# Ranking Criteria for NRCS Programs

## Application Overview

An applicant may submit an application to participate in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). 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 West Virginia.

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.

**West Virginia** 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)

### 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)

### 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)

### 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)

EXHIBIT H – To National Instruction Title 440 Part 310

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) Ranking Guidance

A. Ranking Pools

1. States must create agricultural and non-industrial private forest (NIPF) ranking pools in CART based on the national ranking template and guidance in 440 M Part 530, Subparts D and Q. States must publish the program ranking criteria for each ranking pool on the state's website.
2. States must determine the minimal number of geographic ranking pools necessary to support program delivery.
    a. At a minimum, states must establish two ranking pools using the CSP ranking template. States are limited to five pools unless it is documented that a vast variation in the 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 minimize workload for staff.
3. States are encouraged to establish a geospatial applicability question to automate the final step for ranking pool matching.
4. 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 create a category with the name Regenerative Pilot Program, which prioritizes opportunities for advanced regenerative agriculture producers.
    c. States that receive a CSP allocation for initiatives must establish one or more categories in ranking pools that overlap the initiative boundary.
        i. Landscape Conservation Initiatives (LCI)
            - States must follow the guidance in 440 NI 307.
            - The category name for an LCI 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 initiative-specific criteria under the heading Initiatives and Other Projects to determine if an application will be sorted into the

category.

d. States must establish at least 3 reserve categories to allow for special priorities and future funding consideration if the need arises. States may not allocate funds to the 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.

5. States must include the following land uses within any agricultural or NIPF ranking pool.

   a. Agricultural land: crop, pasture, range, associated agricultural land, and farmstead.

   b. NIPF: forest, associated agricultural land, and farmstead.

6. Resource Concern Categories

   a. States must establish the weights for applicable resource concern categories based on the following guidelines:

      i. The eight-state priority resource concern categories must have a weight between 5 and 30 percent.

      ii. Non-priority resource concern categories must not have a weight over 5 percent.

B. Applicability and Ranking

1. Applicability

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

2. Ranking

   a. States must include the following program question:

      i. Does the producer have active CSP contract(s) but chooses not to include the newly acquired/newly eligible land? (Yes/No) (-200 points)

      Note: If the contract is IRA funded, the answer will be "No."

   b. States will include the following program questions for BFR and SDFR categories only.

      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 CSP application come out of CRP within the last 2 years? (Yes/No) (5 to 20 points)

   c. At minimum, states must develop program and resource questions using the following criteria.

      i. The natural resources conservation and environmental benefits of the

conservation treatment on all state-identified priority resource concern categories at the time of application (i.e., existing stewardship).

ii. How much the proposed conservation activities increase natural resource conservation and environmental benefits (i.e., additional conservation); and

iii. Other consistent criteria the state establishes to make sure that state and local priority resource concern categories are effectively addressed.

d. Example Ranking Questions

i. At the time of application, the applicant meets one of the following.

- Four to eight state priority resource concern categories across all land uses in the operation (180 points)
- One to three state priority resource concern categories across all land uses in the operation (150 points)
- Six to eight state priority resource concern categories across all land uses in the operation (excluding farmstead and associated agricultural land) (145 points)
- Three to five state priority resource concern categories across all land uses included in the operation (excluding farmstead and associated agricultural land) (125 points)
- One or two state priority resource concern categories across all land uses included in the operation (excluding farmstead and associated agricultural land) (100 points)
- Four to eight state priority resource concern categories on at least one land use included in the operation (excluding farmstead and associated agricultural land) (50 points)
- One to three state priority resource concern categories on at least one land use included in the operation (excluding farmstead and associated agricultural land) (25 points)

ii. By the end of the contract, the applicant will implement more conservation activities across the operation that will allow the producer to do one of the following.

- Exceed the stewardship threshold for more than three additional resource concern categories on at least two land uses (200 points)
- Exceed the stewardship threshold for two or three additional resource concern categories on at least two land uses (150 points)
- Exceed the stewardship threshold for one additional resource concern category on at least two land uses (125 points)
- Exceed the stewardship threshold for more than three additional resource concern categories on one land use (100 points)
- Exceed the stewardship threshold for two or three additional resource

concern categories on one land use (75 points)

- Meet the stewardship threshold for two or three additional resource concern categories on at least two land uses (50 points)
- Meet the stewardship threshold for one additional resource concern category on at least two land uses (25 points)
- Meet the stewardship threshold for two or three additional resource concern categories on one land use (10 points)

3. Initiatives and Other Projects
   a. Longleaf Pine Initiative (LLPI)
      i. States must use the following criteria when developing questions for sorting applications into an LLPI category. States may add more criteria as needed.
         - The planned land units (PLU) included in the application intersect the LLPI geodata boundary layer,
         - The application includes at least one of the applicable core practices or completes a conservation system that supports core practices that are documented as already applied on the land under contract, and
         - Practices in the application are predominantly practices which contribute to the establishment, improvement, or maintenance of longleaf pine trees on the PLUs.
      ii. States must include the following conditional ranking questions in the resource questions for the LLPI category:
         - Is this application for land that is contiguous to a protected area such as a national forest, military installation, national wildlife refuge, state forest, heritage reserve, or land protected by a perpetual conservation easement (e.g., WRP, FRPP, GRP, and TNC)? Yes (10 points) / No (0 points)
         - Is the field (acreage) where practice installation will take place within state-designated priority counties? States will use the national layer for LLPI Priority Counties: Longleaf_Pine_PriorityArea_Fy20 Yes (10 points) / No (0 points)
         - Will the offered area connect two or more blocks of longleaf pine? Yes (10 points) / No (0 points)
         - Is this application for land with a forest management plan that includes prescribed burning in an established longleaf pine stand (not for site prep burning)? Yes (20 points) / No (0 points)
   b. Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI)
      i. States must use the following criteria when developing questions for sorting applications into an MRBI category. States may add more criteria when necessary.
         - The PLUs included in the application intersect the MRBI national layer of

watersheds by at least 50 percent, and

- Practices in the application are predominantly practices identified in the MRBI watershed assessment.

ii. States with an MRBI category must include the following conditional ranking questions in the resource questions.

- Do the PLUs intersect the critical source areas identified in the MRBI watershed assessment?

  (1) No intersection (0 points).

  (2) Intersects (25 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 see 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.

- How much of the offered acres intersect with the MRBI watershed layer?

  (1) All offered acres (25 points)

  (2) At least 50 percent and less than 100 percent of the acres offered (13 points)

  (3) Less than 50 percent of the acres offered ( −25 points)

- States may develop more 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:

  (1) Address water quality in priority water bodies by supporting the states' nutrient loss reduction strategies.

  (2) Address water quantity concerns that positively impact water quality.

  (3) Improve fish and wildlife habitat while addressing water quality.

  (4) Measure the benefits of conservation implementation and promote adaptive management.

  (5) Promote high-level conservation using innovative technologies.

c. National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI)

i. States must use the following criteria when developing questions for sorting applications into an NWQI category. States may add more criteria when necessary.

- The PLUs included in the application intersect the NWQI national layer of watersheds, and

- Practices in the application are predominantly practices identified in the

NWQI watershed assessment.

ii. States with an NWQI category must include the following conditional ranking questions in the resource questions.

- Do the PLUs intersect the critical source areas identified in the NWQI watershed assessment?

  (1) No intersection (0 points)

  (2) Intersects (25 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 see 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.

- How much of the offered acres intersect with the NWQI watershed layer?

  (1) All offered acres (25 points)

  (2) At least 50 percent and less than 100 percent of the offered acres (13 points)

  (3) Less than 50 percent of the offered acres (−25 points)

iii. States may develop more 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.

d. Regenerative Pilot Program

i. States must use the following criteria to determine applicability for the category.

- The applicant must be willing to develop a whole farm plan and include soil testing. At minimum, CEMA 216 must be planned for the first and last year of the contract.

ii. States must give priority emphasis, through points, for addressing soil and water resource concerns. A list of regenerative management practices will be available through separate guidance.

4. States may use the program questions, resource questions, or both to target local and state priorities based on input from the state technical committee, tribal conservation

advisory councils, and local workgroups.

5. States must not exceed 200 points per set of resource and program questions. Point values provided in this guidance are recommendations and should not exceed 25 percent of the total points allowed in each set of questions.

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 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 applications.

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.