



## **SOUTHEAST AQUATICS FUND**

### **2020 REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS**

Applicant Webinar: A recorded webinar will be posted [here](#) by **Friday, June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020**  
Full Proposal Due Date: **Thursday, July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020 by 11:59 PM Eastern Time**

### **OVERVIEW**

The southeastern U.S. harbors a diversity of aquatic species unparalleled in the nation. Nearly two thirds of U.S. fish species, over 90% of U.S. mussel species and almost half of the world's crayfish species call the rivers and streams of this region home<sup>1</sup>. However, land use changes, habitat fragmentation, declines in water quality and availability, and invasive species introductions have greatly impacted these species. Notably, the number of at-risk aquatic species in this region is greater than anywhere else in the United States, with many species petitioned or candidates for listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

To help conserve habitats for a wide range of aquatic species, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) is soliciting proposals to restore habitats and improve water quality in targeted river basins and watersheds of the Southeast. The Southeast Aquatics Fund is a competitive grants program that supports watershed-based restoration that will improve the health of these aquatic systems and secure populations of native freshwater aquatic species. By promoting a habitat based approach a diversity of species benefit, from game species to at-risk species, helping reduce the risk of future listings under the ESA.

The Southeast Aquatics Fund is a public-private partnership with funding provided by USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Southern Company. Over \$2.7 million is available in grant funding in 2020, with individual grant awards typically ranging between \$150,000 and \$350,000.

### **GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS**

Geographic focal areas and funding priorities for the Southeast Aquatics Fund are informed by:

- The [Longleaf Forests and Rivers Business Plan](#), which outlines NFWF's goals and strategies for freshwater habitat restoration and enhancement. A suite of aquatic species were selected as indicators of healthy freshwater habitat in prioritized watersheds, including the bridled and trispot darters, Alabama rainbow, Coosa creekshell, Black Warrior waterdog and flattened musk turtle. The specific watersheds and associated focal species are indicated below.
- The Southeastern Aquatic Biodiversity Conservation Strategy (<http://southeastfreshwater.org/>) completed in 2016 by the University of Georgia River

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://southeastfreshwater.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/web\\_SE\\_Aquatic\\_Biodiv\\_Strat\\_Body\\_Apdx1\\_Apdx2.pdf](http://southeastfreshwater.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/web_SE_Aquatic_Biodiv_Strat_Body_Apdx1_Apdx2.pdf)

Basin Center and Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute. This science-based, systematic assessment identified watersheds critical to southeast aquatic conservation based on the richness, endemism, and imperilment of freshwater fish, mussel, and crayfish species.

- State Wildlife and Forest Action Plans, with additional input from regional and state conservation partners.

In 2020, proposals to the Southeast Aquatics Fund will be considered from the following three geographies. The first two are driven by goals set in NFWF’s Longleaf Forest and Rivers Business Plan mentioned above, and the third is driven by new funding partner priorities:

1) **The Alabama and Mobile-Tombigbee Basins**

Projects will only be considered within the three Hydrologic Unit Code (HUC) 8 watersheds listed below. Priority will be given to projects within specific tributary watersheds benefitting focal species where indicated (Figure 1):

- Conasauga (priority tributary: Holly Creek)
  - Focal species: Bridled and trispot darter; *Villosa* mussels (Alabama rainbow, Coosa creekshell)
- Locust Fork
  - Focal species: Black Warrior waterdog; flattened musk turtle
- Middle Coosa (priority tributary: Big Canoe Creek)
  - Focal species: Trispot darter

2) **The Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint (ACF) Basin**

Projects will be considered that support sufficient water flows for native freshwater species, with particular interest in projects associated with agricultural lands (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Southeast Aquatics Fund Geographic Focal Areas 1 & 2

### 3) Gulf Coastal Watershed Working Lands Conservation and Management

Projects will be considered within coastal HUC-6 watersheds within the five Gulf Coast states: Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas (Figure 2). Within Florida, priority may be given to projects within HUC-6 watersheds in the Panhandle from the Alabama border east to the Ochlockonee watershed and the Suwannee watershed, particularly when aligned with projects supporting the RESTORE Council.

To be eligible to apply in this geographic focal area, projects must be focused on providing outreach and technical assistance to private landowners related to the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and/or the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) to increase enrollment and implementation of wetland, agricultural and forestry conservation practices through EQIP or ACEP that improve water quality and quantity to benefit native freshwater species habitat. Projects should be in coordination with appropriate state and local NRCS offices (refer to “Provide Technical Assistance and Outreach” section below in Program Priorities).



**Figure 2: Southeast Aquatics Fund Geographic Focal Area 3**

**Note:** Funding for habitat restoration projects benefitting freshwater species in the Cumberland and Tennessee river system is available through the Cumberland Plateau Stewardship Fund (2020 RFP anticipated to be posted Fall this year): <http://www.nfwf.org/cumberland/Pages/home.aspx>.

### **PROGRAM PRIORITIES**

Competitive proposals will address the threats facing the species within the above-listed geographies by implementing one or more of the following strategies identified below. (Please note that proposals in the “Gulf Coastal Watershed Working Lands Conservation and Management”

Geographic Focal Area may only apply for the first program priority.) Proposals should demonstrate how project activities will advance specific goals and objectives of the [Longleaf Forests and Rivers Business Plan](#) and other relevant conservation plans, including, but not limited to, State Wildlife and Forest Action Plans, regional watershed management plans, fish habitat partnerships, and federal species recovery plans. Lastly, NFWF is interested in bringing forward projects that have strong water quality, water quantity benefits, and/or carbon benefits.

- 1) **Provide Technical Assistance and Outreach** – Support needed capacity to conduct outreach to private landowners to increase awareness of conservation need, appropriate practices and available cost-share programs to improve water quality/quantity or connectivity. This includes providing technical assistance to develop management plans and guidance on best management practice implementation; and the coordination of stakeholders within the watershed to share information and build consensus around priorities for targeting activities to most effectively and efficiently achieve outcomes. Projects should seek to leverage funding through the Farm Bill and other programs to renew or enter into new cost-share contracts. Proposals must estimate the amount of acres and/or miles to be restored or enhanced and the number of landowners implementing practices as a result of technical assistance and outreach activities (please refer to “Project Metrics” below).

**Note:** Projects within the “Gulf Coastal Watershed Working Lands Conservation and Management” Geographic Focal Area must be focused on this program priority and provide outreach and assistance for NRCS EQIP and/or ACEP in coordination with appropriate state and local NRCS offices to be eligible to apply to the Southeast Aquatics Fund. If the project supports capacity for both EQIP and ACEP, please estimate the proportion of time that will be spent toward each program and include in the proposal narrative. Specifically for projects in this geography, please indicate in the proposal narrative if there are opportunities for increased NRCS financial assistance (above and beyond what otherwise would be available) in association with the proposed technical assistance and outreach activities. Include the estimated amount of financial assistance through EQIP or ACEP that could be applied and for what conservation actions.

- 2) **Agricultural and Forestry Best Management Practices** –Support agricultural and forestry practices that reduce nutrient and sediment runoff from the land and conserve water where assistance is needed in addition to or outside of available Farm Bill and other cost-share programs. These practices may include, but are not limited to, livestock fencing, irrigation retrofits, riparian buffers and vegetative buffers around agricultural ditches, rotational grazing, cover crops, reducing nutrient inputs, and restoring streambanks impacted by erosion. Opportunities to leverage funding through the Farm Bill and other programs will be given priority. Proposals should clearly explain why this funding is needed and wouldn’t otherwise be covered by available cost-share programs.
- 3) **Restore and Enhance Riparian and In-stream Habitat** –Restore wetland, streambank, and instream habitat in prioritized areas of a watershed that otherwise would not be addressed through agricultural or forestry best management practices to

support key functions of the watershed and improve native aquatic species populations. Proposals should discuss how the project has been prioritized in the watershed to maximize cost efficiency and conservation outcomes for the target species.

- 4) **Improve stream crossings** – Restore connectivity for fish passage and reduce sedimentation by removing or retrofitting stream barriers and stream crossings (culverts, concrete fords). Preference will be given to projects that remove or retrofit high priority barriers or crossings within watersheds where barrier/crossing surveys and/or assessments are being developed or have been completed with an emphasis on lower cost/high gain methods in locations known to fragment habitat for priority species.
  
- 5) **Assessment, Prioritization and Planning** – Support the assessment of barriers and crossings within a watershed in order to identify which should receive highest priority for removal or retrofitting based on probable gains for target species. Barriers to habitat connectivity should be identified as a main factor impacting targeted species, and if a barrier assessment for the area already exists, strong justification should be provided for how the proposed work will build upon the existing assessment. Emphasis will be placed on lowest cost/highest gain opportunities, and identifying willing landowners.
  
- 6) **Monitoring** – Conduct monitoring to understand the population status and habitat conditions for bridled and trispot darter, *Villosa* mussels (Alabama rainbow, Coosa creekshell), Black Warrior waterdog and flattened musk turtle within the Conasauga, Locust Fork and Middle Coosa watersheds.

## PROJECT METRICS

To better gauge progress on individual grants and to ensure greater consistency of project data provided by multiple grants, the Southeast Aquatics Fund has a list of metrics in Easygrants for full proposal applicants to choose from for future reporting. We ask that applicants select only the most relevant metrics from this list for their project (all possible program metrics are shown in the table below). If you think an applicable metric has not been provided, please contact Suzanne Sessine ([Suzanne.Sessine@nfwf.org](mailto:Suzanne.Sessine@nfwf.org)) to discuss acceptable alternatives.

Project Activity	Recommended Metric (as listed in Easygrants)	Additional Guidance
Technical Assistance and Outreach to Private Landowners; Agricultural and Forestry BMPs	Acres under improved management	Enter the number of acres under improved management through implementation of agricultural and forestry conservation practices. For practices where acres cannot be calculated, such as livestock exclusion fencing, please use the “Miles of improved management” metric below instead or in addition if the project includes multiple practices, but please do not double count any metrics. Please include in the notes the specific practices to be implemented.

Technical Assistance and Outreach to Private Landowners; Agricultural and Forestry BMPs	Miles under improved management	Enter the number of miles of stream under improved management, specifically through conservation practices along or in-stream that can't be quantified in acres, such as fencing installed to exclude livestock from streams or rivers. Please include in the notes the specific practices to be implemented. If project will be directly restoring streambank or in-stream habitat, please use instead the "Miles restored" metric.
Technical Assistance and Outreach to Private Landowners	Acres protected under easement	Enter the number of acres enrolled in the NRCS Agricultural Conservation Easements Program.
Technical Assistance and Outreach to Private Landowners	# mgmt plans with BMPs	Enter the number of agricultural or forest management plans incorporating Best Management Practices (BMPs).
Technical Assistance and Outreach to Private Landowners	# people reached	Enter the number # of landowners anticipated to be reached through educational meetings, trainings and/or technical assistance. If the target value includes landowners reached through more than one activity, please break out in the notes section.
Technical Assistance and Outreach to Private Landowners	# people with changed behavior	Enter the number of private landowners who have implemented conservation actions as a result of technical assistance and outreach (developed a management plan, enrolled into new NRCS EQIP or ACEP contracts, implemented conservation practices that will improve aquatic habitat, etc.).
Riparian and instream habitat restoration	Miles restored	Enter the number of miles from this project for which habitat quality has been restored to support/increase target species presence. If there are multiple activities happening at different parts of the stream you can break out in the notes the 'distance' of impact for each activity.
Fish passage improvements	Miles of stream opened	Enter the number of stream miles opened as a result of the removal or retrofit of stream barriers.
Fish passage improvements	# passage barriers rectified	In the notes section of this metric please indicate what type of barrier is being removed (e.g., culvert).
Assessment, Prioritization and Planning	# studies used to inform mgmt	Enter the number of barrier assessments completed whose findings will be used to inform and/or prioritize management decisions within a watershed.
Monitoring	# sites being monitored	Enter the number of streams/sites being monitored, and in the notes section indicate which priority species are being monitored (bridled and trispot darter,

		Alabama rainbow, Coosa creekshell, Black Warrior waterdog and flattened musk turtle).
--	--	---

## ELIGIBILITY

### Eligible and Ineligible Entities

- Eligible applicants include non-profit 501(c) organizations, U.S. Federal government agencies, state government agencies, local governments, municipal governments, Indian tribes and educational institutions.
- Ineligible applicants include businesses, unincorporated individuals and international organizations.

### Ineligible Uses of Grant Funds

- NFWF funds and matching contributions may not be used to support political advocacy, fundraising, lobbying, litigation, terrorist activities or Foreign Corrupt Practices Act violations.
- NFWF funds may not be used to support ongoing efforts to comply with legal requirements, including permit conditions, mitigation and settlement agreements. However, grant funds may be used to support projects that enhance or improve upon existing baseline compliance efforts.

## FUNDING AVAILABILITY AND MATCH

Over \$2.7 million is available in grant funding in 2020. Grant awards are expected to range from \$150,000 to \$350,000, depending on the overall scale and duration of the project. If outside of this range, please contact [Suzanne Sessine](#).

**Project Period:** Anticipated completion time for funded projects typically will be 24 – 36 months following finalization of a grant agreement. The project narrative must include a clear timetable or schedule for project completion.

Project start and end dates should define the period during which all proposed work is accomplished, all requested funds are spent and all matching funds are spent or applied. Projects may be a discrete part of a longer-term project, provided there are definable outcomes for the proposed phase of the overall effort.

**Match Requirement:** Projects must have a minimum match of 1:1 non-federal cash or in-kind. Larger match ratios and matching fund contributions from a diversity of partners are encouraged and will be more competitive.<sup>2</sup> Applicants are encouraged to describe federal partner contributions as well in the proposal narrative, although those contributions may not count toward the minimum match.

---

<sup>2</sup> Note that landowner contributions being used as match for a Southeast Aquatics grant must be outside of the amount already written into any agency financial assistance contract as a cost-share contribution.

## EVALUATION CRITERIA

All proposals will be screened for relevance, accuracy, completeness and compliance with NFWF and funding source policies. Proposals will then be evaluated based on the extent to which they meet the following criteria.

**Program Goals and Priorities** – Project contributes to the Fund’s overall habitat and species conservation goals, and has specific, quantifiable performance metrics to evaluate project success. Project addresses one or more of the program priorities consistent with the geographic eligibility requirements.

**Conservation Plan and Context** – The project advances an existing conservation plan or strategy, as outlined in the “Program Priorities” section above. If the project takes place in the Conasauga, Locust Fork or Middle Coosa priority watersheds, the proposal should describe how the project will advance the aquatic species goals and strategies outlined in the [Longleaf Forests and Rivers Business Plan](#).

**NRCS Alignment** – For projects providing technical assistance and outreach to private landowners, please ensure the project is in alignment with the goals/priorities of the respective state in which your project is located.

**Technical Merit** – Project is technically sound and feasible, and the proposal sets forth a clear, logical and achievable work plan and timeline. Project engages appropriate technical experts throughout project planning, design and implementation to ensure activities are technically-sound and feasible.

**Cost-Effectiveness** – Project includes a cost-effective budget that balances performance risk and efficient use of funds. Cost-effectiveness evaluation may include, but is not limited to, an assessment of either or both direct and indirect costs in the proposed budget. The federal government has determined that a *de minimis* 10% indirect rate is an acceptable minimum for organizations without a NICRA, as such NFWF reserves the right to scrutinize **ALL** proposals with indirect rates above 10% for cost-effectiveness.

**Transferability** – Project has potential and plan to transfer lessons learned to other communities and/or to be integrated into government programs and policies.

**Communication** – Project includes a detailed plan to communicate information about the project to appropriate audiences.

**Funding Need** – Project establishes a clear need for the funds being requested, and demonstrates that activities would not move forward absent funding.

**Monitoring** – Project includes a plan for monitoring progress during and after the proposed project period to track project success and adaptively address new challenges and opportunities as they arise.

**Long-term Sustainability** – Project will be maintained to ensure benefits are achieved and sustained over time. This should include how future funding will be secured to implement necessary long-term monitoring and maintenance activities.

**Past Success** – Applicant has a proven track record of success in implementing conservation practices with specific, measurable results.

**Partnership** – An appropriate partnership exists to implement the project and the project is supported by a strong local partnership that leverages additional funds and will sustain it after the life of the grant. Identify proposed partners, if known (including potential or contemplated subawards to third party subrecipients of the applicant), the roles they will play in implementing the project, and how this project will build new or enhance existing partnerships. (Note: a project partner is any local community, non-profit organization, tribe, and/or local, state, and federal government agency that contributes to the project in a substantial way and is closely involved in the completion of the project.)

## **OTHER**

**Budget** – Costs are allowable, reasonable and budgeted in accordance with NFWF’s [Budget Instructions](#) cost categories. Federally-funded projects must be in compliance with [OMB Uniform Guidance](#) as applicable.

**Matching Contributions** – Matching Contributions consist of cash, contributed goods and services, volunteer hours, and/or property raised and spent for the Project during the Period of Performance. Larger match ratios and matching fund contributions from a diversity of partners are encouraged and will be more competitive during application review.

**Procurement** – If the applicant chooses to specifically identify proposed Contractor(s) for Services, an award by NFWF to the applicant does not constitute NFWF’s express written authorization for the applicant to procure such specific services noncompetitively. When procuring goods and services, NFWF recipients must follow documented procurement procedures which reflect applicable laws and regulations.

**Publicity and Acknowledgement of Support** – Award recipients will be required to grant NFWF the right and authority to publicize the project and NFWF’s financial support for the grant in press releases, publications and other public communications. Recipients may also be asked by NFWF to provide high-resolution (minimum 300 dpi) photographs depicting the project.

**Receiving Award Funds** – Award payments are primarily reimbursable. Projects may request funds for reimbursement at any time after completing a signed agreement with NFWF. A request of an advance of funds must be due to an imminent need of expenditure and must detail how the funds will be used and provide justification and a timeline for expected disbursement of these funds.

**Compliance Requirements** – Projects selected may be subject to requirements under the National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act (state and federal), and National Historic Preservation Act. Documentation of compliance with these regulations must be approved prior to

initiating activities that disturb or alter habitat or other features of the project site(s). Applicants should budget time and resources to obtain the needed approvals. As may be applicable, successful applicants may be required to comply with additional Federal, state or local requirements and obtain all necessary permits and clearances.

**Permits** – Successful applicants will be required to provide sufficient documentation that the project expects to receive or has received all necessary permits and clearances to comply with any Federal, state or local requirements. Where projects involve work in the waters of the United States, NFWF strongly encourages applicants to conduct a permit pre-application meeting with the Army Corps of Engineers prior to submitting their proposal. In some cases, if a permit pre-application meeting has not been completed, NFWF may require successful applicants to complete such a meeting prior to grant award.

**Federal Funding** – The availability of federal funds estimated in this solicitation is contingent upon the federal appropriations process. Funding decisions will be made based on level of funding and timing of when it is received by NFWF.

## **TIMELINE**

Dates of activities are subject to change. Please check the [Southeast Aquatics Fund](#) page of the NFWF website for the most current dates and information.

Applicant Webinar	Available online by June 26 <sup>th</sup> , 2020
Full Proposal Due Date	Thursday, July 23 <sup>rd</sup> 2020, 11:59 pm ET
Review Period	August – October 2020
Awards Announced	November 2020

## **HOW TO APPLY**

All application materials must be submitted online through National Fish and Wildlife Foundation’s Easygrants system.

1. Go to [easygrants.nfwf.org](http://easygrants.nfwf.org) to register in our Easygrants online system. New users to the system will be prompted to register before starting the application (if you already are a registered user, use your existing login). Enter your applicant information. Please disable the pop-up blocker on your internet browser prior to beginning the application process.
2. Once on your homepage, click the “Apply for Funding” button and select this RFP’s “Funding Opportunity” from the list of options.
3. Follow the instructions in Easygrants to complete your application. Once an application has been started, it may be saved and returned to at a later time for completion and submission.

## **APPLICATION ASSISTANCE**

A *Tip Sheet* is available for quick reference while you are working through your application. This document can be downloaded [here](#).

Additional information to support the application process can be accessed on the NFWF website's [Applicant Information](#) page.

For more information or questions about this RFP, please contact:

***Suzanne Sessine***

*Program Director, Southern Coastal Programs*

202-595-2477

[Suzanne.Sessine@nfwf.org](mailto:Suzanne.Sessine@nfwf.org)

***Zack Bernstein***

*Program Coordinator, Southern Regional Office*

202-595-2433

[Zachary.Bernstein@nfwf.org](mailto:Zachary.Bernstein@nfwf.org)

For issues or assistance with our online Easygrants system, please contact:

Easygrants Helpdesk

Email: [Easygrants@nfwf.org](mailto:Easygrants@nfwf.org)

Voicemail: 202-595-2497

Hours: 9:00 am to 5:00 pm ET, Monday-Friday.

Include: your name, proposal ID #, e-mail address, phone number, program you are applying to, and a description of the issue.