

**NRCS Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)
FY 2016 Frequently Asked Questions
For Applicants**

[Program Information](#)

[Eligibility](#)

[Funding](#)

[Payments](#)

[Funds Matching](#)

[Indirect Costs](#)

[Subcontractors](#)

[Application](#)

[For previous Awardees](#)

[Letters of Support](#)

[Environmental Impact](#)

[Environmental Evaluation Worksheet](#)

[Historically Underserved Producers](#)

[Environmental Quality Incentive Program \(EQIP\)](#)

[Research](#)

[Project Activities](#)

Program Information

- 1. Who administers the Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)?**
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

- 2. What is the purpose of CIG?**
CIG is intended to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies while leveraging the Federal investment in environmental enhancement and protection, in conjunction with agricultural production.

- 3. How many years can a project last?**
CIG projects are limited to three years.

4. What program funds CIG projects?

CIG is authorized under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Funds for CIG come from EQIP.

5. Who should I contact for additional information?

For programmatic information, please contact the National CIG Program Analyst at (202) 720-7412, or melleny.cotton@wdc.usda.gov. For budget and administrative information, please contact the Grants and Agreements Team at USDA-NRCS (202) 720-0242 or frankie.comfort@wdc.usda.gov

Eligibility

6. Who is eligible to apply?

CIG applications are accepted from State or local units of government, federally-recognized American Indian tribes, nongovernmental organizations, and individuals.

7. Do the location eligibility requirements apply to the organization or the project site(s)?

The location eligibility requirements apply to both the applicant organization and the location of the project.

8. Is there a formal definition for a “community-based organization?”

Recognized groups concerned with improving the quality of life for residents within local communities. Such organizations serve as project initiators and managers, thereby providing avenues for involvement with and access to locally led processes and activities. These groups include nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations with well-defined constituencies that include all or part of a particular community. Faith-based organizations, women’s groups, environmental groups, farm or woodlands groups, trade and professional associations, educational associations, and schools are examples.

9. What other requirements do I need to meet?

CIG projects must involve producers who are eligible for EQIP. The criteria for EQIP-eligible producers is outlined in the Announcement for Program Funds. Applicants must describe the type and extent of producer involvement in the application narrative.

10. Can any agricultural producer who owns the land use these grants?

Yes, however if they are conducting the project activities on their own land exclusively, they must be EQIP-eligible.

11. The Announcement for Program Funds (APF) appears to say that cooperating farmers don't necessarily have to be landowners, just need to prove they have control of the land for the term of the proposed contract period (e.g. with a lease) - am I reading that correctly?

Yes. Control of land is a part of the EQIP eligibility requirement.

12. I am graduate student. Can you please tell me if international entities can be part of this grant? Not as a Principal Investigator but as collaborators?

NRCS does not have authority to enter into awards with international entities. If your university wishes to enter into a separate award to utilize internationals as collaborators, then they should utilize their own funds.

13. Are corporations eligible to apply?

Yes, eligible entities include federally recognized American Indian tribes, State and local units of government, and non-governmental organizations and individuals. Corporations fall under the non-governmental organizations category.

Historically Underserved Producers

14. Will you please go over the definition of “Historically Underserved Producers?”

Historically underserved producer means a person, joint operation, legal entity, or American Indian Tribe that is a beginning farmer or rancher, socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher, or limited resource farmer or rancher.

15. How do I qualify for the Historically Underserved Producers and Veteran Farmers or Ranchers, or community-based organizations comprised of or representing these entities 10 percent set-aside?

To compete for the set-aside funds, the applicant must make a declaration in the proposal as described in 2016 CIG announcement.

16. What if the producer that you are working with is an Historically Underserved Producer or Veteran Farmer or Rancher, or Native American?

The applicant entity itself must be a Historically Underserved Producer or Veteran Farmer or Rancher, or community-based organization comprised of or representing these entities in order to qualify for the 10 percent set-aside funding pool during the full proposal phase.

17. Are women farmers still considered “Historically Underserved” (socially disadvantaged)?

For the purposes of CIG, special consideration is extended to Historically Underserved Producers and Veteran Farmers or Ranchers, or community based organizations comprised of or representing these entities. Women are not considered an additional group under this program. Additional information is located at the following link-

http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/people/outreach/sbfr/?cid=nrcsdev11_001040

Funding

18. Where can I find CIG funding opportunities?

Funding notices are published annually on the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) CIG website <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/cig> and on the Federal government's eGrants portal, www.grants.gov.

19. Can you please explain in more detail the 10 percent funding pool?

The 10 percent set-aside funding pool is intended to encourage Historically Underserved Producers, Veteran Farmers and Ranchers, American Indian Tribes, or community-based organizations comprised of or representing these entities to apply for CIG. If an applicant declares themselves a member of one of these groups in their proposal, their application will be considered for the 10 percent set-aside funding pool first. If the 10 percent set-aside funding pool is exhausted, eligible applications will be considered for the main funding pool.

20. Must all funds be expended within the United States, or only the funds provided by CIG, or is there no restriction?

NRCS does not have authority to enter into awards with international entities. Therefore, the Federal funds associated with the CIG award can only be expended in the United States and its territories. If the entity wishes to enter into a separate award to utilize services of an international organization, then they should utilize their own funds.

21. Is there a minimum grant amount that will be considered under this opportunity (size of project that will be competitive)?

There is no minimum grant amount. However, the applicant should present a budget that demonstrates the successful completion of the project.

22. When is the last date funding can be spent after the 3 years?

Project costs must be incurred before the expiration of the grant.

23. What is the required \$3,000 travel fund? Can that be in-kind? What is the objective for having CIG recipients travel?

The \$3,000 travel fund is for CIG recipients to share their project results and benefit from peer-to-peer technology transfer opportunities identified in coordination with the NRCS National Technical Contact for the project. The funding can be in-kind, cash match, or part of the federal funding request.

24. Can a USDA Agricultural Research Service collaborator be listed as a co-Principal Investigator? Can they receive funds?

Federal employees can serve as technical advisors on CIG project teams. They cannot receive recompense for serving in this role in the form of salary, honoraria, travel, or gifts.

Payments

25. How is the grant award distributed? Is it dispersed up front or must participants submit for reimbursement for project expenses?

Funding is disbursed on a reimbursable basis. However, recipients can submit a request for advance payment covering project activities up to 30 days from the date of submission.

Funds Matching

26. Do I need to provide additional funding for the project?

Selected applicants may receive grants of up to 50 percent of the total project cost. Applicants must provide non-Federal funding for at least 50 percent of the project cost from cash and/or in-kind contributions. Sources and amounts of matching funds must be identified in the application package.

27. Can you specify what 'cash' match includes?

Third party contributions as cash or cash from recipient's employee services.

28. In what time period can matching funds be used to count towards the applicant's required contribution to the project?

Matching funds (including both cash and in-kind) must be utilized during the period of performance of the grant in order to count towards the applicant's contribution.

29. How do applicants show matching commitments?

Applicants must document match in the SF-424A budget sheet and narrative. Applicants must also include written verification of commitments of matching support (including both cash and in-kind contributions) from non-federal third parties. Any additional requirements will be outlined in the Annual Program Funding announcement.

30. Is staff time committed to the project by a project partner considered cash or in-kind match? What other types of activities or experiences can be considered in-kind match?

Generally, staff time is considered in-kind since that person will be a paid staff member of the organization whether the NRCS proposal is funded or not. In some situations it might be cash. For example, if the staff incurs additional hours specifically for the project or if a person is hired specifically for the purpose of meeting a project requirement, then those hours could be counted as cash, unless their salary is to be paid by the grant. There may be some donated equipment, information, or assistance where cash is not transferred that would be considered in-kind.

31. Must matching funds be secured at the time of the proposal application, or can they be pending?

At the time of submitting their proposal, applicants must include written verification of commitments of matching support (including both cash and in-kind contributions) from non-federal parties.

Subcontractors

32. What is the guidance on sub-contractors arrangements?

The grantee is responsible for all sub-awards and assuring the responsible parties follow the appropriate terms and conditions. All sub-awards are subject to the same federal requirements as the grantee. The grantee is responsible for assuring/monitoring that the

sub-awards follow the requirements. The grantee will also be the one penalized if there are issues with sub-award actions.

33. Can a federal entity receive a subcontract from the applicant/project director to assist with completion of the project?

Yes, but CIG federal request funds cannot be used to pay for subcontract.

Indirect Costs

34. Can we request our full indirect cost rate on the USDA CIG program?

Applicants wishing to claim indirect costs must have a federally approved indirect cost rate. This means that if you have a federally negotiated rate, you may claim indirect costs. Once your indirect cost rate agreement is received, eligible charges to the grant are dependent on that approved rate.

35. Is there a limit to Indirect Cost (IDC) rates? The Request for Proposal only states that if we have a negotiated rate that rate is acceptable. I assume that means an outreach/extension rate not a research rate - and we can use the negotiated rate?

No limit has been set on IDC rates. The appropriate type IDC rate will be accepted as documented. However, if you do not have an approved Federally Negotiated Rate the maximum rate is 15 percent. Please see the Annual Program Funding announcement for details.

Application

36. Where can I find the application package on grants.gov?

<http://www.grants.gov/web/grants/view-opportunity.html?oppld=272028>

37. May multiple agencies join together for and submit a single application?

Multiple agencies or other entities can work together as collaborators in one project proposal. However, only one agency or other entity can be the applicant.

38. Can an applicant submit several applications?

Yes. If submitting applications for more than one project, submit a separate proposal for each project.

39. If we are submitting via email, how should we put our signature on the application?

Print out, sign, and scan the signature page and add it to the submission. Alternatively, you may use the Adobe e-signature capabilities.

40. Can an applicant apply for a national CIG and a state component CIG in the same year for the same project (understanding that one would be declined if the other was awarded)?

Yes.

- 41. What involvement does a local NRCS office have in the application or project process?** CIG is a competitive grants process. NRCS personnel may provide general guidance to potential applicants on the appropriate forms to submit, program information, instruction on completing blocks or sections of forms, etc. The local NRCS offices cannot assist with the development of an application.
- 42. What are our limitations in working with our local NRCS personnel on the project should it be selected for funding?**
NRCS personnel can be involved in a technical advisor capacity.
- 43. Which state conservationists should we inform about our proposal application if we are not entirely sure about which states we will be active in?**
Any states in which you think you might conduct project activities. Be sure to cc nrcscig@wdc.usda.gov when emailing the proposal to the state conservationist(s).

For previous Awardees

- 44. Is the Declaration of Previous CIG Project Involvement and Past Performance required for just the Prime or does this apply to any subcontractors as well?**
It is only required for the applicant entity. However, you may submit the information for any partners or subcontractors.
- 45. My agency was previously awarded a CIG for a different type of project and for which I had no involvement. Should I submit a Declaration of Previous CIG Project Involvement and Past Performance?**
Yes. The Declaration of Previous CIG Project Involvement and Past Performance is linked to the applicant entity. Therefore, you should submit it with your application.
- 46. If you are a current CIG grantee, can you apply for the current CIG competition?**
Yes. However, it is recommended there not be substantial overlap with or duplication of any previous or current CIG project's goals.

Letters of Support

- 47. What should be included in the List of Letters of Support?**
The list should include all other organizations that have provided a letter of support. This includes letters from organizations that are not pledging cash or in-kind match as well as written verification of commitments of matching support (pledge agreements). For each organization, include entity name, location, role, and if a commitment of cash or in-kind support has been made, the value.
- 48. Can you please provide clarification on the Letters of Support and Written Verification of Commitments for the proposal? For example, if a third party organization is providing General support, as Cash Match and an In-Kind Match, does it require that we get three separate documents from the third party or can these be all rolled into one document?**

One document per third party organization is sufficient but should address each role.

49. Is the “separate pledge agreement” different than a letter of support?

The Pledge Agreement is only different from a Letter of Support if the organization is not pledging cash or in-kind match.

50. Do the letters of support count against the full proposal page count?

No.

Environmental Impact

51. How many pages are allowed/expected for the Environmental Impact sections in the proposal?

The length of the analysis should be commensurate with the complexity of the project proposed and the natural environmental resources impacted directly, indirectly, or cumulatively.

Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)

52. Please expand on the project eligibility regarding Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) producers. Do they have to be a matching partner in the grant or may they be participants?

In order for a project to be eligible for CIG, projects must involve producers who meet the EQIP eligibility requirements as set forth in 16 USC 3839aa-1. At the discretion of the applicant and project needs, a producer can be a matching funds partner, a participant, or both. However, the producer’s costs associated with implementation of conservation practices or activities under EQIP contracts during the period of performance of a grant cannot be counted towards the grant’s matching requirements.

53. Is it necessary to involve EQIP eligible producers directly in the project? We are considering a tool-building project at the regional scale and there is not an on the ground component at this time.

Yes, in order for a project to be eligible for CIG, projects must involve producers who meet the EQIP eligibility requirements.

54. Do the EQIP eligibility income restrictions (\$900,000 AGI) apply to Tribes (or Tribal entities, like Tribal rangeland management programs) as they do for individual producers under the EQIP guidelines?

No. Federally recognized American Indian Tribe applicants are exempt from adjusted gross income requirements. However, individual applicants are subject to all EQIP eligibility requirements.

55. If the applicant conducts a project that involves cost sharing with producers, do the producers apply through EQIP? And if so, who signs off on the installed measures if NRCS cannot provide technical assistance under CIG?

The grantee is responsible for providing the technical assistance required to successfully implement and complete the CIG project. NRCS will designate a Program Contact, Administrative Contact, and Technical Contact to provide oversight for each project receiving an award.

Technologies and approaches that are eligible for funding in a project's geographic area through EQIP are ineligible for CIG funding except where the use of those technologies and approaches demonstrates clear innovation.

56. If a producer benefits from the project, how, or to what degree, will the benefit be calculated towards the \$450,000 limit on EQIP funding?

Direct payments using CIG federal funds to the producer do not count towards the \$450,000 payment limitation for the 2014 Farm Bill.

57. If we have received previous EQIP financial assistance, are we eligible to receive payments for CIG project activities?

Yes. However, direct or indirect payments cannot be made for a conservation practice for which an individual or legal entity has already received funds, or is contracted to receive funds through any USDA conservation program.

58. What constitutes eligible lands for EQIP and in turn CIG?

To be eligible, the land must be in crop or livestock production, Non-Industrial Private Forest, or be American Indian Tribal land.

59. Are public lands eligible for EQIP?

The EQIP Rule provides the specific criteria for public land eligibility:

(2) Publicly owned land where:

- (i) The land is a working component of the participant's agricultural and forestry operation,
- (ii) The participant has control of the land for the term of the contract, and
- (iii) The conservation practices to be implemented on the public land are necessary and will contribute to an improvement in the identified resource concern.

Consideration of EQIP eligibility for public land would require that an eligible producer is leasing the public land for the proposed contract period and that all other eligibility requirements are met.

Research

60. Is there a way for researchers to be involved in this grant program?

Even though CIG cannot fund research projects, with the exception of on-farm conservation research, researchers can offer or collaborate in projects that encompass the development, evaluation, implementation, and monitoring of conservation adoption approaches or incentive systems; or conservation technologies, practices, systems, procedures, or approaches; or environmental soundness with goals of environmental

protection and natural resource enhancement.

61. While CIG does not fund research, with the exception of on-farm conservation research, is capturing data to demonstrate the efficacy/utility of the activity to other landowners/operators an eligible activity (i.e., yield/cost data)?

Yes. Capturing monitoring data and publicizing it can validate basic research data sets, expand the geographic coverage of existing data sets, and is an example of transferability.

62. While CIG does not fund research, with the exception of on-farm conservation research, it does encourage monitoring and data collection for the purposes of outreach and extension (transferability). Does that mean that it is still acceptable to publish the results of the data collected?

Yes. Capturing monitoring data and publicizing it can validate basic research data sets, expand the geographic coverage of existing data sets and is an example of transferability.

63. If sampling or monitoring is required by the project activities, is eLab certification required?

No, eLab certification is not required.

Project Requirements/Activities

64. Where can I implement my project?

CIG project implementation is limited to the 50 States, the Caribbean Area (Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands), and the Pacific Islands Area (Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands), and the District of Columbia.

65. Can the project be located in one state only? And can a project be funded that includes collaboration with that state's Extension Service/land grant university research arm? Yes, the projects can be located in only one State. The applicant will determine the partnership that best fit their needs.

66. When is the final technical report due?

The final technical report is due within 90 days of grant expiration.