National Association of Conservation Districts

SECTION 1: PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

Effective and equitable outreach, conservation education, technical assistance, and land stewardship has never been more important. Through historic federal investments (e.g., Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, Inflation Reduction Act, Climate Smart Commodities), the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will invest over $20 billion in working lands conservation over five years.

In order to achieve its climate and conservation goals, NRCS must enroll new and underserved producers into its conservation programs. Conservation Districts, their respective state/territory associations and agencies, Resource Conservation & Development Councils, and Tribal organizations can help provide the outreach, education, mentoring and technical assistance that helps farmers, ranchers, and forest stewards make informed decisions on their lands and enhance its sustainability. These organizations contribute to the mutually beneficial goals of supporting conservation through the technical and financial assistance programs provided to private land managers by NRCS.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

The Outreach and Technical Assistance Grant program is a partnership between NACD and NRCS. Our mutual goal is to achieve equitable outcomes for producers and communities while addressing conservation issues on private lands. This grant program explicitly provides Conservation Operations Technical Assistance (COTA), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) funding to advance NRCS programs. It also provides for opportunities to increase or create new opportunities for civic engagement (e.g., via outreach, Local Working Groups, conservation education initiatives). This ensures that locally led conservation remains a core community value and that conservation districts' initiatives are inclusive and reflect the diversity of the communities they serve.

The table below provides examples of the expected impacts conservation districts may expect to achieve through this program.

Individual Impacts	Community Impacts	Civic Engagement
• Increase the number of producers who implement conservation plans and practices • Address high priority increasing conservation workloads across the country • Support and facilitate conservation delivery and customer service • Increasing participation in NRCS programs	• Improve economic and environmental resilience in rural and urban communities • Address environmental justice issues, such as food security/sovereignty and access, heat equity, clean water initiatives, and access to outdoor recreation • Develop conservationists and leaders within the communities for long-term sustainment of programs and investments	• Increase or create new opportunities for civic engagement in conservation (e.g., Local Working Groups, Conservation District Boards) • Increase awareness of the locally led conservation system and how producers' voices can impact community outcomes • Develop and implement inclusive board succession plans/processes that advance DEIJA and ensure locally led

• Acknowledge and address historical barriers with the goals of: o Introducing new and historically underserved producers to conservation	• Support and advance Tribal conservation goals	conservation remains a core community value • Improve approaches to outreach and technical assistance

1.3 COMMITMENT TO EQUITY, JUSTICE, AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

NRCS and NACD are committed to advancing equity, justice, and equal opportunity by sustaining fairness in the way programs, services, and technical assistance are delivered. "Equity" means the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian American and Pacific Islander persons and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; women and girls; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; persons who live in United States Territories and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality. Equity ensures that all individuals and communities have the opportunities and resources they need to reach equal outcomes.

Some groups of people are identified in Farm Bill legislation and in USDA policy as being Historically Underserved. Members of these groups have been historically underserved by, or subject to discrimination in, Federal policies and programs. Four groups are defined by USDA as "Historically Underserved," including producers who are: Beginning; Socially Disadvantaged; Veteran; and Limited Resource. See the NRCS website for further explanations and eligibility criteria: https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/underserved-farmers-ranchers

SECTION 2: GRANT INFORMATION

2.1 NACD POINTS OF CONTACT

Chessa Ossefoort, NACD Program Manager, is the primary point of contact for this funding opportunity. Chessa can be reached at chessa-ossefoort@nacdnet.org. NACD members may also reach out to their Regional Representative for questions and guidance.

2.2 AVAILABLE FUNDING

NACD expects to award approximately $18 million in subawards.

2.3 ANTICIPATED PERIOD OF PERFORMANCE

NACD expects to notify successful awardees in December 2024. Projects must be completed within 13 months of the grant execution date.

2.4 ELIGIBLE APPLICANTS

Applications may be submitted by one of the following entities:

- Conservation Districts
- State or territory Association of Conservation Districts
- Conservation Districts' respective state agencies (e.g., State Departments of Natural Resources, State Departments of Agriculture), so long as a Conservation District is engaged at the local level
- Resource Conservation & Development Councils
- Indian Tribal governments or intertribal consortia
    - Note: This includes Federally Recognized Indian Tribal Governments and State Designated Indian Tribes. Intertribal Consortia must meet the definition for eligibility in the Environmental Program Grants for Tribe Final Rule (40 CFR 35.504, 66 FR 3782, January 16, 2001 (FRL-6929-5)) and be a non-profit organization within the meaning of 2CFR 200.

2.5 ELIGIBLE GEOGRAPHIES

Eligible geographies include anywhere in the United States, including territories and the freely associated states of Palau and Federated States of Micronesia (FSM).

2.6 ELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES

Funding may be used to provide technical assistance to landowners and operators, conduct outreach, and advance education and stewardship. This includes conservation planning, enrolling producers into EQIP or CSP, and support from design through certification of conservation practices. COTA funding may also be used to improve capabilities to perform landscape scale planning including activities such as sponsor watershed projects and preparing for potential emergencies.

NACD anticipates receiving a combination of Conservation Operations Technical Assistance (COTA), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) funding. The actual breakdown of funding is anticipated in October 2024.

The funds are in three different programs and applicants may receive a mix of funds from each pool. Each of the funds has distinct uses and deliverables. The freely associated states of Palau and FSM are only eligible for COTA funds. Below is a description of what falls under each account:

EQIP - is time spent focused on moving from applying for an EQIP contract to certifying the practice is completed.

CSP – is for CSP work, similar to EQIP, but also includes time spent explaining CSP either to an individual or as part of a field day as a presentation.

COTA – is time spent on planning and technical assistance. It can include from preliminary meetings with producers to figure out what might be done to help them, to long-range written conservation plans either for an individual operation up to a watershed or state-wide landscape.

2.7 USE OF FUNDS

Funding may be used to fund salaries, fringe benefits, and indirect costs. Supplies, contracts and other expenses (e.g., pass-through agreements) designed to advance the goals of the locally led conservation will also be evaluated and considered, especially within the context of supporting historically underserved producers and operators.

The following items cannot be purchased under the potential resultant grants:

- Any purchases or activities deemed unnecessary to accomplish grant purposes as determined by NACD or NRCS, including any grantee expenses that are not directly linked to the implementation of the proposed activities
- Financial incentives (e.g. producer financial assistance, staff retention bonuses, etc.)
- Equipment purchases are not allowed and accountable personal property
- Real property (purchase or lease of land, including land improvements, and structures thereto)
- Private ceremonies, parties, celebrations, or related expenses
- Previous obligations and/or bad debts
- Expenses related to overtly religious purposes
- Expenses intended to influence the outcome of elections or other political processes
- Fines and/or penalties
- Creation of endowments
- Alcoholic beverages

Note on Indirect Costs

Please see NACD's Guidance for Indirect Costs for more information on the requirements for requesting indirect costs for Technical Assistance grants.

2.8 ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR ELIGIBILITY – ADVANCING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE & EQUITY

NACD is committed to incorporating and implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion principles in all its programs. It is also working collaboratively with NRCS to achieve equitable outcomes across the locally led conservation delivery system.

Individual districts, their state/territory associations, and NACD are core partners in the conservation delivery system along with NRCS, NCDEA, NASCA, and NARC&DC. These requirements were developed in collaboration with NRCS to ensure that the entire partnership can advance equity and inclusion, both within our respective organizations and the communities we serve.

The requirements outlined below are applicable to the lead organization, as well as any organization in receipt of a subaward.

A. Inclusive Board Succession Planning & Workforce Development

Grassroots advocacy and civic engagement are at the core of the locally led conservation delivery system. Given that, it is critically important that conservation districts and boards reflect the diversity of the communities they serve. Through this cooperative agreement, NACD and NRCS support efforts to increase civic engagement through local working groups, conservation district boards, and other community-based opportunities or partnerships.

As a condition of this grant, recipients must participate in one of the following activities:

- Development and/or implementation of **board succession plans** that are **inclusive** and **provide opportunities for new, diverse voices** to participate in mentorship or board development opportunities. Examples include:
    - Planning and hosting events that promote civic engagement, which can be the first

step to identify potential candidates for district boards
    - Mentorship or candidate development efforts
    - Hiring a consultant or board/staff time to develop succession plans that prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion

- Development and/or implementation of **diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) plans** that advance **environmental and social justice** (both within the entity and community). Examples include:
    - Hiring a consultant or board/staff time to assess organizational structures, policies, and bylaws and recommend ways to increase DEI
    - Development or implementation of initiatives that advance organizational DEI
    - Studies to assess community demographics, identify potentially unmet producer needs, and recommendations for enhancing district services or programming
    - Examples of a DEI toolkit: https://www.nacdnet.org/about-nacd/dei/ and https://openteam-equity-resource.webflow.io/

Performance of the activities described above may be tracked and supplied as in-kind match. Activities that can be directly tied to the achievement of grant outcomes (e.g., outreach to historically underserved producers; strengthening LWGs; addressing barriers to USDA program participation) and advance equitable outcomes for producers/communities may be funded through this grant.

B. Demographic Survey

The demographic survey broadens data collection and includes the entire organization (e.g., all conservation district board and staff – not just positions funded by grant dollars). This enables NACD and its members to better tell its story and understand the diverse backgrounds of board members and district staffs.

Full staff and board participation in the demographic survey is a condition of this grant. The link to participate in the survey shall be distributed to all staff and board members to fill out on a semi-annual basis. Individual responses will not be shared; data will be aggregated and reported at the district, state, and regional levels. The survey is set up to preserve individual privacy and anonymity, meaning that responses are not linked to specific email addresses or IP addresses. The only automated data collected is a timestamp. Aggregated reports will be shared with NRCS.

It is the grant recipient's responsibility to collect and report all data in a timely manner; this is a requirement for grant eligibility. All associated activities – including time used to socialize the survey with supervisors and staff, fill out the survey, and follow up with individuals to ensure full participation – can be provided as in-kind match.

Note: Several tribes do not have a formal conservation district or district board. In lieu of the above requirements, tribal organizations may develop and/or implement a tribal program that develops future conservation leaders (e.g., youth education program, workforce development and training) or improves access to NRCS and other conservation programs for tribal members. In addition, participation in the demographic survey is only required for whoever is in the program or division that handles TA grants.

C. Match

NACD will contribute 80 percent of the cost of the proposed project, and the applicant will contribute 20 percent as match funding. Cash and/or in-kind match will be accepted.

SECTION 3: APPLICATION PROCESS

3.1 ANTICIPATED MILESTONES & TIMELINES

Anticipated Dates	Milestones
August 22, 2024 4:00pm – 5:00pm ET	NACD will host a webinar to discuss this RFA and answer any questions. All interested parties, both eligible entities and partners, are welcome to join. The webinar will be recorded and posted to NACD's website.
September 30, 2024 11:59pm ET	Applications due Note: Applications must be submitted via NACD's application portal.
September – October 2024	Application clarifications, evaluations, and selections
December 1, 2024	Applicants notified of selection
December 30, 2024	Final award, Memorandum of Agreements distributed

3.2 APPLICATION INSTRUCTIONS

A. Submission Instructions

Eligible applicants must submit applications using the NACD Funding Portal. The application must be submitted by the deadline established in Section 3.1. The application questions and additional instructions are provided in Section B below. Late applications will not be accepted.

B. Application Narrative

Statement on Equity and Environmental Justice (250 words max)

Applicants shall describe their organization's statement and philosophy on equity and environmental justice. This should include:

- Definition (How do you broadly explain equity and environmental justice to your community?)
- Organization's stance and core beliefs on equity and environmental justice (What are the core principles that drive your work in this space?)
- How equity and environmental justice underly your organizational mission and vision (What is your organizational commitment, how does this relate to your mission, and how is it embodied in your day-to-day work?)
    - Examples of a DEI toolkit: https://www.nacdnet.org/about-nacd/dei/ and https://openteam-equity-resource.webflow.io/

Local Priorities/Needs and Targeted Outreach (1000 words max)

Applicants shall discuss local conservation priorities and how the project will fulfill the community's needs. This narrative should address the scope of the project, potential risks and mitigation plans, and environmental and social benefits. It should also address why and what type of technical assistance is needed in the target community and how the identified need fits within the context of the district's long-range or strategic plan.

The section should also describe how targeted outreach will advance local priorities, equity, inclusion, justice, and access to technical assistance and conservation programs. The narrative should include a clear, concise approach to building partnerships, conducting effective outreach and education to reach new and historically underserved producers, and enrolling them in NRCS programs.

This may include:

- Assess the number historically underserved producers in your community and tell us how that informs your outreach strategies and goals (https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Online_Resources/Race,_Ethnicity_and_Gender_Profiles/)
- Identify which socially or economically disadvantaged communities are in your service area and how your work will improve outcomes for those producers and communities (https://eig.org/distressed-communities/2022-dci-interactive-map/)
- How the project and environmental outcomes will benefit and meet the needs of the community at large and in particular, historically underserved producers
- Identification of local barriers to technical assistance or access to USDA programs and how the applicant will help address or mitigate them
- How the project will increase civic engagement within the local community (e.g., through Local Working Groups), while advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Identify the local partnerships you will develop or strengthen and how those partnerships will help advance the goals of your proposed grant
- How you will market and advertise meetings (e.g., Local Working Group) or other grant initiatives with the goals of:
    - Increasing communication with historically underserved producers
    - Creating an inclusive environment that encourages historically underserved producers to meaningfully engage and participate
    - Process for capacity building to implement NRCS programs

Project Goals and Outcomes

Applicants must provide an overview of the project goals and outcomes. These may be qualitative or quantitative. Qualitative goals, outcomes, and impacts should be described in this section's narrative. Applicants shall also set specific, quantifiable goals for their respective projects.

Quantifiable technical outcomes shall include, but are not limited to:

- Number of contracts obligated (EQIP and/or CSP)
- Number of practices implemented (EQIP and/or CSP)
- Number of plans assisted (EQIP, CSP, and/or COTA)

- Number of presentations and/or workshops (CSP)
- Number of acres with improved management (EQIP, CSP, and/or COTA)
- Number of acres with practices implemented (EQIP and/or CSP)

Quantifiable social outcomes shall include, but are not limited to:

- Number of clients reached (CSP and/or COTA)
- Number of new producers reached (have not participated in Farm Bill program in last 10 years)
- Number of historically underserved producers reached
- Number of farmer-to-farmer education events/presentations and number of participants
- Number of new coalitions or partnerships

Quantifiable staffing outcomes shall include, but are not limited to:

- Number of Technical Specialists
- Number of Resource Technicians
- Number of Resource Conservationists/Planners
- Number of Program Management Specialists
- Number of Organization Management
- Number of Other Staff
- Total number of staff to be funded
    - How many of these positions are for staff only employed for this project?
- Predicted number of staff hours to be worked
    - Include time funding with both grant and match funds

Budget

Applicants will be required to submit the following information regarding the budget:

- Requested EQIP Funds
- Requested CSP Funds
- Requested COTA Funds
- Total Request
    - Funding must be at least 80% salaries and fringe or contracting.
- Total Match proposed
- Funding explanatory notes
    - Explain the source(s) of match. What is cash match or in-kind credit.

SECTION 4: EVALUATION OF FINAL APPLICATIONS & AWARD

4.1 STATE/TERRITORY APPROVAL

Applicants are not required to obtain prior approval to submit an application. Applications will be reviewed by each individual state leadership team (SLT), which will include at minimum NRCS STC (or delegate) and State/Territory Association (or NACD Board member for that state/region, after the application deadline. SLTs may also include representatives from NCDEA and NASCA, based on interest and availability.

Tribal Applications will be reviewed by the NRCS State Conservationist, the Tribal Liaison, or by staff in their offices.

4.2 EVALUATION PROCESS

Applications will be evaluated and ranked by the State Leadership Team based on the evaluation criteria listed in section 4.3.

NACD Programs Team will review proposal packages for completion and distribute proposals and scoring matrix to the State/Territory Conservation Partnership Leaders for review and ranking after the RFP closes. All rankings should be returned to NACD no later than November 30, 2024. NACD Region Representatives will notify applicants of tentative selection and provide required revisions based on State/Territory evaluators feedback. Applicants must submit final revised proposals to State/Territory evaluators and work directly with them on any additional questions, feedback, or discussions.

Members of the State/Territory leadership team will submit final approval letter and proposal to NACD Programs Team.

NACD Programs Team will develop and distribute Memoranda of Agreement (MOAs) to awardee, which document the scope and budget for awarded projects.

4.3 EVALUATION CRITERIA

All applicants must certify that the organization will comply with conditions for award:

- Development and/or implementation of an inclusive board succession plan or a diversity, equity, and inclusion plan; and
- Semi-annual board/staff demographic survey

The applications will also be evaluated based on:

- Alignment to local conservation priorities and needs (40 pts)
    - This includes state/territory leaders' assessment of anticipated EQIP and CSP workloads relative to NRCS and conservation district staffing levels

- Strength and clarity of applicant's plan to (40 pts):
    - Advance equity and environmental justice within their respective communities
    - Impact on Tribal and historically underserved producers
    - Develop/strengthen partnerships, conduct outreach, and enroll new and historically underserved producers in NRCS programs

- Feasibility of targets/metrics and ability to equitably advance NRCS programs and increase participation of historically underserved producers (10 pts)

- Past performance (grantee's compliance with past TA grants and MOA requirements – applicable to previous grantees only) (5 pts)

- Budget (cost effectiveness and source(s) of match) (5 pts)

SECTION 5: OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

5.1 PARTIAL FUNDING

NACD reserves the right to partially fund an application. NACD staff will work with applicants to revise or refine budgets if needed.

5.2 POST-AWARD REPORTING

Grantees will be responsible for quarterly reporting to NACD. Quarterly reports must be submitted utilizing the grant portal.

A. Reporting on grant-funded work

At minimum, quarterly reports shall include a description of work accomplished (including photographs, when possible), a summary of environmental, social, and DEIJA outcomes achieved compared to the targets, costs incurred, and a brief description of work anticipated during the next quarter. Financial reporting will include total grant expenditure by budget category and CFDA, staff hours and rates, match details and a request for payment. A final report must be submitted within 30 days of the last grant expense.

B. Reporting on cash and in-kind match

Quarterly progress reports must include a summary of cash and in-kind contributions. This will include a narrative describing progress on the development and/or implementation of inclusive board succession plans or DEI plans. Eligible activities include:

- Activities to advance development of plans, such as stakeholder interviews, focus groups, assessment of community demographics, analysis of barriers to participation, etc.
- Activities designed to advance outreach
- Description of mentorship programs and/or participation metrics

5.3 REQUESTS FOR PAYMENT

Grant recipients must provide ACH information for direct deposit to receive funds.

Grant advance payments will be processed within 30 days of MOA execution. Additional advance payments will be processed based on anticipated cash flow needs and documented spending. Grantees may request payments on a reimbursement basis.