



## **SOUTHEAST AQUATICS FUND**

### **2021 REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS**

*Applicant Webinar: Thursday, June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021 at 3:00 PM Eastern Time [[REGISTER](#)]*

*Full Proposal Due Date: Tuesday, July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021 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 \$1 million is anticipated to be available in grant funding in 2021, 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 Basin Center and Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute. This science-based,

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<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)

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 2021, 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 developing 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) **Florida Grazing Lands Management**

Projects will be considered that provide technical assistance to farmers and ranchers currently enrolled in NRCS Farm Bill cost-share programs within cattle-producing counties in Florida for implementing practices that support effective grazing lands management. Implementation of these practices will create carbon benefits and advance watershed health by improving water conservation and water quality. Applications within this geography should identify the counties in Florida where project activities will be focused.

**Note:** Funding for habitat restoration projects benefitting freshwater species in the Cumberland and Tennessee river system is available through the Cumberland Plateau Stewardship Fund (2022 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. 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 number 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 “Florida Grazing Lands Management” Geographic Focal Area must be focused on this program priority and provide technical assistance for NRCS Farm Bill cost-share programs supporting improved grazing lands management. This work must be done in coordination with local NRCS offices and be focused on existing contracts. Activities may include working with landowners to develop management plans, including grazing management plans for existing easements supported by NRCS, and assisting with implementation of prescribed grazing and associated practices that improve water management, restore wildlife habitat and provide carbon benefits.

- 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 would not 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 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	Additional Guidance
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	<b>listed in Easygrants)</b>	
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 the acres across two or more metrics. Please include in the notes the specific practices to be implemented. If project will be directly restoring riparian habitat, please use instead the “Acres restored” metric.
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 cannot 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 in-stream habitat, please use instead the “Miles restored” metric.
Technical Assistance and Outreach to Private Landowners	# mgmt plans with BMPs	Enter the number of agricultural or forest management plans developed that incorporate 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 the # of landowners for specific activities 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 for already enrolled NRCS Farm Bill program contracts or have implemented conservation practices that will improve aquatic habitat, etc.).
Riparian habitat restoration	Acres restored	Enter the number of acres from this project for which riparian habitat quality has been restored to support/increase target species presence.
Instream habitat restoration	Miles restored	Enter the number of miles from this project for which instream habitat quality has been restored to support/increase target species

		presence. If there are multiple activities happening at different parts of the stream please break out in the notes the 'distance' of impact for each activity.
Fish passage improvements	# passage barriers rectified	Enter the number of fish passage barriers rectified. In the notes section of this metric please indicate what type of barrier is being removed (e.g., culvert).
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.
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, Tribal Governments and Organizations and educational institutions.
- Ineligible applicants include businesses, unincorporated individuals and international organizations.

### 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.

## **FUNDING AVAILABILITY AND MATCH**

Over \$1 million is available in grant funding in 2021. 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.

## **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. The proposal should describe how the project will advance the aquatic species goals and strategies outlined in the [Longleaf Forests and Rivers Business Plan](#).

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<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.

**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	Thursday, June 10, 2021, 3-4 pm ET [ <a href="#">REGISTER</a> ]
Full Proposal Due Date	Tuesday, July 20, 2021, 11:59 pm ET
Review Period	July- October 2021
Awards Announced	November 2021

## 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.

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*

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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.