



NFWF



## **Conservation Partners Program**

### **2021 REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS**

Pre-Proposal Due Date: **Tuesday, April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 by 11:59 PM Eastern Time**

Full Proposal Due Date: **Thursday, May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021 by 11:59 PM Eastern Time**

### **OVERVIEW**

The Conservation Partners Program (CPP) is a collaborative effort between the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) ([www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov)), General Mills ([www.generalmills.com](http://www.generalmills.com)) and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) ([www.nfwf.org](http://www.nfwf.org)).

The purpose of the partnership is to provide grants on a competitive basis that will support the adoption of conservation practices and regenerative agriculture principles on working lands. Funded projects will advance goals of: 1) NRCS's landscape conservation initiatives; 2) NFWF's conservation priorities; and 3) the NRCS–U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service partnership, Working Lands for Wildlife. To maximize benefits to these priorities, the CPP targets investments in identified program priority areas.

The CPP program funding will support:

- Projects that provide private landowners with technical assistance to accelerate on-the-ground delivery and implementation of NRCS/NFWF initiatives and Farm Bill conservation programs within the program priority areas listed below.
- Incorporation of best available science in applying conservation systems and strategically focusing resources where the greatest conservation opportunities exist.
- Efforts to increase the number and diversity of landowners/managers aware of and participating in NRCS/NFWF initiatives and Farm Bill programs
- Identifying and promoting positive economic outcomes as a result of conservation system implementation.
- Identifying and promoting positive environmental outcomes as a result of conservation system implementation.

### **GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS**

The CPP is a nationwide program with specific priority funding areas. A total of approximately \$3.8 million will be available through this funding opportunity.

Competitive proposals will be focused on one of the four program priority areas listed below:

- Upper Mississippi River Basin
- Southern Great Plains
- Pacific Salmon and Western Water
- Working Lands for Wildlife

# PROGRAM PRIORITIES

## Upper Mississippi River Basin

Projects located across the Upper Mississippi Basin (including the portion of the Ohio River Basin included in the NRCS's Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI)) are of interest to the CPP. The Mississippi River Basin downstream from the confluence with the Ohio River is not considered part of the Upper Mississippi River Basin. Priorities include improving soil health, improving water quantity, improving water quality by reducing nitrogen, phosphorus, sediment, or water runoff; and improving grassland or forest health/function to benefit fish habitat, and wildlife habitat.

Projects should provide technical assistance to private landowners to help enroll them in agricultural or forestry-based Farm Bill practices by hiring or supporting agricultural/conservation or forestry professionals. Please describe any fish or wildlife species benefits from the proposed project. If you intend for positions to be co-located with an NRCS office, concurrence documentation from the appropriate NRCS Area Conservationist should be provided as evidence of available space and resources to support these positions.

Projects focused on delivering water quality benefits within MRBI Focus Area Watersheds (as shown on the reference map found [here](#)) are preferred.

Additionally, priority projects are sought specifically in the Driftless Area of Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Projects that improve water quality (especially for cold water systems), water quantity, riparian habitat, grassland habitat, forested habitat, and flood/drought resilience are of interest. Projects working with dairy or grazing operations are also of special interest.

We expect approximately \$1,000,000 to be available in this category. Projects should address at least one of the following objectives.

### Objectives/Activities

- Improve water quality primarily through reductions in sediment, nitrogen and phosphorous losses.
- Support the goals of each state's nutrient reduction strategy.
- Promote management of privately-owned forested lands for multiple resource benefits, including forest health, wildlife habitat, water quality, water quantity and flood/drought resilience.
- Engage private forest landowners in developing Farm Bill forestry practices by delivering technical assistance to private forest owners.
- Engage farmers and ranchers in developing and implementing soil health-oriented conservation practices that minimize soil disturbance, maintain soil cover and living root systems, and/or increase plant diversity to sustain soil biota. For more information, visit NRCS's [online soil health resources](#).
- Promote conservation systems that include avoiding, controlling and trapping practices for greatest water quality benefit.
- Increase adoption of cover crops, reduced tillage, and diversified crop rotations in cropping operations for greatest benefits to water quantity, water quality, and flood/drought resilience.
- Increase adoption of grass-based, prescribed and/or rotational grazing practices in livestock operations for greatest benefits to water quantity, water quality, and flood/drought resilience.
- Promote responsible incorporation of crop residue, manures, and other sources of organic matter into soil management systems.

- Establish and enhance farmer-led education and outreach programs to drive increased adoption of soil health practices.
- Develop and/or implement farm nutrient management plans.
- Implement Farm Bill conservation practices.
- Engage farmer-led groups in conservation planning.
- Promote wetlands, floodplain restoration, active floodplains, and other practices that can trap and treat excess nutrient runoff.

### **Southern Great Plains**

For the purpose of this RFP, the Southern Great Plains includes the Plains portions of Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, New Mexico, Iowa, Missouri and Arkansas. Projects are sought to improve water quality, water quantity, soil health, fish and wildlife habitat, floodplain restoration, biodiversity, flood/drought resilience, and working land resilience by accelerating the planning and adoption of regenerative agriculture (RA) principles on both croplands and grazing lands. Regenerative agriculture is a systems-approach to farming and ranching that integrates multiple principles of agricultural management for improving ecosystem function and resilience such as: 1) minimizing chronic disturbances to the soil and biological community; 2) maximizing diversity of plants and animals; 3) keeping the soil covered; and 4) keeping a living root in the ground at all times. Emphasis in this landscape is placed on providing landowners with technical assistance and fostering community learning and adoption of regenerative agriculture principles. We expect more than \$1 million to be available in this category.

#### Objectives/Activities

- Provide technical assistance to landowners to strategically apply soil health and RA conservation practices, such as the use of cover crops in crop rotation, construction of on-farm riparian buffers and wetlands, tillage practices to reduce sediment and phosphorous losses and improve fish and wildlife habitat.
- Improve water quantity, hydrology, flood/drought resilience, and increase habitat quality by improving irrigation efficiency and reducing agricultural runoff.
- Coordinate outreach and implementation of conservation systems and RA principles on agricultural land, floodplains, and adjacent riparian and buffer lands.
- Conduct outreach and convene farmer- and rancher-led groups to engage in peer-to-peer learning and conservation planning (nutrient management plans, grazing plans, flood risk reduction, etc.) to advance regional knowledge and adoption of RA principles.
- Encourage and support landowners in developing and/or advancing a comprehensive holistic approach to managing working lands that build back soil productivity and function and enhance the ecosystem.
- Increase enrollment in Farm Bill practices in complement to advancing RA principles and/or developing RA management plans.
- Restore degraded habitat through prescribed burning, removal of woody invasive species, wet meadow/riparian/floodplain restoration, and returning cropland to native grass.
- Improve management of working grasslands by facilitating prescribed burning, beneficial grazing practices, and infrastructure for rangeland management.
- Restore degraded habitat by planting native species, including milkweed and other nectar plants, to promote use by pollinators and other wildlife.
- Improve habitat management through beneficial mowing, prescribed burning and grazing practices.
- Create new habitat by accelerating adoption of precision agriculture techniques and Farm Bill enrollments.

- Enhance habitat values of field buffers, riparian zones, floodplains and other adjacent areas through native plantings, fencing and other conservation practices.

All applications must report anticipated outcomes, if applicable, in terms of acres with best management practices (BMPs) applied to restore water quantity, improve flood/drought resilience, and/or to reduce nutrient or sediment loads (this encompasses RA principles or any meaningful on or off farm action to improve soil health, water quality and/or biodiversity) and pounds of sediment, nitrogen and phosphorus inputs avoided annually. Please describe any fish or wildlife species benefits from the proposed project. All grantees will be required to submit additional field-level data to NFWF to help measure anticipated benefits of RA practices in terms of greenhouse gasses, carbon and/or water benefits.

Projects should provide technical assistance to private landowners to help enroll them in agricultural Farm Bill practices by hiring or supporting agricultural/conservation professionals. Technical assistance should be adaptable to each producer's unique goals, experience, tolerance to risk, and other factors that affect their path to improved grazing management. If positions are to be co-located with an NRCS office, concurrence documentation from the appropriate NRCS Area Conservationist should be provided as evidence of available space and resources to support these positions.

### **Pacific Salmon and Western Water**

Projects should improve the efficiency of on-farm irrigation practices, conserve water quantities used, and provide quantifiable benefits to instream flows through a state-approved transfer or some other form of enforceable agreement. Projects should: 1) involve anadromous salmonid streams in California, Oregon, Washington, or Idaho and 2) should benefit stream reaches where insufficient instream flows are identified as a key limiting factor for fish survival by a state or federal agency. Additionally, projects are sought that support delivery of the NRCS EQIP WaterSMART landscape conservation initiative that complements Bureau of Reclamation WaterSMART Programs funding. If you intend for positions to be co-located with staff at an NRCS office, concurrence documentation from the appropriate NRCS Area Conservationist should be provided as evidence of available space and resources to support these positions. We expect approximately \$800,000 to be available in this category.

#### Objectives/Activities:

- Improve instream flows and water quality in freshwater systems through implementation of conservation practices that address resource concerns of surface water depletion as well as ground water depletion in groundwater dependent ecosystems.
- Restore stream flows while maintaining or balancing crop yields through conservation planning and implementation on agricultural lands.
- Promote and facilitate natural resource conservation practices including irrigation efficiencies and other conservation agricultural practices that benefit freshwater systems, promote water conservation, and maintain viable agriculture.
- Integrate Farm Bill funding into whole-farm planning and implementation efforts aimed at improving water availability, both its quantity and quality.

Increase adoption of cover crops, reduced tillage, diversified crop rotations, perennial cropping systems, and other soil health improvement conservation practices among crop operations in the priority area. For more information, visit NRCS's [online soil health resources](#).

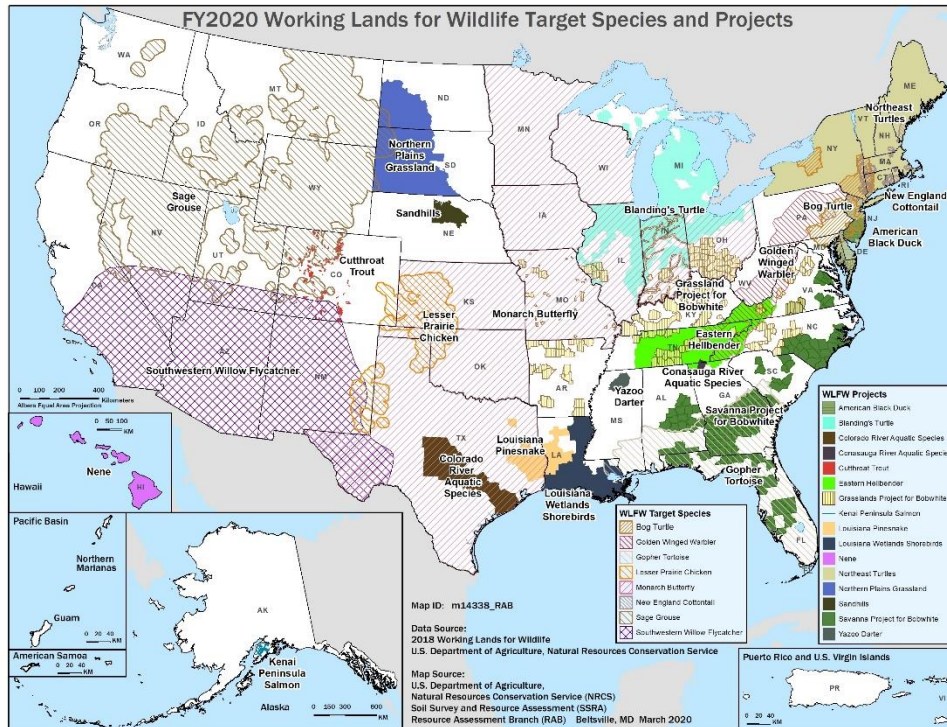
## Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW)

Projects focused on addressing Working Lands for Wildlife--national or state priority species--are of interest to the CPP. Projects should provide technical assistance to private landowners to help develop practices, enroll in Farm Bill practices, and implement those practices by hiring or supporting agricultural/conservation professionals.

### Objectives/Activities:

- Increase participation in Farm Bill programs and assist private landowners in implementing conservation practices focused on benefitting WLFW species.
- Accelerate implementation of NRCS/NFWF initiatives and Farm Bill conservation programs to address WLFW species within the boundaries shown in the map below.
- Engage private landowners in developing and implementing practices designed to specifically benefit WLFW species.

Please consult with the respective state-level Working Lands for Wildlife coordinator for information on specific priority activities and project approaches. If you intend for positions to be co-located with an NRCS office, concurrence documentation from the appropriate NRCS Area Conservationist should be provided as evidence of available space and resources to support these positions. We expect approximately \$1,000,000 to be available in this category.



### Map web address:

[https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/PA\\_NRCSConsumption/download?cid=nrcseprd1617833&ext=pdf](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/PA_NRCSConsumption/download?cid=nrcseprd1617833&ext=pdf)

## PROJECT METRICS

To better gauge progress on individual grants and to ensure greater consistency of project data provided by multiple grants, the CPP has a list of metrics in Easygrants for grantees to choose from for 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 do not believe an applicable metric has been provided, please contact Eric Forward to discuss acceptable alternatives. Projects that may involve organizations or producers that identify as one or more of the NRCS' Underserved/Special Emphasis Categories (described on page 9) are encouraged to apply and should report impact on such categories in the notes section of their selected metrics shown below.

<b>Project Activity</b>	<b>Recommended Metric</b>	<b>Additional Guidance</b>
Outreach/ Education/ Technical Assistance - # people with changed behavior	# people with changed behavior	Enter the number of individuals demonstrating a minimum threshold of behavior change. If applicable, in the notes section, please report the number of people with changed behavior in each underserved/special emphasis categories
Outreach/ Education/ Technical Assistance - # people targeted	# people targeted	Enter the number of people targeted by outreach, training, or technical assistance activities. If applicable, in the notes section, please report the number of people targeted in each special underserved/special emphasis categories
Economic benefits - # jobs created	# jobs created	Enter the number of new jobs created. If applicable, in the notes section, please report the number of new jobs created in each underserved/special emphasis category
Economic benefits - # jobs sustained	# jobs sustained	Enter the number of existing jobs sustained. If applicable, in the notes section, please report the number of existing jobs sustained in each underserved/ special emphasis category
Improved management practices - Acres under improved management	Acres under improved management	Enter the number of acres under improved management
Erosion control - Lbs sediment avoided	Lbs sediment avoided	Enter the amount of sediment prevented from entering system
BMP implementation for nutrient or sediment reduction - Lbs nutrients avoided (annually)	Lbs Nitrogen avoided (annually)	Enter the amount of nitrogen prevented from entering system annually
BMP implementation for nutrient or sediment reduction - Lbs nutrients avoided (annually)	Lbs Phosphorus avoided (annually)	Enter the amount of phosphorous prevented from entering system annually

BMP development - # BMP recommendations developed	# BMP recommendations developed	Enter the number of Best Management Practice (BMP) recommendations developed through technical assistance activities
BMP development - # mgmt plans with BMPs	# mgmt plans with BMPs	Enter the number of management plans into which Best Management Practices (BMPs) were incorporated through technical assistance with private landowners
BMP implementation	# of BMPs implemented	Enter the number of BMPs implemented
Restoring Hydrology	Gallons water conserved per year	Enter the volume in gallons of water conserved per year

## ELIGIBILITY

### Eligible and Ineligible Entities

- Eligible applicants include: non-profit 501(c) organizations, farmer and commodity-led organizations, educational institutions, tribal governments, and state or local units of governments (e.g. state agricultural and/or conservation agencies, counties, townships, cities, conservation districts, utility districts, drainage districts, etc.).
- Ineligible applicants include: individuals, federal government agencies, and for-profit entities.

### Ineligible Uses of Grant Funds

- **Equipment:** Applicants are encouraged to rent equipment where possible and cost-effective or use matching funds to make those purchases. NFWF acknowledges, however, that some projects may only be completed using NFWF funds to procure equipment. If this applies to your project, please contact the program staff listed in this RFP to discuss options.
- Federal funds and matching contributions may not be used to procure or obtain equipment, services, or systems (including entering into or renewing a contract) that uses telecommunications equipment or services produced by Huawei Technologies Company or ZTE Corporation (or any subsidiary or affiliate of such entities) as a substantial or essential component, or as critical technology of any system. Refer to Public Law 115-232, section 889 for additional information. 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.
- Funds may not be used to provide technical assistance for Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) projects.

## FUNDING AVAILABILITY AND MATCH

The 2021 Conservation Partners Program will award approximately \$3.8 million in funds. Typical grant awards will range from \$50,000 to \$500,000. Projects may be funded for up to three years from the completion of a grant agreement.

Projects must have a minimum match of 1:1 non-federal cash or in-kind, but larger match ratios and matching fund contributions from a diversity of partners are encouraged and will be more competitive. Projects submitted from organizations which identify as one or more of the NRCS's Underserved/Special Emphasis Categories (described on page 9) unable to provide a 1:1 non-federal match are eligible, but applicants must contact NFWF to discuss potential match adjustment options prior to submitting a proposal.

The landowner portion of cost share to enroll in Farm Bill programs is not an eligible source of match for CPP.

## 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 Program'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.

**NRCS Alignment** – Please ensure the project is in alignment with the goals/priorities of the respective state in which your project is located. A list of state contacts can be found [here](#).

**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.

**Conservation Plan and Context** – The project advances an existing conservation plan or strategy.

**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 Acknowledgment 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. 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.

**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.

**Underserved/Special Emphasis Categories** –The historically underserved farmer and rancher categories include those with limited resources, beginning farmers/ranchers, socially disadvantaged (American Indians

or Alaska Natives, Asians, Blacks or African Americans, Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders, and Hispanics) and veterans. More information can be found at [https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/people/outreach/slbfr/?cid=nrcsdev11\\_001040](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/people/outreach/slbfr/?cid=nrcsdev11_001040).

The special emphasis categories are American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian American, Black, Disability, Women, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Hispanic, and Veterans. More information can be found at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/people/employee/sep/>.

## **TIMELINE**

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

Applicant Webinar	Thursday, March 4 <sup>th</sup> , 2021 at 3:00 PM ET Register for the webinar at the following link: <a href="https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/25680606547894539">https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/25680606547894539</a>
Pre-Proposal Due Date	Tuesday, April 6 <sup>th</sup> , 2021 by 11:59 PM ET
Invitations for Full Proposals Sent	Week of April 26 <sup>th</sup>
Full Proposal Due Date	Thursday, May 27 <sup>th</sup> , 2021 by 11:59 PM ET
Review Period	June – mid July
Awards Announced	Early August

## **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](https://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:

Eric Forward  
[Eric.Forward@nfwf.org](mailto:Eric.Forward@nfwf.org)  
612-564-7285

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.