



NFWF



# Conservation Partners Program

## REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS – JANUARY 2022

Applicant Webinar [[Register Here](#)]: **Tuesday, January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022 at 3:00-4:00 PM Eastern Time**  
Full Proposal Due Date: **Wednesday, February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022 by 11:59 PM Eastern Time**

### OVERVIEW

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) manages the Conservation Partners Program in partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service ([NRCS](#)) and [General Mills](#). The program awards competitive grants that accelerate the adoption of regenerative agriculture principles and conservation practices on private working lands in priority geographic areas. Grant recipients provide technical assistance to farmers and ranchers to help them develop management plans, design and implement best practices, participate in Farm Bill programs, and share their experiences and lessons learned. This work enhances wildlife habitat, soil health, water conservation and quality, and carbon storage while providing important social and economic benefits to agricultural producers. Approximately \$6.7 million in grant funding is available under this funding opportunity.

### GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

This funding opportunity will provide grant funding for projects that align geographically with the following program priority categories:

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

### PROGRAM PRIORITIES

The Conservation Partners Program will fund projects that provide agricultural producers with technical assistance to adopt regenerative agriculture systems and conservation practices on their working lands. Grant recipients will hire or otherwise support field conservation professionals who will help producers develop and implement economically sound approaches that achieve positive environmental outcomes.

Competitive projects will increase participation in Farm Bill programs as one way to advance regenerative agriculture principles. Some of these principles include: 1) minimizing chronic disturbances to the soil and biological community; 2) maximizing diversity of plants and animals; 3) keeping the soil covered; 4) keeping a living root in the ground at all times; and 5) efficiently managing water resources. Grant recipients will apply these principles to support producers in developing and advancing holistic approaches that simultaneously improve performance of agricultural operations and ecosystem functions.

The Conservation Partners Program encourages projects that foster participation by diverse local community members and community-based organizations. Incorporating local input into project design, integrating traditional ecological knowledge, and working collaboratively with diverse partners toward optimal solutions are some of the ways projects can ensure alignment among individual producer objectives, broader community priorities, and desired conservation outcomes.

The Conservation Partners Program will support projects that:

- Direct staff resources to help agricultural producers design and implement regenerative agriculture systems and practices.
- Increase Farm Bill program participation and conservation practice implementation among agricultural producers, including farmers and ranchers in the [Historically Underserved](#) and [Special Emphasis](#) categories.
- Generate environmental benefits, such as improvements to wildlife habitat, soil health, and water conservation and quality.
- Sequester and store carbon, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and increase resilience to impacts of climate change.
- Promote conservation systems that complement/advance producer economic interests and operation performance
- Equip agricultural producers with information and data management capabilities to access ecosystem service markets
- Foster community learning to advance regional knowledge and adoption of regenerative agriculture systems and practices.

Competitive projects will promote approaches that best align with the key objectives identified for each of the five program priority categories described below. Key strategies within these categories include:

- Grazing management: Promote plant growth above and below ground, improve wildlife habitat, and maximize soil carbon by establishing native grasses, optimizing stocking rates, livestock rotations, utilization rates, and plant rest and recovery.
- Crop management: Improve water quality and maximize soil carbon by increasing adoption of cover crops, reduced tillage, diversified crop rotations, perennial cropping systems, nutrient management plans, precision agriculture, and other soil health practices.
- Irrigation improvement: Improve hydrology, in-stream flows, aquifer recharge, and flood/drought resilience by increasing efficiency of on-farm irrigation practices and reducing agricultural runoff.
- Habitat enhancement: Enhance habitat values of working grasslands, field buffers, forests, wetlands, riparian zones, floodplains and other adjacent areas through native plantings, removal of invasive species, beneficial mowing, prescribed burning, fencing and other conservation practices.

The following sections provide more details for each of the five program priority categories.

### **1) Prairie Pothole Region**

Approximately \$2.1 million will be available for the Prairie Pothole Region category. The geography includes the region of historic tallgrass, mixed grass, and shortgrass prairie spanning portions of Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota ([see map here](#)). Priority will be given to projects in western Minnesota and eastern North and South Dakota. Key objectives for this category include:

- Sustain and enhance conservation and economic values associated with working grasslands
- Improve soil health and maximize soil carbon on grazing lands and crop lands
- Reduce nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment runoff to local waterways
- Enhance habitat quality and connectivity for waterfowl, shorebirds, pollinators, and many other species that depend on the grassland–wetland complexes of the region.

Priority strategies include: grazing management, crop management, and habitat enhancement. A minimum of \$1.2 million will be dedicated specifically to projects that expand and improve grazing management in this landscape.

### **2) Upper Mississippi River Basin**

Approximately \$1.6 million will be available for the Upper Mississippi River Basin category. The geography includes the [NRCS's Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative](#) (MRBI) states upstream of the Ohio River confluence with the Mississippi River. Priority will be given to projects focused within [MRBI Focus Area Watersheds](#). Key objectives for this category include:

- Improve soil health and maximize soil carbon on crop lands, pastures, and other grazing lands
- Reduce nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment runoff to local waterways
- Enhance habitat for migratory birds, fish, and other aquatic species

Priority strategies include: grazing management, crop management, and habitat enhancement. A minimum of \$600,000 will be dedicated specifically to projects that expand and improve grazing management in this landscape.

### **3) Southern Great Plains**

Approximately \$1.2 million will be available for the Southern Great Plains category. The geography includes portions of Arkansas, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, and Wyoming ([see map here](#)). Projects in Kansas will receive special consideration. Key objectives for this category include:

- Improve soil health and maximize soil carbon on crop lands and grazing lands
- Sustain and enhance conservation and economic values associated with working grasslands
- Reduce nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment runoff to local waterways
- Conserve and sustainably manage limited water resources

- Enhance habitat quality and connectivity for birds, pollinators, and other species that depend on grassland complexes in the region.

Priority strategies include: crop management, grazing management, irrigation improvement, and habitat enhancement.

#### **4) Pacific Salmon and Western Water**

Approximately \$800,000 will be available for the Pacific Salmon and Western Water category. This category focuses on stream reaches in California, Idaho, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming where insufficient in-stream flows are identified as a key limiting factor for salmonid survival. Priority will be given to projects that support delivery of the the NRCS EQIP [WaterSMART](#) Initiative as a complement to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation [WaterSMART](#) program. Key objectives for this category include:

- Advance irrigation efficiencies and other on-farm conservation practices to conserve water
- Restore in-stream flows to support Pacific salmonid populations
- Increase drought resilience of farm operations and freshwater systems
- Integrate water conservation into whole-farm planning

Priority strategies include: irrigation improvement and other water conservation strategies.

#### **5) Working Lands for Wildlife**

Approximately \$1 million will be available for the [Working Lands for Wildlife](#) (WLFW) category. This category includes twenty-two national and state NRCS initiatives that span 48 states (see [WLFW initiative map](#)). In relation to those initiatives, more than 20 species serve as indicators of ecosystem health and are used to focus conservation toward key practices and strategies that benefit species populations as well as agricultural operations.

Conservation Partners Program funding will be directed to efforts that advance goals of WLFW initiatives. Competitive projects will increase participation in Farm Bill programs and help private landowners develop and implement practices to benefit WLFW target species and priority landscapes.

Each WLFW initiative has a unique combination of priority strategies. Applicants are encouraged to consult with state-level NRCS WLFW coordinators for more information on planning projects that align with specific initiative goals. Please visit the WLFW webpage for links to published [species strategies](#).

#### **PROJECT METRICS**

To better gauge progress on individual grants and to ensure greater consistency of project data across numerous grants, the Conservation Partners Program application includes a list of standard metric options for describing project impacts and reporting outcomes (Table 1). Applicants should select only the metrics most relevant to their proposed projects. If an important metric has not been provided, applicants may **contact Bridget Collins** ([bridget.collins@nfwf.org](mailto:bridget.collins@nfwf.org)) to discuss acceptable alternatives.

As part of interim and final performance reporting, grant recipients may be required to submit additional field-level implementation data using a template to be provided by NFWF. NFWF may use this information, as well as information in the proposal's Easygrants metrics, to estimate and track

anticipated and actual project outcomes in terms of carbon and water benefits. These benefits will not be used as carbon or water credits, but rather for narrative purposes and demonstration of the values provided by various projects and conservation practices.

The Conservation Partner Program encourages projects that engage organizations and producers in one or more of the NRCS' Underserved and Special Emphasis categories. Applicants are encouraged to use the metrics notes fields to indicate the extent that the overall values for the # people and # jobs metrics are expected to include people in the [Underserved](#) or [Special Emphasis](#) categories.

Table 1. Standard metrics available for selection in the application.

Strategy	Recommended Metric	Instructions
Capacity, Outreach, Incentives	# jobs created	Enter the number of new jobs created. If applicable, in the NOTES section report the number of new jobs created for people in the Historically Underserved or Special Emphasis categories.
	# jobs sustained	Enter the number of jobs sustained. If applicable, in the NOTES section report the number of jobs sustained for people in the Historically Underserved or Special Emphasis categories.
	# people reached	Enter the number of people who responded to an offer of outreach, training, or technical assistance. In the NOTES, specify the percent of people reached out of the total targeted. If applicable, note the number of people in the Historically Underserved or Special Emphasis categories.
	# participants receiving gov't agency cost share or financial assistance	Enter the number of participants enrolled in government cost share or financial assistance programs. In the NOTES section, specify which program(s) (e.g., NRCS EQIP) and if applicable note the number of participants in the Historically Underserved or Special Emphasis categories.
	Acres covered by government agency cost share or financial assistance	Enter the number of acres enrolled in government agency cost share or financial assistance. In the NOTES section, specify which program(s) (e.g., NRCS EQIP). If applicable, number should be equal to or less than "Acreage of project footprint" metric.
Habitat Management	Acreage of project footprint	Enter the total number of acres impacted by one or more project conservation activities. Only count an acre once, even if multiple activities or treatments will occur on that acre during the project.
	Acres with conservation tillage	Enter the number of acres with conservation tillage.
	Acres with cover crops	Enter the number of acres with cover crops.

	Acres with enhanced nutrient mgt	Enter the number of cropland acres with enhanced nutrient management practices other than or in addition to conservation tillage or cover crops. Please describe the nutrient management practices in the NOTES section.
	Acres with managed grazing	Enter the number of acres with managed grazing (i.e., promoting plant growth above and below ground, improving wildlife habitat, and maximizing soil carbon through grazing approaches that optimize stocking rates, livestock rotations, utilization rates, and plant rest and recovery, including development of associated grazing infrastructure). Please describe the grazing practices in the NOTES section.
	Lbs N avoided (annually)	Enter the amount of nitrogen prevented from entering system annually and indicate method of calculating reduction in NOTES section.
	Lbs P avoided (annually)	Enter the amount of phosphorous prevented from entering system annually and indicate method of calculating reduction in NOTES section.
	Lbs sediment avoided (annually)	Enter the amount of sediment prevented from entering system annually and indicate method of calculating reduction in NOTES section.
	Acres burned	Enter the number of acres prescribed fire was applied. In the NOTES section, specify the average frequency (in years) at which prescribed burning is expected to occur in the future, the vegetation being burned (forest, shrubland, grassland, cropland, Phragmites marsh), and, if forest, whether trees have been planted in past 10 years (Yes, No).
	Acre feet of water conserved	Enter the number of acre feet of water conserved and indicate method of calculating water conservation in the NOTES section.
	# BMPs implemented	Enter the number of BMPs implemented. In the NOTES section, specify the percentage of BMPs implemented out of the total recommendations developed.
Habitat Restoration	Land restoration-Acres restored	Enter the number of acres of GRASSLAND habitat restored. In the NOTES section, specify the landcover type prior to and following restoration (barren, cropland, grassland, shrubland, herbaceous wetland, wet meadow).
	Wetland restoration-Acres restored	Enter the number of acres of WETLAND habitat restored. In the NOTES section, specify the landcover type prior to and following restoration (barren, cropland, deciduous forest, coniferous forest, shrubland, grassland, herbaceous wetland, wooded wetland, wet meadow).

	Land restoration-Acres of field buffers created	Enter the number of acres of FIELD BUFFER created. In the NOTES section, specify the landcover type prior to planting (barren, cropland, grassland, shrubland), and the dominant vegetation being planted (grassland, deciduous forest, shrubland, wooded wetland).
	Land restoration-Acres of trees planted	Enter the number of acres of TREES planted. In the NOTES section, specify the landcover type prior to planting (barren, cropland, grassland, shrubland), and the average number of trees per acre planted.
	Land restoration-Acres restored	Enter the number of acres restored by removal of INVASIVE SPECIES. In the NOTES section, specify: the vegetation type being removed (herbaceous, shrub, or tree), average frequency (in years) the treatment is expected to occur in the future, and whether the removed vegetation will be left on site to decompose (Yes, No).
Habitat Conservation	Acres protected under long-term easement (permanent or >30-yr)	Enter the number of acres protected under long-term easement (permanent or >30-yr).
	Acres acquired in fee	Enter the number of acres acquired in fee.
Planning, Research, Monitoring	# mgmt plans with BMPs	Enter the number of completed management plans into which Best Management Practices (BMPs) were incorporated.

## ELIGIBILITY

### Eligible and Ineligible Entities

- Eligible applicants include non-profit 501(c) organizations, state government agencies, local governments, municipal governments, tribal governments and organizations, and educational institutions. To be competitive, applicant organizations must demonstrate capacity and experience commensurate with the scale of the project being proposed and the funding being requested.
- Individuals, federal government agencies, and for-profit entities are not eligible to apply for grant funding.

### 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 projects.

### **FUNDING AVAILABILITY AND MATCH CONTRIBUTIONS**

Approximately \$6.7 million in grant funding is available under this funding opportunity. Typical grant awards will range from \$100,000 to \$600,000, with an estimated average grant size of approximately \$250,000.

This funding opportunity requires a minimum 1:1 non-federal matching contribution, except in circumstances described in the next paragraph or when stated otherwise in the Program Priority section. Higher match ratios and contributions from a diversity of partners are encouraged and may help a project be more competitive during application review. Matching contributions may include cash, in-kind contributions of staff and volunteer time, work performed, materials and services donated, or other tangible contributions to the project objectives and outcomes. In addition, eligible indirect costs (that would not be paid with requested grant funding) may be applied as match. More information about using indirect costs as match can be found by [clicking here](#). To be eligible, matching contributions must be spent or applied during the period of performance indicated in the application. The landowner portion of cost-share required to obtain funding from Farm Bill programs is not an eligible source of match for this funding opportunity.

Organizations relevant to any of NRCS's Underserved/Special Emphasis Categories (described on page 9) that are unable to meet the 1:1 non-federal matching contribution requirement are eligible to receive grant funding, but they must contact NFWF to discuss potential match adjustment options prior to submitting a proposal.

### **PROJECT PERIOD OF PERFORMANCE**

Grant period of performance will typically be three years following finalization of the grant agreement.

### **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.

**Priorities** – Project addresses one or more of the funding opportunity priorities and has specific, quantifiable performance metrics to evaluate project success.

**NRCS Coordination** – Please ensure the project is in alignment with NRCS goals and priorities by conferring with the NRCS State Conservationist and their staff in the state in which your project is located. A list of NRCS state contacts can be found [here](#) and [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.

**Partnership and Community Impact** – The applicant organization partners and engages collaboratively with diverse local community members, leaders, community-based organizations, and other relevant stakeholders to develop and implement the proposed project. This ensures long-term sustainability and success of the project, integration into local programs and policies, and community acceptance of proposed restoration actions. Non-traditional partners or communities are enlisted to broaden the sustained impact from the project.

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

**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 and Expansion** – Project has potential to apply lessons learned to other communities and catalyze broader practice adoption.

**Communication** – Project includes a 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. Project includes plans for securing future funding needed to implement long-term monitoring and maintenance activities.

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

**Partnership** – Relationships are in place to implement the project and the project is supported by relevant stakeholders, constituents and communities. Project identifies key partners (including potential or contemplated subawards to third party subrecipients of the applicant), the roles they will play in implementation, 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 project completion.)

## OTHER

**Applicant Demographic Information** – In an effort to better understand diversity in our grantmaking, NFWF is collecting basic information on applicants and their communities via a voluntary survey form (available in Easygrants). This information will not be shared externally or with reviewers. For more details, please see the tip sheet and the Uploads section of Easygrants.

**Procurement** – If the applicant chooses to identify specific 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. Grantees 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 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 on the underserved categories can be found [here](#). The special emphasis categories are American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian American, Black, Disability, Women, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Hispanic, and Veterans. More information on the special emphasis categories can be found [here](#).

## TIMELINE

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

Applicant Webinar: Tuesday, January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022 at 3:00 PM ET  
Register for the webinar using [this link](#).

Full Proposals Due: Wednesday, February 23<sup>th</sup>, 2022 by 11:59 PM ET  
Review Period: February–May 2022  
Awards Announced: Late May 2022

After award announcements, NFWF staff will work with grantees to prepare grant agreements and other necessary paperwork, all of which will be completed electronically using the Easygrants system. Additional information about the grantee’s organization and its finances may be solicited during this time. Once grant agreements are finalized, funds will typically be paid to grantees on a reimbursable basis. Funds may be advanced to qualified grantees on an as-needed basis.

## HOW TO APPLY

All application materials must be submitted online through NFWF’s Easygrants system.

1. Go to [easygrants.nfwf.org](https://easygrants.nfwf.org) to register in NFWF’s 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 *Conservation Partners Program – January 2022* 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 funding opportunity, please contact:

Bridget Collins  
Program Director,  
Central Region Working Lands  
[bridget.collins@nfwf.org](mailto:bridget.collins@nfwf.org)  
202-595-2655

Todd Hogrefe  
Director,  
Central Regional Office  
[todd.hogrefe@nfwf.org](mailto:todd.hogrefe@nfwf.org)  
612-564-7286

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 #, email address, phone number, program you are applying to, and a description of the issue.