CONSERVATION INNOVATION GRANTS (CIG) CLASSIC PROGRAM

These Q&A address the current opportunity on Grants.gov:
USDA-NRCS-NHQ-CIGCLASSIC-26-NOFO0001449
CONSERVATION INNOVATION GRANTS (CIG) CLASSIC PROGRAM

Unmanned Aeriel Systems (UAS) (This includes drones)

I. Are the purchase of UAS or drones or data collected by UAS an allowable cost?

   As stated in the CIG Classic NOFO on page 7, UAS is not an allowable cost. This includes the purchase of new systems and the purchase of new data collected by these systems and it includes systems that are manufactured in the United States. Per M-26-02, No Federal funds awarded through a grant or cooperative agreement, or otherwise made available, may be used by a recipient or subrecipient: (i) To procure a FASC-prohibited unmanned aircraft system; or (ii) In connection with the operation of a FASC-prohibited unmanned aircraft system.

II. Is a project that uses UAS equipment, including drones, and UAS drone data eligible if the UAS drones/drone data is in no part paid for by project funds. For example, if we already own the drones, or if they are paid for by a partner and there is no request for reimbursement or cost-share reflected in the budget.

   Yes, if no federal funding will be used to procure or operate the UAS, a project can include UAS.

III. Are satellite imagery products (e.g. weather satellite images) an eligible budget item for projects this year, or does the prohibition on UAS apply to satellite imagery?

   Yes, satellite imagery producers are an allowable budget item. The M-26-02 does not address satellites.

IV. Can we use funding for editing footage, putting together videos, etc that was taken with drones as long as we are not charging for the drone itself, or the time flying the drone?

   According to M-26-02, Federal funding cannot be used in connection with the operation of a FASC-prohibited unmanned aircraft system, therefore, since a policy is not in place to determine prohibited systems, all systems have this restriction under this funding announcement. Therefore, time flying the drone would be an unallowable cost since it impacts the operation of the system, but activities not directly tied to operation would be allowable.

BASIC REQUIREMENTS - *WEBINAR Presentation*

Are we able to access the presentations of both the CIG Classic and On Farm Trials Webinars?

> Both Webinars with the transcripts will be posted to the CIG Website eventually. All webinar participants with access to the Teams site will have immediate access to the recorded presentations.

BASIC REQUIREMENTS - *MULTIPLE PROPOSALS & Projects*

Can one applicant apply to multiple CIG competitions in the same year?

> Yes, one applicant can apply to both CIG competitions or submit multiple applications to one competition as long as each application is a unique project.

If you currently have an active CIG grant, can you apply for one this year?

> Yes, you can. If you currently have a CIG project, either at the state or national level, you are considered eligible for the competition. In addition, there is no prohibition of a single entity being awarded more than one grant in a single year as long as each project is unique.

Can we apply for a second phase of a project already funded by CIG, if so, what are the requirements?

> Yes, project teams are able to build off of an original CIG project as long as the new application describes something uniquely innovative relative to the original application and has the potential to expand private lands conservation in a way the original project could not. The CIG program will not fund the same project twice.

BASIC REQUIREMENTS - *START DATES*

The notice of funding opportunity (NOFO), says to plan projects starting September 2026. Is that an accurate date?

> The project start date in the NOFO is an estimate, and does not account for any delays. The project team expects all awards will be announced by September 30, 2026. The applicant can request a different start date than what is in the NOFO as long as it is after the date an agreement is signed. Therefore, for planning purposes it maybe beneficial to put a date later than what is in the NOFO to account for potential delays. It is not uncommon for the finalization of an agreement to take 4-6 months after awards are announced.

BASIC REQUIREMENTS - *Submission*

Historically, it was required to receive approval from State NRCS offices before submission. Is this still a requirement?

No, applications should not be submitted to state NRCS offices. Applicants should only submit applications to the grants.gov website and they should not receive any input into their proposal from state NRCS offices before submission.

BASIC REQUIREMENTS – *Letters of Support*

Do we need letters of support from potential cooperating growers?

No, letters of support are not a requirement, but they are allowed and can help give a project more context, clarity, and support.

BASIC REQUIREMENTS – *Beneficiaries*

Are improvements meant to be on-farm or can they be improvements in the wider context of the environment in general?

The main objective of the CIG program is to benefit conservation on private lands in agricultural production. While project activities do not have to take place on private farmland, the project benefit should ultimately address conservation on private lands.

ELIGIBILITY – TYPES OF APPLICANTS

For sole proprietor farmers/producers who also work at a research institution, are they allowed to apply and under what entity should they be allowed to apply?

Yes, a sole proprietor farmer can apply. As long as they are not working at a federal research institution and are not a federal employee, they are eligible to apply. In deciding if they should apply as an individual, as a farm owner or as an employee of the research institution, it is the responsibility of the applicant to weigh the pros and cons of each of these options.

Would commercial shellfish aquaculture producers, such as oyster farmers, or producers who use Recirculating Aquaculture Systems (RAS), be considered eligible agricultural producers for purposes of CIG Classic projects, provided the project demonstrates conservation outcomes and involves participating producers?

It is important that each project takes on a subject that falls within the NRCS mission, therefore if an organization can sign up for EQIP through FSA, most likely they would qualify. Aquaculture is an allowable agricultural production activity in several states and therefore they can get a farm and track number associated with land that is underwater. Therefore, yes, aquaculture and RAS producers are an allowable group.

Is forestry and other tree related activities eligible to this program?

Yes, within the "Overview" in Section C of the funding opportunity forests, in addition to crop and ranch land, is listed as an acceptable land use.

CIG Classic compared to CIG On-Farm Trials

-Should the CIG Classic be used only for totally nascent approaches and technologies, with On-Farm trials being used for any technology that is already commercially available?
-So I'm understanding that if an innovation is "ready for farmers" then do On-Farm, if not, Classic?

> The National CIG Classic competition is focused on finding innovations in conservation for private landowners that improve their natural resources. The idea is to field test, demonstrate or pilot new technologies that have not yet been proven for regular use by producers.
>
> On-Farm Trials is focused on technology that has been proven and are ready to scale. The intention of On-Farm Trials is to remove the financial risk for the producer of trying innovated practices that are not yet commonly used.
>
> CIG Classic targets technologies and approaches not necessarily fully developed whereas the On-Farm Trials competition targets projects that have been proven effective and are poised for widescale adoption. On-Farm Trials activities are on farms of EQIP eligible producers, while CIG Classic activities do not necessarily have to be on producer farms.

ELIGIBILITY – INNOVATIONS
- Do financial innovations qualify?
- Would funds be able to be applied to the development of an app?
- Would an innovation that increases the water supply of a watershed (but not specific to an individual producer/farmer) be eligible for CIG?

-Would integrating two different BMPs or Conservation practice standards can be considered as innovation to look at combined effects in different cropping systems?

> In general, app development, financial innovations, and many other ideas can be potentially acceptable innovations. The question is if it can provide true innovation, helping to expand natural resources conservation on private lands. If the idea, technology or approach has not been practiced before regularly and cannot currently be paid for by EQIP funding, that helps indicate that it is innovative. Please see our website project search page for past examples.

Does the "innovation" need to be a technology, or could a practice/combination of practices that does not rely on new technology still qualify as an innovation?

> The program supports new technologies and approaches, so new farm management plans, conservation practices, and other methodologies qualify as innovations.

If a project looks at current technology that is already being used on-farm, but the project is looking at using the technology in a new, innovative way, would this be an appropriate project for CIG Classic?

> Innovation is essentially anything that could bring more natural resource conservation to a region of the country for agricultural producers that is not

currently commonly used and is not currently fundable by EQIP. Therefore, if an improvement to a technology changes that technologies current ability to impact and improve natural resource conservation, then it may be considered innovative. Each proposal will be subject, though, to a review panel of experts that will assess how compelling this innovation is relative to other submissions and to its overall ability to impact natural resources conservation.

If a BMP has demonstrated co-benefits for specific species under a prior CIG award, would a new application be considered innovative if it formally quantifies outcomes for additional understudied taxa?

Generally speaking, we don't fund the same innovation, but technology enhancement is not necessarily considered the same innovation. If the current technology is not transferable without these enhancements, there may be a convincing argument made that this is an innovation. The question is what will be the impact and benefit to private lands natural resource conservation with this enhancement.

EQIP Producers/Community Colleges

Can you elaborate on the requirement that "all CIG projects must involve EQIP eligible producers or Community College?" How much involvement is expected from the producer? Should it involve incentives?

A requirement of this award is that all projects must involve EQIP eligible producers. There is only one exception; a project can involve a community college that will carry out a demonstration on the community college land instead of including EQIP eligible producers. Therefore, it is important to distinguish this requirement from the optional focus areas that prioritizes projects that involve community colleges, junior colleges, or technical schools. This focus does not require the involvement of community college land. Projects that involve community colleges as a focus area, but not a demonstration on their land, are still required to include EQIP eligible producers.

Projects with demonstrations on community college land can substitute for EQIP eligible producers if their institution meets the definition of a community college in 7 U.S.C 3319e(a)),

EQIP eligible producer involvement is not defined and can include many activities including work on the producer's land, producer surveys, or producer involvement in a field day. The extent to which projects involve EQIP eligible producers is taken into consideration as part of the application evaluation criteria. In addition, CIG Classic projects can include producer incentives for work on producer's land, but that is not a requirement of this program.

Do participating producers need to be enrolled in EQIP or do they just need to be EQIP eligible?

Producers only need to be EQIP eligible. Like On-Farm Trials, if a farmer is involved with the project by testing an innovation on his land and receiving federal funding for this, they will be required to be enrolled with FSA. If farmers are only involved through surveys or field days, they do not need to be enrolled with FSA.

Do EQIP eligible farmers involved in CIG that will be participating with activities on their farmland also have to meet the AGI requirements of having a gross income of $900,000 or below?

Yes, all farmers that will receive federal funding from the project will also have to meet AGI requirements.

Can a project work with a mix of EQIP eligible farmers and non-eligible EQIP farmers?

Yes, a project can involve both EQIP eligible farmers and non-EQIP eligible farmers, but only EQIP eligible farmers are eligible for federal funding through the grant.

Is there a minimum number of EQIP farmers we need to work with?

No, there is no minimum for the number of EQIP eligible farmers that can be involved in the project. There has to be at least one EQIP eligible farmer and it cannot be the applicant.

BUDGET - EQUIPMENT
Can budget costs include the cost to build a piece of field equipment necessary to evaluate the technology in the field?

This depends. Some types of equipment costs are allowed. Equipment is any individual unit that costs greater than $10,000. Any item below that cost is considered a supply. In addition, equipment does not include permanent structures that would be considered capital equipment. Field equipment should be unfixed. Any item determined to be equipment is considered owned by the federal government. (**§**200.313)

BUDGET – Minimum federal funding
Is the posted minimum, $250,000, the minimum we can ask from the federal government or is it the minimum total project budget. Does this minimum include both federal and non-federal cost share?

The $250,000 minimum refers to the federal portion of the budget, not the total budget. Therefore, the minimum ask of federal government funding is $250,000 and the minimum required amount of cost share is $250,000. Therefore, each project budget total will be at least $500,000.

BUDGET – INDIRECT COSTS
Is indirect an allowable budget cost even if you do not have a NICRA?

1.

Yes, indirect is an allowable cost for the CIG Classic competition. Applicants can either apply their Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement (NICRA) rate or apply a 15% *De Minimus* rate. If you do not have a Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement (NICRA) you are allowed to apply the15% *De Minimus* rate to your budget for indirect costs and no forms are required for the application. If you have a negotiated NICRA rate, be sure to include the paperwork with your application. (§ 200.414)

BUDGET – FARMER INCENTIVE PAYMENTS

Can CIG funds be used for incentive payments to producers to implement innovative practices or NRCS funds limited to technical assistance? Are payments to EQIP eligible producers a requirement?

Yes, for CIG Classic, farmer incentive payments are an allowable cost in the budget. Incentive payments or other payments to farmers are optional, they are not a required cost for CIG Classic.

BUDGET – ALLOWABLE COSTS

Will a high performance computer/workshop PC be allowed as equipment? What costs are allowable and unallowable?

Costs that are unallowable are described in detail in the Uniform Guidance for grants and cooperative agreements (2CFR200) in the section on cost principles. If you search the term "unallowable" you will see each section describes what is allowable and unallowable, so there are about 90 references to unallowable costs. Therefore, for general supplies, like computer equipment, they have to be necessary and reasonable for the performance of the award to be allowable. Commonly asked about costs that are unallowable for the CIG program are capital expenditures for general purpose equipment, buildings, and land.

If we need the funding to secure the lease for the project and currently have a term sheet from a landlord, would this be acceptable?

Leased land and space is an allowable cost for the federal portion of the budget if necessary and reasonable. If the lease is not in place, you would not be able to apply this cost as your cost share to the non-federal portion of the budget since it is not fully secure.

BUDGET – COST SHARE/MATCH (§ 200.306)

What is the difference between match, cost share, third party cost share, and non-federal match and non-federal cost share?

These terms are considered to mean the same thing and are all used interchangeably for this opportunity.

How much cost share can come from cash verse in-kind?

The applicant can use any combination of cash and in-kind sources to meet their match commitment. 100% of either type of match is acceptable, as well as a budget that has a percentage of both.

Do we need letters of commitment from partners or can we commit as the primary applicant that will secure 50% cost share matched by the end of the project?

Cost share can come from either the applicant or partners, and there is no limit regarding the percent that each give to the project. What is important is that the proposal has the full required amount of cost share committed. All cost share submitted by partners require a letter from the organization or individual committing that cost share. See the funding opportunity for details on what is required for a cost share letter.

Please provide additional clarification on what qualifies as in-kind contributions for the required non-federal cost share? Specifically, more details on the types of services, materials, equipment or other non-cash contributions from external partners that are considered allowable under this requirement.

1. Allowable costs for cost share follow the same regulations as for federal awards (see above references to 2CFR200) and therefore the same types of costs appear in the non-federal cost share budget. Cost share can be any combination of cash or in-kind (§ 200.306). For cash, many awardees include personnel costs, fringe costs, or the cost of purchasing supplies such as laboratory supplies or farming supplies or supplies to build an innovation. For in-kind, many proposals include volunteer hours (labor), mileage to a site, or the use of equipment from individuals, including from partners. These costs have to reflect a fair market value if it is donated as in-kind. For example, community volunteer time coordinated by a project partner, the awardee would require the partner to keep detailed notes on who the volunteers were, the hours they spent on the project, the dates in which they did the work, as well as a brief description of that work. There would be a fair market hourly rate attached to their labor so the in-kind work could be calculated credit for the non-federal budget.

What percent of the required match can come from unrecovered indirect costs?

It is allowable to apply unrecovered indirect cost (indirect costs allowed to charge for but not listed in the federal portion of the budget) to the Non-Federal cost share portion of the budget. Therefore, the non-federal cost share budget can reflect both unrecovered indirect cost from the federal portion of the budget in addition to indirect costs applied to various costs in the Non-Federal budget itself.

For the match in contribution does cloud credit from third party counts?

We don’t ask where organizations keep their money. The application requires a commitment by the applicant or their partners that they will pay for project activities. In addition, they should provide a detailed description of what these activities will be and designate the contributions as cash or in-kind. How an organization will finance the activities is not a direct question in the application.

PROJECT NARRATIVE

Can you provide a sample of clarifying boundaries under writing a good project narrative?

> Projects that are larger than the NRCS proposal, where the NRCS application is only reflecting a part of an organizations overall initiative, should be summarized in the project background section. For instance, a professor might have a research program on specific cover crops, but the proposal may just be looking at one crop and have a limited set of tests around this one crop. The project team, though, plans to publish the results bundled with some of their other work, so some of the project outputs will not be purely "CIG" project outputs. This overlap has to be described in the proposal so it is clear exactly what is to be supported by the project. This is important so individuals with multiple federal funding sources do not confuse this funding. This type of description is only required if the NRCS project, including the cost share portions, are only a part of another project.

PRIORITY AREAS – FARMER OUTCOMES

What is the definition of holistic?

> Holistic is an approach that reflects the interdependence of parts, specifically one that would address at least one of the 11 identified natural resource concerns for NRCS (SWAPAE) and that recognizes and integrates producer perspectives and experiences that are impacted by the introduced technology.

Can you talk more about the new farmer focused conservation outcomes?

> Every project in this focus area should qualify as holistic (see above definition), but the priority area is more restrictive since it specifically calls out understanding factors that influence farmers' assessment of the value (e.g., economic, environmental, and production) of adopting conservation practices on their land.

PROJECT NARRATIVE – FIELD TRIALS

Should trials under the CIG classic program always be on producer farm fields or can the trials be conducted at university research lands along with producer fields?

> Yes, university research land can be part of a project. The project does not have to involve producer land. It depends on the project and the questions that are being answered for that technology. Currently we have several active CIG's which include only university plots, as well, we have several projects that include only farmer plots.

PROJECT NARRATIVE - EVALUATION

What are the evaluation requirements for CIG Classic and how do they differ from the CIG On-Farm Trials competition?

The CIG Classic competition does not require any specific evaluation measurements or techniques, as some On-Farm Trials priority areas. What we require is that there is an evaluation and that it is described in detail enough so we understand what natural resources will be investigated and how they will be assessed. Evaluation is one of the sub-criteria, so it has to be an element of the project. It should be relevant to and adequate for the questions being asked so the new knowledge created is usable for the public.

PROJECT NARRATIVE – TEAM QUALIFICATIONS

Is there a benefit to a proposal having their project staff fully hired before the project is funded? For instance, most graduate students are selected after a project is funded to assure funds to pay them.

All projects have different requirements. If a project's methodology depends on the expertise of a few of the team members, if these skill sets cannot be reflected in the team's presented experience, it brings into question the ability of a project to be successful. Often, less trained staff, such as graduate students, are not viewed as critical to the success of the project. The key personal are usually the project director and the co-directors, but this can vary depending on the project.

TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

Are projects that plan the capacity building phase of the development of an innovation competitive for this award including: site identification, prioritization, Partnership Building, regulatory review etcetera?

Each project has to present an innovation that will be ready for farmers at the end of the project. We do not support purely planning grants as they are not investigating anything. While the grant may contain elements of planning, the majority of the project should be testing the innovation that will have something available to farmers by the end of the project. A purely planning project would not be able to achieve this. Please carefully review the review criteria in the NOFO to better understand this