

To: Jason Weller, Chief of USDA NRCS

From: National Association of Conservation Districts

Cc: Mark Rose, Director of Financial Assistance Program Division of USDA NRCS

Date: April 20, 2015

Subject: FY 2016 RCPP APF Recommendations

The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) developed a Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Task Force designed to provide reports and guidance to NACD's Board of Directors to encourage participation by local soil and water conservation districts as well as provide recommendations for improvements to NRCS. At the direction of the RCPP Task Force a six-question survey was widely distributed within NACD's broad membership regarding recommendations to improve the Announcement of Program Funding (APF) prior to the FY 2016 APF publication.

Below we have summarized the recommendations we have provided based on our responses to each question. We appreciate the opportunity to provide helpful input for your consideration for the FY 2016 RCPP APF.

1. What would have helped you complete your proposal that wasn't included in last year's APF? What did you find confusing or have a hard time understanding?

Conservation districts were most confused about the preferred ratio of Technical Assistance (TA) vs. Financial Assistance (FA) requested by NRCS and want clarity on the percentage of TA funds being directed back to NRCS. The initial APF left the door open for a wide range of TA v. FA and it later came to light that NRCS was using a particular ratio as the threshold for proposals moving forward in the process, a better idea or guidance of what is requested would aid in securing leveraging funds from partners.

Districts were overwhelmed by the unfamiliarity and number of acronyms included in last year's APF. Since there are many new partners and others less accustomed to these acronyms, making the APF read as clearly and simply as possible would be beneficial.

Another need largely identified by respondents was for clarity of natural resource priorities within the state funding pool. We request that NRCS offer more points towards projects that address natural resource concerns identified by the Local Working Groups in the area they're applying to work within and let applicants know in the APF that using locally identified resource concerns is a good starting point for projects. A concise and realistic description of funding available for each funding pool and a link to several exemplary proposals from the first round of funding would be helpful to districts planning their own projects.

2. What do you think is ample time to complete your proposal once the APF is published?

Conservation districts requested that a minimum of 3 months is provided to submit RCPP proposals once the APF is published to provide ample preparation time and outreach to

partners. They also encourage NRCS to set firm deadlines and timelines for both applicants and for the agency to complete work on their end. Districts noted the importance of timeliness when working with private partners to avoid the loss of potential leveraged funds and to maintain positive relationships.

3. What were areas of the APF where you felt like you needed more clarification from NRCS prior to submission?

Similar to the first question's recommendations, districts asked for more clarity of what constitutes a request for TA and for FA and the eligibility of "in-kind" contributions towards projects in the proposals. Clarity could also be used in the adjustment of terms section if NRCS was able to provide a clearly defined list of all of the terms that are acceptable to be adjusted. Districts requested that the APF offer realistic funding ranges as projects would be planned much differently if applicants had a more realistic view of funding to be provided (one district stated that they requested and planned for a \$20 million project over five years which was cut drastically to \$2 million over five years causing significant adjustments to be made).

4. Do you think it's necessary that districts are consulted by other partners prior to including them in a proposal or establishing local priority concerns? If so, how best do you think this could be addressed?

Nearly every district responding to the survey very clearly indicated that districts/partners of all levels should be notified, consulted and should even be required to submit a letter of support as an acceptable way of showing that they're fully on-board with the project. Soil and water conservation districts should be listed in the APF as a source or requirement for applicants to consult and provide guidance and local input on projects submitted within their district. Another possible way to incorporate partner participation into the APF is to include a section where applicants fully describe each partner's level of participation to help ensure they're not being listed just to improve an applicant's score (there were many instances of conservation districts being listed as partners in the last round of funding that found out after funding contracts were finalized or at some other point after applications were submitted to NRCS).

5. What do you as districts need to be successful in acquiring the necessary cash match?

Most of the conservation districts responding indicated that they would like to see a "lessons learned" webinar or power point made available by NRCS as a way to make the process more efficient and answer a number of questions that would otherwise be directed to local, state and national NRCS by potential applicants. Fact sheets or other sources of information provided to applicants on "strategies used by successful applicants" or a list of possible funding sources included (grant opportunities, NGO's, foundations, corporations, etc.) would be helpful. Information helping applicants approach funders and partners and make "the ask" would be great for districts without much experience in fundraising. We feel that helping applicants secure more private funding should be worth its weight in gold to NRCS as that's more money going towards projects that they do not need to provide which helps to ultimately fund more projects.

6. What would make the negotiated rates/technical assistance funding portion of the APF clearer and easier to both understand and explain to potential partners?

Districts would better understand the negotiated rates and technical assistance funding portion with the availability of a short explanatory video/power point/webinar for all applicants to have as either a resource or a requirement to help keep everyone on the same page. If NRCS could allow for applicants to establish chargeable billing rates that accurately cover their operational costs that would be hugely helpful as well as the ability for NRCS to reimburse grantee labor, materials, contracts, etc. Districts could also improve their proposal's competitiveness if NRCS could provide clarity of expectations of deliverables. The program should be competitive but grant writing expertise should not be a limiting factor in achieving success, many districts don't have the financial or human resources to have someone on staff solely to write or review grant or program applications.