# Questions and Answers for Conservation Innovation Grants
# On-Farm Conservation Innovation Trials (OFT)

## Select Topic



NOTE: Questions that were repetitive are clustered together and only one answer is provided.

## Administration

1. Are we able to access the applicant webinar presentation?

   *The webinar will be posted to the CIG Website once it has been processed.*

2. Where is the link to the application and process?

   *The following link gives access to the site that hosts the National Funding Opportunity (NFO) for On-Farm Trials: https://www.grants.gov/search-results-detail/362550*

   *As described in the NFO, all applications must be submitted through grants.gov.*

3. Can you please confirm that you aren't able to begin the application process until you have the Sam.Gov business UEI and the business fully registered in Sam.Gov?

   *Applicants can preview the application but cannot submit until they have a UEI number. For questions about the grants.gov submission process there is a support center link on the grants.gov website. The email address is support@grants.gov. The phone number is 1-800-518-4726.*

4. What is the expected number of awards under the on-farm trials portion?

   *We estimate awarding between 15 and 25 grants.*

5. The notice of funding opportunity (NOFO) says to plan projects starting September 2026. Is that an accurate date? The NOFO says to plan for start dates in September 2026 and in another place it says the intent is to execute awards during the 4th quarter of calendar year 2026, so should we plan for September 2026 or January 1, 2027?

   *The project start date in the NOFO is an estimate. While we anticipate that agreements will be finalized by the end of the calendar year, there is the potential for delays. Applicants can request a later start date. For example, the agreement could be signed in December 2026 for a project that starts in March 2027.*

   *Agreement development can take several months, and agreements will be executed on a rolling basis. Some projects may take longer than others depending on modifications that are needed.*

6. Is there anticipation that this program will be available in the future?

   *Yes, we anticipate that future competitions will be held on an annual basis.*

7. How do we get additional questions answered?

   *Further questions should be emailed to NRCSCIG@usda.gov.*

## Funding and Budget

8. Where can I find more information on administrative (indirect) costs?

   *Section D.2.e in the NFO addresses indirect costs (also known as administrative costs or overhead). Indirect costs are usually a general fee that organizations include in funding requests that represent the general costs of doing business, and may include many incidentals such as internet, electricity, copy machines, building costs, etc. For On-Farm Trials, indirect costs cannot be reimbursed by NRCS funding.*

9. Are indirect costs allowable for subawards?

   *Yes. The prohibition on On-Farm Trials funding reimbursing administrative costs only applies to the lead partner, the entity with which NRCS has a direct agreement.*

10. How are costs reimbursed under an On-Farm Trials agreement?

    *In general, awardees submit monthly or quarterly reimbursement requests using a standard form known as a SF-270.*

11. Can equipment be purchased with federal funding and incentive payments?

    *Yes, funds can be used for equipment in some instances. Equipment critical to implementing an innovative approach, providing technical assistance (TA) or carrying out an On-Farm Trials evaluation would be an allowable cost since those are eligible expenses. Guidelines for purchasing equipment with federal funding are specific and sometimes require a grantee sell acquired equipment at the end of the project to meet the terms of the agreement. Please review the federal regulations carefully (see §2CFR 200.313 and 200.439) before including equipment purchases in your proposal. In general, Federal funds may not be used to purchase facilities- related equipment (e.g. office space or a barn).*

12. Is On-Farm Trials funding available for more than making incentive payments to producers?

    *Yes, On-Farm Trials funding can be used for the three components required of each project:*
    *1) Incentive payments to producers to implement innovative approaches.*
    *2) Technical assistance to help producers implement innovative approaches.*
    *3) Evaluation of conservation, economic, and social impacts of the On-Farm Trials.*

    *Additionally, OFT funding can be used to cover direct administrative costs associated with a project.*

13. Can OFT funds be used for outreach and education?

    *Yes, funds for outreach and education would fall under technical assistance*

14. Should we include allowable direct administrative expenses (e.g. filling out reports, organizing meetings) in the budget?

*Direct administrative expenses may be included when they can be specifically attributed to the project work.*

15. Does the project budget need to include costs for NRCS associated with compliance, eligibility and environmental evaluations?

    *No. Most OFT awardees will not have any project costs associated with producer eligibility or environmental evaluations. The exception would be an applicant that anticipates needing an environmental assessment to inform the environmental evaluation. This would be relevant for projects that do not use NRCS practice standards and are not reasonably limited in context and intensity to allow an NRCS environmental compliance specialist to conclude that there are no expected negative environmental impacts.*

16. Is training an allowable cost?

    *Training producers to help them implement a practice, system or technology is an allowable cost and is considered TA. On-Farm Trials funding may not be used to train personnel providing TA to producers.*

17. How will producer incentive payments be processed?

    *Incentive payments must be paid from awarded entities to participating producers. It is the lead partner's responsibility to establish a means for paying producers.*

18. Can subawardees handle the incentive payments or does it need to be the lead institution?

    *Subawardees can handle the incentive payments.*

19. Is there any assistance to help determine appropriate incentive payment structures or amounts?

    *Applicants are wholly responsible for proposing the amount and composition of incentive payments. [NRCS payment schedules]() may be useful to partners as they develop incentive payments proposals. Incentive payments may be comprised of foregone income, conservation implementation-related equipment, evaluation costs, or other considerations necessary to facilitate effective execution of an on-farm trial. This is not an exhaustive list but is intended to provide some basic guidance that encourages maximum creativity. The overall framework for making the payments will just be evaluated as a part of the overall project by the peer panel. Payments may not be provided to a producer for a conservation practice, system or approach for which the producer has already received, or is contracted to receive, funding through another NRCS or USDA program.*

20. Can a private engineering consultant receive funds for technical assistance?

    *On-Farm Trials awardees may sub-contract with third-party providers to deliver technical assistance to participating producers.*

21. Will the grant support equipment that is shared acrost a consortium of growers.

*Yes.*

22. Are organizations allowed to ask for advances?

    *Yes. The terms and conditions allow for advances. In the new terms and conditions, advances now have to be liquidated within three days.*

23. What percentage of the total request should be allocated for incentive payments to producers, relative to technical assistance and evaluation?

    *There is no required ratio of the various cost categories. NRCS is asking applicants to propose and justify expenses for incentive payments, technical assistance and evaluation costs.*

## Eligibility - Partners and Producers

24. Are there restrictions on a single PI leading or participating as a co-PI in more than one CIG grant proposals?

    *No, an applicant may submit more than one application for different projects or for proposing different approaches.*

25. What are the requirements for producer eligibility? Will NRCS help with the farmer AGI verification or other steps?

    *Any producer receiving an On-Farm Trials incentive payment must meet the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) eligibility requirements listed in7 CFR § 1466.6(b)(1) through (3):*
    - *Be in compliance with the highly erodible land and wetland conservation provisions (7 CFR § 12).*
    - *Be a person, legal entity, joint operation, Indian tribe, or native corporation engaged in agricultural production or forestry management or having an interest in the agricultural or forestry operation as defined in7 CFR § 1400.*
    - *Have control of the land involved for the term of the proposed contract period.*

    *In addition, any producer receiving a payment through participation in a funded project is subject to the adjusted gross income (AGI) limitation. The producer must have an AGI that does not exceed $900,000.*

    *After a project is awarded but before any incentive payments are made, NRCS will work with the awardee to confirm that participating producers meet the eligibility criteria above. All participating producers must register or be registered with the Farm Service Agency (FSA). The FSA registration allows NRCS to confirm eligibility.*

26. If a farmer is NOT eligible for EQIP, can they still participate in the project if they are willing to forego any financial assistance?

    *Non-EQIP eligible producers are allowed to participate in OFT projects by providing data but are not eligible to receive any direct benefits paid for by project funds.*

27. Can federal agencies such as ARS be sub-awardees for the grant project?

    *No, Federal agencies may not receive funding through On-Farm Trials. They can partner and participate in the project if they agree to do so without receiving project funds.*

28. Can an individual producer submit a proposal?

    *Individuals are not eligible applicants. The On-Farm Trials statute limits eligible entities to:*
    *• private entities whose primary business is related to agriculture;*
    *• nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with experience working with agricultural producers; and*
    *• non-Federal government agencies.*

    *A farm business could qualify as a for-profit entity whose primary business is related to agriculture. To be competitive, a farm business would need to have the experience to manage a federal award of this size including the capacity to recruit participating producers, provide technical assistance, facilitate incentive payments, coordinate the project evaluation and manage project reporting.*

29. Is a scientist at a federal agency eligible to be a "co-PD" for an On-Farm Trials submissions?

    *Yes, but there is a funding restriction for consulting services performed by a Federal employee during official duty hours when such consulting services result in the payment of additional compensation to the employee. They can be a CO-PD, but they need to make clear they do not appear on the budget. We recommend a "support" letter that states their involvement and the letter makes clear they will not be on the budget.*

30. Can On-Farm Trials take place on indoor farms?

    *Yes, provided the proposed project addresses one of the On-Farm Trials priorities and the participating producers are eligible for NRCS payments.*

31. We have a range of producers we have been working with from small to very large, some of which may not meet the Farm Bill's Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) restrictions. Can I include a producer that does not meet AGI limits in the application?

    *AGI waivers can only be requested and granted after an On-Farm Trials project begins. A project that relies on the participation of producers that exceed the AGI limitation may be vulnerable because AGI waivers are not guaranteed. AGI waivers may only be granted when a NRCS analysis determines that the conservation activity in question would take place on "lands of special environmental significance" and the activity would address the issue that classified that land as being of special environmental significance. Producers who do not meet the eligibility requirements, including the AGI limitation, can only participate in an OFT project by providing data. They are not eligible to receive any direct benefits paid for by project funds.*

32. Does the proposal need to identify the producers that are participating, or can producers be selected after the grant is awarded?

    *The proposal does not have to identify participating producers. Applications, however, must demonstrate that the applicant can recruit enough producer participants to implement the project.*

33. Is there a selection process we need to follow to identify producers?

    *No, there is no required process. It is the responsibility of applicants/awardees to describe the recruitment process and secure the participation of producers.*

34. Is there any preference given to working with producers already involved in conservation practices vs. producers who have not utilized those practices?

    *Incentive payments must go to producers who are implementing the innovative approach in question for the first time. If an application, for example, is proposing to increase the adoption of denitrifying bioreactors, producers who have already implemented a bioreactor cannot receive an incentive payment for simply maintaining the practice.*

35. One of our potential producer participants is prohibited by shareholders from disclosing financial information about the operation, does this automatically disqualify him from participating?

    *Any producer getting an On-Farm Trials incentive payment must consent to registering with Farm Service Agency (if they are not already registered) and undergoing AGI, Highly Erodible Wetlands/Wetlands Conservation, and EQIP-eligibility checks.*

36. Are participants required to have a conservation plan signed by a certified conservation planner (CCP)?

    *Producer participants are not required to have a conservation plan for the purposes of On-Farm Trials.*

37. I plan to have two to three farmers involved in the trail. Would that be enough for the program?

    *Technically speaking, projects with two or more eligible producer participants would be eligible. The number of producers that participate in an OFT project will vary depending on the expense and complexity of the practice being implemented. Previously awarded OFT projects range in producer participants from five to upwards of 200. On balance, NRCS would like to see more rather than fewer participating producers—the intent of On-Farm Trials is to increase the adoption of innovative approaches and technologies. Larger numbers of producers also increases the statistical confidence of On-Farm Trials evaluation results.*

38. When working with a farmer on a trial, how many fields can they include in the project?

    *There is not a set minimum or maximum number of fields that a participating producer can include in the project.*

39. Is there a minimum size of the project area?

    *There is not a minimum project size in terms of acreage. Projects must be multi-site and include more than one eligible producer. Single site demonstrations are not eligible.*

40. Can the same technology be deployed on multiple farms and will each farm be funded?

*NRCS anticipates that On-Farm Trials projects will involve multiple participating producers on multiple fields and farms. An application proposing implementation on a single farm would not be eligible.*

41. We have a CSP contract that we are currently under, can there be any overlap between On-Farm Trials and the CSP practices?

    *On-Farm Trials funding cannot be used to provide payments to producers for a practice that a producer is already receiving funding for from another NRCS or USDA program. If the OFT project is implementing a different practice than what is contracted for under CSP, there may still be rules and restrictions in the terms and conditions of the CSP programs that participating producers need to be aware of.*

42. If a producer has a current CSP contract can we still use that land as an evaluation/data collection point as they are not receiving an additional payment?

    *Yes, if the producer is not receiving On-Farm Trials funding or incentives, the land and practices in question can still be used for data collection and evaluation.*

43. Can an awardee serve as one of the cooperating producers in their own project?

    *This would fall outside the program's intent, as projects are structured for awardees to be the facilitators of the trials that take place on the land of the eligible producers that they recruit. The program intent is to overcome barriers to adoption by providing the recruited producers with technical assistance and incentives to adopt practices that are new to them.*

## Eligibility – Projects

44. Will additional points be given to proposals that address multiple priorities?

    *We welcome projects that have benefits that cover more than one priority category, but peer panel reviewers will evaluate how well your project addresses the primary priority under which it is being competed. Including features that cross over priority categories does not provide an applicant with any inherent advantage or disadvantage over projects that address one priority category.*

45. Could a project include implementing current NRCS conservation practices offered through the EQIP program or are we talking about different proven conservation practices?

    *The criteria for what constitutes an innovative approach is broad for On-Farm Trials. An existing conservation practice funded through EQIP may be quite common in one part of the country or agricultural sector but considered innovative in another. It is the applicant's responsibility to justify the innovative nature of their proposed approach.*

46. Can practices that have been proven but don't necessarily have an NRCS practice standard be funded?

*Proposed innovative approaches do not have to be a part of a current NRCS conservation practice standard.*

47. Can the On Farm trials be a mix of commodity and specialty crops?

    *Yes.*

48. Can projects be carried out in multiple states?

    *Yes.*

49. If the proposed project involves a new technology, will a component testing the technology in a test field before the on farm trials be permitted in the proposal? Or do the trials have to be strictly in participating producer farms?

    *This program is not designed to test new products, but instead it is designed to support more widespread adoption of practices that, for whatever reason, have not been widely adopted. The trials have to be on the land of eligible producers.*

## Criteria - Evaluations

50. What type of data from the project will NRCS be asking for from the awardees? Such as detailed individual data or aggregated and anonymized data?

    *The evaluation component of On-Farm Trials projects requires both data collection and analysis to reach conclusions about the conservation and economic impacts of innovative approach implementation. NRCS may request access to data collected on individual farms and fields. NRCS operates under strict producer privacy and confidentiality regulations, so the use of individual producer data is safeguarded.*

51. If we choose nutrient management as the main priority but have some soil health aspect in that, do we need to follow all the Soil Health Demo (SHD) evaluations in this scenario?

    *No.*

52. Are the evaluation protocols and methods listed?

    *Outside of the Soil Health Demo Trial, applicants are responsible for proposing an evaluation approach for the conservation and economic evaluation component of their projects. Evaluation methods may be negotiated prior to agreement execution.*

## Specific only to the Soil Health Demonstration Trial

53. Do we need to identify if we are applying for funds under the *Soil Health Demonstration Trials (SHD)* priority?

*Yes, you are required to identify which priority the proposal will compete under in the cover page, a required section of the project narrative. The NFO identifies four main priorities, they are as follows: irrigation management technologies; grazing lands; nutrient management; and soil health demonstration (SHD) trials.*

54. For the Soil Health Demo trials: Have the evaluation protocols been established? If so, what are they?

    *Eligible entities receiving Soil Health Demo Trial awards agree to follow consistent soil health assessment protocols to evaluate the impacts of practice and system implementation. The standard SHD dataset requirements and methods are available on the [CIG website] under "More Information for CIG On-Farm Trial Soil Health Demo Awardees."*

55. Is the Soil Health Demo Trial a separate application?

    *No, the Soil Health Demo Trial is one of four priority areas within On-Farm Trials.*

56. For the soil health demo trial evaluations, is there a specific cost per sample or per producer that we can use to build our budget?

    *No, we do not have an established cost per sample or producer for the SHD. Applicants must propose these costs as part of their budget.*

57. For the Soil Health Demonstration Trials, can soil health testing be conducted in university research laboratories, or are soil samples required to be sent to certified commercial labs? For the Soil Health Demonstration Trials, CEMA 216 guidance emphasizes the use of certified laboratories for soil health testing. However, in our region, there are relatively few certified commercial laboratories, and not all of them provide the full suite of soil health measurements required for these trials. Additionally, the analytical costs associated with these services can be cost-prohibitive.

    *Awardees can complete the soil health testing at the university provided that they follow the guidance in the current CEMA 216 guidance. There are commercial labs that awardees can send samples to and meet the CEMA 216 guidelines. They may not show on the NAPT-PAP website as certified for all of the methods, but they do offer methods to fully support CEMA 216. NAPT-PAP is currently transitioning their certification protocols, and they are actively working with labs who wish to become certified and are offering variances in the meantime through this transition process.*

58. Will the soil health demos have minimum or maximum acreages?

    *No, there is no direct minimum or maximum acreage. Each project needs to be substantive and large enough to provide a scientifically robust data set for evaluation.*

59. Is there any special consideration for organic practices under the Soil Health Demoss?

    *No.*

## Definitions and examples:

60. Does NRCS have any examples of successful projects

    *Yes, information on previously funded projects can be found in the CIG project search tool:* [*https://cig.sc.egov.usda.gov/cig-projects*](https://cig.sc.egov.usda.gov/cig-projects)

61. The Notice of Funding Opportunity says that foreign entities are ineligible to apply. Is there a publicly-available definition of foreign entity for this program?

    *The definitions section of the Uniform Guidance (2 CFR 200.1) contains a definition for foreign organization.*

## Miscellaneous

62. Do we need a support letter from NRCS State offices?

    *Applications should not include support letters from NRCS State offices or staff.*

63. Is the 50 million dollars going to be evenly split amongst the four priorities?

    *The funding is often not split evenly among the priorities. It varies based on the number and quality of proposals that we receive for each.*

64. Are letters of support required? If not required, do they improve overall score of proposal?

    *Letters of support are not required but are allowed. They may or may not be considered by the review panel.*

65. Can I submit my proposal to both CIG classic and OFT in the same cycle?

    *The same proposal should not be submitted to both the CIG Classic and OFT competitions. CIG Classic, another competition of the Conservation Innovation Grants, funds the development and piloting of new approaches and technologies. CIG Classic is better suited for projects that are focused on early stage exploration of a new technology or practice.*

66. For the environmental evaluation does that mean the producers need to complete CPA 52 forms?

    *NRCS will work with the awardee to fill out a CPA 52 for each participating producer after a project is awarded.*

67. If a project is highly successful, will there be an option to seek additional funding during the project's lifespan?

    *No, there is no provision for renewing or adding additional funding during a project's lifespan.*

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

*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.*

69. 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.

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

70. 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?

Yes, activities not directly tied to operation would be allowable. Time flying the drone would be an unallowable cost since it impacts the operation of the system

71. 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?

*Satellite imagery products are an allowable budget item. The M-26-02 does not address satellites.*