Plant Health (Plant structure and composition)	0	50	100

Plants (Pest pressure)

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Plant Health (Plant pest pressure)	0	100	100

Soil (Concentrated erosion)

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Soil Erosion (Bank erosion from streams, shorelines or water conveyance channels)	0	20	100
Soil Erosion (Classic gully erosion)	0	40	100
Soil Erosion (Ephemeral gully erosion)	0	40	100

Soil (Soil quality limitations)

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
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Soil (Soil quality limitations)

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Soil Health (Aggregate instability)	0	15	100
Soil Health (Compaction)	0	15	100
Soil Health (Concentration of salts or other chemicals)	0	15	100
Soil Health (Organic matter depletion)	0	20	100
Soil Health (Soil organism habitat loss or degradation)	0	20	100
Soil Health (Subsidence)	0	15	100

Soil (Wind and water erosion)

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Soil Erosion (Sheet and rill erosion)	0	50	100
Soil Erosion (Wind erosion)	0	50	100

Water (Field pesticide loss)

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Water Quality (Pesticides transported to groundwater)	0	50	100
Water Quality (Pesticides transported to surface water)	0	50	100

Water (Field sediment, nutrient and pathogen loss)

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Water Quality (Nutrients transported to groundwater)	0	20	100
Water Quality (Nutrients transported to surface water)	0	20	100
Water Quality (Pathogens and chemicals from manure, biosolids or compost applications transported to groundwater)	0	20	100
Water Quality (Pathogens and chemicals from manure, biosolids or compost applications transported to surface water)	0	20	100
Water Quality (Sediment transported to surface water)	0	20	100

Water (Salt losses to water)

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Water Quality (Salts transported to groundwater)	0	50	100
Water Quality (Salts transported to surface water)	0	50	100

Water (Source water depletion)

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Water Quantity (Groundwater depletion)	0	35	100
Water Quantity (Inefficient irrigation water use)	0	35	100
Water Quantity (Surface water depletion)	0	30	100

Water (Storage and handling of pollutants)

Resource Concern	Min %	Default %	Max %
Water Quality (Nutrients transported to groundwater)	0	25	100
Water Quality (Nutrients transported to surface water)	0	25	100
Water Quality (Petroleum, heavy metals and other pollutants transported to groundwater)	0	25	100
Water Quality (Petroleum, heavy metals and other pollutants transported to surface water)	0	25	100

Practices

Practice Name	Practice Code	Practice Narratives	Practice Type
Acquisition Process - Buy-Protect-Sell Transfer	LTAPBPST	00N	Easements
Acquisition Process - Environmental Database Records Search	LTAPERS	00N	Easements
Acquisition Process - Ingress Egress	LTAPIE	00N	Easements
Acquisition Process - Appraisal Technical Review First Review	LTAPTR1	00N	Easements
Acquisition Process - Appraisal Technical Review Second Review	LTAPTR2	00N	Easements
Long-Term Protection of Land - Maximum Duration Allowed by State Law	LTPMAS	00N	Easements
Long-Term Protection of Land - Permanent Easement	LTPPE	00N	Easements

Ranking Weights

Factors	Algorithm	Allowable Min	Default	Allowable Max
Vulnerabilities	Default	5	15	20
Planned Practice Effects	Default	5	5	10
Resource Priorities	Default	35	40	50
Program Priorities	Default	40	40	50
Efficiencies	Default	0	0	0

Display Group: NH FY26 ACEP ALE ver2 (Active)



An asterisk will be displayed to show that it is a conditional section or conditional question.

Survey: Applicability Questions

Section: Applicability		
Question	Answer Choices	Points
Located in NH?	Yes	--
	Otherwise	--

Survey: Category Questions

Section: Categories		
Question	Answer Choices	Points
Located in NH?	YES	--
	NO	--

Survey: Program Questions

Section: Program Questions		
Question	Answer Choices	Points
Percent of the offered parcel containing prime farmland soils, soils of statewide agricultural importance, or locally important agricultural land.	<10% PUS/L	0
	10-33% Prime, Unique, Statewide/Locally Important	25
	34%-66% PUS/L	45
	67%-100% PUS/L	60
Presence of cropland/hayland, pastureland, grassland, or nonindustrial private forest land in parcel to be protected.	Cropland/Hayland	10
	Pastureland	10
	Grassland	7
	Nonindustrial Private Forestland	3
Ratio of the total acres of land in the parcel to be protected to average farm size in the county according to the most recent USDA Census of Agriculture	Less than county average	0
	Equal to or greater than county average	5
Decrease in the percentage of acreage of farm and ranch land in the county in which the parcel is located between the last two USDA Censuses of Agriculture.	Decrease in agricultural land use	10
	Increase in agricultural land use	0
Decrease in the percentage of acreage of permanent grassland, pasture, and rangeland, other than cropland and woodland pasture, in the county in which the parcel is located between the last two USDA Censuses of Agriculture.	Decrease in percentage of acreage	5
	Increase in percentage of acreage	0
Percent population growth in the county as documented by the U.S. Census	Above NH average	10
	Below NH average	0
Population density (population per square mile) as documented by the most recent U.S. Census.	Above state average	5
	Below state average	0
Existence of a farm or ranch succession plan or similar plan established to address agricultural viability for future generations.	YES	5
	NO	0
Proximity of the parcel to other permanently protected agricultural land.	Directly abuts protected agricultural land	20
	Is within 2.5 miles from protected agricultural land	15
	is between 2.6 and 5 miles from protected agricultural land	10
	Is greater than 5 miles from protected agricultural land	0

Section: Program Questions

Question	Answer Choices	Points
Proximity of the parcel to other agricultural operations and agricultural infrastructure.	Directly abuts other ag land OR is within 2 miles of ag infrastructure	15
	Is within 2 miles of other ag land OR between 2.1 and 5 miles from ag infrastructure	10
	is between 2.1 to 5 miles from other ag land OR between 5.1 and 10 miles from ag infrastructure	5
	Is greater than 5 miles from other ag land OR greater than 10 miles from ag infrastructure	0
Does the parcel connect two or more protected parcels devoted to agricultural use?	YES	9
	NO	0
Percent of the fair market value of the agricultural land easement that is the eligible entity's own cash resources for payment of easement compensation to the landowner and comes from sources other than the landowner.	<10%	0
	10-25%	5
	26-50%	15
	51% or more	20
Is land currently enrolled in CRP in a contract that is set to expire within one year and is grassland that would benefit from protection under a long-term easement or is land under a CRP contract that is in transition to a covered farmer or rancher pursuant to 16 U.S.C 3835(f).	YES	5
	NO	0
Land is grassland of special environmental significance that would benefit from protection under a long-term easement.	YES	1
	NO	0

Survey: Resource Questions

Section: Resource Questions*

Question	Answer Choices	Points
The parcel contains a site of cultural or historical significance that is currently listed or was formally determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places OR currently listed on the NH Department of Historic Resources or is included in the State Historic Preservation Office Inventory.	YES	10
	NO	0
Proximity of parcel to other permanently protected nonagricultural lands (such as forestlands and wetlands).	Directly abuts protected nonagricultural land	30
	Is within 2.5 miles	20
	is between 2.6 and 5 miles	10
	is greater than 5 miles	0
Percent of parcel that lies within any of the 4 Food Desert categories OR lies within 5 miles of any of the 4 Food Desert categories.	0-50% of parcel is within a Food Desert category	20
	51-100% of parcel is within a Food Desert category	40
	Parcel lies within 5 miles of any Food Desert category	10
	Parcel is greater than 5 miles from a Food Desert Category	0

Section: Resource Questions*

Question	Answer Choices	Points
Conservation practices are actively being applied or maintained to address identified resource concerns. Practices can include, but are not limited to: Riparian Forest Buffers, Soil Health Assessments (soil analysis, plantings to increase soil organic matter, crop rotations to minimize pest management, etc.), Nutrient/Grazing/Integrated Pest Management plans (being ACTIVELY applied), Storm Water Runoff (such as roof/ground gutters), Erosion Control (such as contour farming, no till seeding, cover crops, water bars, vegetated forest trails and log landings, etc.), Agricultural drainage systems have been maintained (grassed waterways, drainage ditches, etc.) allowing land to continue to be actively managed as cropland, hayland, or pastureland.	Riparian Forest Buffers	10
	Soil Health Assessments	10
	Nutrient/Grazing/Integrated Pest Management plans	10
	Storm Water Runoff	10
	Erosion Control	10
	Maintaining Agricultural drainage systems	10
	Other (including wildlife related practices)	10
	None	0
The eligible entity has elected to develop and periodically update an Agricultural Land Easement Plan (ALEP). NOTE: If the eligible entity agrees to develop an ALEP (including any component plans, except HEL plans) as a condition of selection and funding, the eligible entity is responsible for the development and maintenance of such plans.	YES	15
	NO	0
The project is located within a defined source water protection area.	In SWPA	25
	Otherwise	0
Majority of the offered area is mapped as the Highest Ranked Habitat in the NH Wildlife Action Plan (Greater than 50% Tier 1 Highest Ranked Habitat in NH WAP and/or Tier 2 Highest Ranked Habitat in Biological Region).	YES	30
	NO	0

Detailed Assessments

Name	Type	Jurisdiction	Status
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