



United States Department of Agriculture



Conservation Innovation Grants

New Grantee Guide

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Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

nrcs.usda.gov/

Congratulations on your Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) Classic or On-Farm Conservation Innovation Trials (On-Farm Trials) award! Now that your organization has been selected for a CIG or On-Farm Trials award, the hard part begins—delivering on all the wonderful things you proposed to do in your application! Rest assured, we at NRCS are here to help.

CIG Classic and On-Farm Trials are co-administered by NRCS CIG programs staff and USDA FPAC Business Center grants and agreements staff. Through the life of your project, you will interact with both groups in order to successfully carry out your project, and to successfully be paid for doing so. Federal grant administration can be daunting (especially for the uninitiated), so we developed this guide to help you navigate your responsibilities. The [CIG website](#) (in particular [the page established for grantees](#)) is a good source for program updates and the latest versions of forms and templates discussed in this guide. If you ever have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to us.

Kari Cohen
Projects Branch Chief

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Signing your Agreement and Starting CIG Projects

After NRCS announces the slate of CIG awardees, a Grants Management Specialist (GMS) will contact each awardee and send along the grant award package. At a minimum, your award package will include an NRCS-ADS-093 (Notice of Grant and Agreement Award) form, Statement of Work (taken from the project proposal), and General Terms and Conditions.

Please review the award package for accuracy. Contact the grants management specialist immediately if you have questions or find any errors in your package. Once satisfied with the documents, please sign and send the NRCS-ADS-093 form back to the GMS. The GMS will then work internally at NRCS to finalize the package, execute the agreement and send you a copy signed by USDA.

IMPORTANT NOTE—CIG awards are not fully executed until NRCS leadership signs the NRCS-ADS-093 and sends the fully signed document back to the awardee. **Do not begin work until you receive a fully executed agreement.** NRCS is unable to reimburse for project charges accrued before the date on the fully executed agreement. We encourage awardees to review the award package and send the signed ADS-093 back to the GMS as quickly as possible to avoid any delays in starting your project.

If it appears as though the agency will be delayed in completing the CIG grant agreements, NRCS may offer grantees the option of requesting a pre-award letter, which authorizes project expenditures for a given period of time prior to completion of the grant agreement. NRCS will contact awardees if pre-award letters are authorized in any given year.

Again—without a fully executed grant agreement, do not begin work on your project. When in doubt, please ask!

Official Grant Project Contacts

Technical Contact

NRCS assigns a technical contact to each CIG project. They are listed in the statement of work, and not on the front page of the NRCS-ADS-093. NRCS makes assignments based on technical specialty and geographic proximity to the project.

The following are the roles and responsibilities of NRCS technical contacts:

- Technical oversight
 - Review and approval of semi-annual progress reports.
 - Approval for any technical changes to projects.
 - Facilitating completion of project deliverables.
- Serving as the technical liaison to NRCS. Additional NRCS technical staff may be called on to engage in a CIG project. The technical contact serves to connect project staff with other NRCS staff.
- Project evaluation--at the conclusion of a project, technical contacts complete a project evaluation and make recommendations for any future actions.

Technical contacts are encouraged to make at least one site visit to each of their assigned projects during the project's life. Technical contacts will coordinate site visits with grantees.

NRCS Program Contact

The agreement lists an NRCS Program Contact. This is an NRCS CIG staff member who is at headquarters that ensures all the administrative and technical procedures are followed. In addition, they review reports, invoices, and amendments for program compliance. Any question you may have on process or agreement requirements can be directed to this person. While they are listed with their email address on the agreement, you can also reach them at nrcscig@usda.gov.

NRCS Administrative Contact

The NRCS Grants and Agreements (GAD) staff assigns an administrative point of contact to monitor your project for administrative compliance. The assigned Grants Management Specialist is listed on the NRCS-ADS-093 form in block 8 as the NRCS administrative contact.

The NRCS administrative contact will administer agreement amendments such as budget changes, extensions, changes in scope of work, and changes in contacts.

GAD staff (though not necessarily the assigned staff member) also review and approve CIG Requests of Advancement or Reimbursements (SF-270s, see next section) and work with CIG program and NRCS

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financial management staff to process payments. GAD staff also review all financial reports and progress reports, review required audits for compliance, and upon grant expiration initiate closeout procedures.

Requests for Advances and Reimbursements

NRCS CIG payment requests are submitted by grantees each quarter on a reimbursable basis. Grantees may request monthly reimbursements or advances, but such a change must be requested by the grantee and approved by CIG program staff and be consistent with 2 CFR Part 200. When submitting an advance, grantees must provide evidence of liquidation of advanced funds as soon as possible after the end of the advance period. When NRCS provides an advance, grantees must provide documentation of liquidation of the advanced funds prior to requesting additional payments.

Reimbursement requests are submitted using the [SF-270 form](#) through ezFedGrants, an online USDA grants and agreements management system. Appendix A and B give instructions on how to complete the form and give an example form. (Note that within ezFedGrants, this form appears slightly differently, but has the same lines.) Each request must be accompanied by documentation supporting the amount requested (see Appendix C for further information on supporting documentation). All CIG project funds must be expended within 90 days after the award expiration date. Refer to the NRCS General Terms and Conditions, Part V (attached to your grant agreement) for additional information regarding payments.

If you are having issues submitting an invoice in ezFedGrants, contact the ezFedGrants help desk: ezFedGrants-cfo@usda.gov.

If you have questions on how to fill in an SF-270 claim form, email the CIG inbox: nrcscig@usda.gov

NRCS generally completes payment requests within 30 days of receipt. Grants & Agreements staff process all requests before sending them to CIG program staff for certification and payment approval. Once a payment is approved, the funds may take an additional 3-4 business days to reach your bank account.

Documentation of Grant and Matching Fund Expenditures

CIG and On-Farm Trials Grantees must maintain detailed, auditable documentation of all grant and matching fund expenditures throughout the life of the grant, and for three years following the grant agreement's end date. This documentation must be available whenever requested by USDA. Annually, 5% of National CIG awards are audited specifically to ensure matching funds are being properly expended and recorded.

Reporting Requirements

Grantees are responsible for submitting regular progress and financial reports, as outlined in the general terms and conditions attached to your grant agreement. When reporting is not submitted on time, NRCS may require additional oversight, such as more detailed financial reports, additional project monitoring, or the withholding of payments until delinquent reports are submitted. An overview of grantee reporting requirements is below.

Project Progress Reports

Following execution of the grant agreement, grantees submit progress reports every six months. These semi-annual reports record progress toward completing deliverables, challenges or delays, goals (met and unmet), and any other pertinent information (analysis, explanation of cost overruns). Progress reports should also include any preliminary results related to practice standard revisions, completed or promising products, press releases for interim successes, and news articles highlighting the project. Semi-annual reports must include a list of EQIP-eligible producers (names only) involved in the project.

Progress reports are submitted through ezFedGrants every six months, with the first report due seven months after the project start date. ezFedGrants notifies grantees when a report is due. As a best practice, please also e-mail a copy of your progress report to your technical contact so they have an opportunity to review your progress. Technical contacts will be encouraged to use progress report submissions as an opportunity to maintain a dialogue about project progress and any challenges.

Appendix E contains the semi-annual progress report template for use by grantees.

Financial Reports

Grantees must submit to ezFedGrants an annual Federal Financial Report (SF-425). Instructions for completing a SF-425 are found in Appendix D. The due date for SF-425 reports is 30 days after the anniversary of your start date.

Final Reporting

The final programmatic report submitted by CIG grantees should encompass the entire project, including successes, challenges, and next steps. As NRCS intends to post all final reports on its website, final reports should be concise and written in plain language. In addition, final reports must not include any Personal Identifiable Information (PII--such as names of agricultural producers, addresses, financial information, proprietary business information, etc.).

Following are some guidelines grantees should consider when developing final reports:

- The report should detail the project results and respond to all deliverables of the agreement. Public-friendly graphics and explanatory graphs/infographics are encouraged.
- Final reports should be written in plain language and include background/rationale for the project, a brief summary of methods, results, challenges, a summary of the project's impact on conservation, a list of project outputs and potential next steps.

NRCS may request additional detailed information if it is required by agency technical experts as they look to incorporate CIG project results into agency operations.

All final reports are reviewed by the project technical contact and other appropriate NRCS technical experts within two months of receipt. Incomplete or insufficient final reports will be returned to the grantee for additional information.

A sample final report is posted on the [CIG grantees' page](#).

Both CIG Classic and On-Farm Trials must complete final reports following the above format. For On-Farm Trials projects, the evaluations described below must be synthesized and summarized into the final report format.

On-Farm Trials Project Evaluations

Unique to On-Farm Trials projects is the need for grantees to conduct structured evaluations of the on-farm trials. To the extent possible, grantees must collect baseline data and use controls and other science-based methods to carry out credible and meaningful assessments of the trials' conservation benefits. Awardees must work closely with participating producers to ensure that sufficient data are collected to analyze the effects of conservation implementation and must also ensure that producer privacy is maintained throughout the project and dissemination of project results.

In addition, each On-Farm Trials grantee is required to complete an economic or financial analysis of the on-farm trials. For economic and financial analyses, applicants are encouraged to consult the resources available at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/technical/econ/costs/>. An NRCS technical note on developing economic case studies is available at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/technical/econ/data/?cid=nrcseprd1298423>.

On-Farm Trials grantees have the option to complete social evaluations, as well. Social evaluations analyze the factors that go into a producer's decision to implement conservation practices, systems or approaches, how that producer's decision influences other producers, and any broader effects on communities.

On-Farm Trials grantees must work closely with their NRCS technical contacts to refine their project evaluation approaches.

Soil Health Demonstration Trial Evaluations

Projects funded under the SHD priority must meet additional evaluation requirements. Similar to the broader On-Farm Trials program, SHD projects must include a robust evaluation of the environmental, financial and social (to the extent possible) effects of implementing soil health management systems and practices.

Unique to SHD is the necessity of using common evaluation protocols and methods for assessing soil carbon changes and other soil health outcomes. Eligible entities must—

- Use NRCS standards in field and laboratory methods for soil carbon and other soil health indicator measurements, as defined in the Technical Note 450-03 and Technical Note 450-06. This does not preclude inclusion of additional measurements, beyond the identified NRCS minimum data collection requirements. Awardees will collaborate with NRCS soil health experts to ensure consistency in field and laboratory methods.
- Work with State or local NRCS Soil Scientist to verify the soil series on which the trial site(s) is located.
- Collect current and historic management information from participating producers (tillage, crop rotation, nutrient and other input applications. A 5-year management history is required and a longer history desired to better capture long-term soil health impacts).
- Collect environmental and financial outcome data to include profitability (cost of production, current

yield and historic yield where available). Include data as available such as effects of systems on infiltration rates, ground water recharge, plant available water, runoff, water quality, flooding, pest resilience, weather resilience, air quality, etc.

- At a minimum, develop summary information on social outcomes and profiles of participating producers with information about why management changes were adopted, and challenges and benefits of the changes.
- Provide details on how project results will be shared with producer communities, such as through on-farm field days and other activities, to facilitate broader adoption. Implementation of mentor groups to facilitate change of production systems is highly encouraged. Projects should assist with implementation and coordination, so that opportunities for idea exchange and assistance occurs from a producer or service provider that has implementation experience to participants who are experiencing change.
- Develop regionally-relevant production- and climate-specific SHMS templates for future adopting producers, especially in cases where a novel approach is used to address specific resource concerns or challenging conditions.

The minimum SHD dataset requirements and associated information methods are available at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/financial/cig/?cid=nrcseprd1459039>

Entities receiving an On-Farm Trials SHD award are required to provide their evaluation to NRCS as part of an SHD study to be submitted to Congress, as required by the SHD statute. It is incumbent upon SHD partners to inform participating producers that geospatial, soil, conservation practice, and other information will be provided to NRCS and maintained in a confidential Federal database from which aggregated findings will be made available to the public without personally identifiable information. None of this database information will be shared with the public (e.g., through public affairs or other communications materials) without a producer's consent. Names of participating producers and any incentive payments received are subject to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests.

Agreement Modifications

Grantees sometimes find it necessary to request modifications to their grant agreement. A formal modification requires execution of an agreement amendment. Examples of modifications include:

- No-Cost Extensions – (Form – GADSUM-3) Grantees may request a no-cost extension to allow additional time beyond the established expiration date. Extensions may be provided to ensure completion of the approved project deliverables. No additional funding is added to the award to allow for completing the project during the extension. The fact that funds remain at the expiration of the grant is not in itself sufficient justification for a no- cost extension. 12 months is the maximum length of an extension and only in exceptional cases will more than one extension be considered. **Be aware: Extensions cannot be granted if requested after the agreement termination date.**
- Budget Changes – (Form – GADSUM-2) In general, CIG grantees are allowed a certain degree of latitude to re-budget within and between major budget categories (found on the SF-424A budget form). Budget changes may be made at the recipient's discretion as it impacts less than 10% of the total project funding (NRCS + matching funds). For budget changes less than 10%, please email the technical contact and the NRCSCIG@usda.gov email box for notification of the change. In addition, budget changes should be noted in semi-annual progress reports.

Example: a grantee with a \$450,000 project (\$225k from NRCS, \$225k in matching funds) wants to move \$15,000 from the personnel budget category to supplies. This change can be made without an agreement amendment and can be enacted after the grantee emails its technical contact and the NRCS CIG inbox. The change should also be documented in the next progress report. If this project team moves an additional \$30,000 or more, at that point they will need to submit a request for a budget amendment since they have cumulatively reached 10% of the project funding.

- Change in Scope of Work (Goals, Objectives, and Deliverables) – (Form – GADSUM-2) Please coordinate any changes in project scope of work or deliverables with the NRCS technical contact assigned to the project. Major changes must be enacted through an agreement amendment.
- Change in Project director/Key Personnel – (Form – GADSUM-7) Change in key personnel requires notification. For permanent changes to project personnel that are on the agreement, or for an extended absence (3 straight months or 25% reduction in project time) the required form should be completed and submitted for approval.

All modification requests must be submitted no less than 30 days before the grantee would like to see the modification take effect. All modifications must include the appropriate form and any relevant supporting documentation. Forms can be found on the [CIG grantees' page](#). Submit forms to nrcscig@usda.gov.

Award Termination

In rare circumstances, awardees or NRCS may seek to terminate a CIG award. It is always NRCS's preference that a project continue to its conclusion and CIG staff are committed to working with awardees to avoid agreement terminations. When a termination is called for, it will be carried out in accordance with 2 CFR 200.339.

Environmental Compliance and Cultural Resources

Every NRCS-funded conservation project that involves ground disturbance activities is subject to the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA). As part of NRCS's effort to comply with NEPA, each ground disturbing CIG Classic project must undergo a project-level Environmental Evaluation (EE) before commencing. CIG EEs are completed by NRCS state office staff in the relevant project states. After the grant agreement (NRCS signed AD-093) is fully executed but BEFORE implementation begins, the NRCS state office(s) will contact the grantee to confirm the project site(s). State office staff will conduct an environmental evaluation (EE) and prepare the NRCS-CPA-52, EE Worksheet, if required. The state office staff may, in rare cases, request that the grantee prepare an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement. The State Office will inform the Grantee when compliance efforts are complete and project work may begin.

For On-Farm Trials projects, it is likely that an EE is required for each producer participating in the on-farm trials. OFT grantees must be in contact with NRCS state office staff to ensure that EEs are completed prior to commencement of conservation activities.

If you are NOT contacted by the relevant state office(s) and would like to begin your project, please send an email to nrcscig@usda.gov.

On-Farm Trials only: Determining Participating Producer Eligibility

All producers receiving funding through an On-Farm Trials project must be registered in the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) system, be EQIP-eligible and found to be in compliance with the Farm Bill's conservation compliance and Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) provisions. On-Farm Trials grantees must ensure this is the case for all participating producers prior to initiating technical assistance or conservation implementation with those producers. If the producer participant is not in the FSA system, he/she is required to visit his/her local USDA office and work with FSA to establish farm records. On-Farm Trials awardees will be directed to work with NRCS points of contact in the relevant States to help NRCS make EQIP eligibility, conservation compliance and AGI determinations.

If you are NOT contacted by the relevant state office(s) with instructions for coordinating producer eligibility, please contact CIG Program Staff.

Cultural Resources Procedures

All ground-disturbing CIG and On-Farm Trials projects must comply with the National Historic Preservation Act. The relevant NRCS State Office(s) will, after the grant agreement is fully executed and BEFORE implementation begins, determine if any proposed ground-disturbing activities have the potential to cause effects on historic properties, conduct field reviews or inspections as needed, and

determine project effects. For any questions about cultural resources procedures, please email nrcsig@usda.gov.

Public Affairs

Taking advantage of public affairs opportunities is a critical part of being a CIG grantee for two main reasons: 1) to spread the word about CIG projects and successes, and 2) to build support for the program.

The CIG webpages house basic information about your project. CIG program staff, working with USDA external affairs staff, may contact grantees to develop blog postings, feature stories, news releases, social media and more communications products to highlight project successes. Awardees will be provided with an optional communications template to be filled out and shared with national CIG program staff. Completing the template will facilitate opportunities for the project to be highlighted in the USDA Blog and Gov Delivery mailing list, which has over 100,000 subscribers.

CIG and On-Farm Trials grantees should make every effort to coordinate with the CIG staff and USDA external affairs staff on announcements and any press related to the USDA grants. NRCS can provide official logos and photos, program descriptions and other relevant agency information. NRCS and CIG grantees can collaboratively promote CIG project milestones to leverage communication resources and reach a wider and more diverse audience.

At a minimum, the NRCS and the Conservation Innovation Grants program should be credited on all public presentations and media, including conference/meeting posters, presentations, papers, news releases or other public information about your project. You may consider using the following statement below, if appropriate:

"This work is supported by the Conservation Innovation Grants program at USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service."

Please submit to technical contacts and CIG program staff any news releases, videos, photos and other media about CIG and On-Farm Trials projects through the NRCS-CIG@usda.gov email box. Put in the subject line "Communication" followed by your award number.

Travel Costs

The CIG and On-Farm Trials funding announcements require each proposal to include \$3,000 for travel “designated by NRCS.” These funds are to be used to travel to conferences or meetings where grantees can share project progress or results with a wide audience. Examples include the annual Soil and Water Conservation Society annual meeting (where NRCS often has a CIG Showcase event) and the Conservation Finance Roundtable.

Grantees should work with their NRCS technical contacts to identify and discuss travel opportunities. Each awardee is required to participate in least one event. Event participation should be reported on in progress reports.

Program Contacts

CIG Inbox - nrcscig@usda.gov

ezFedGrants help desk: ezFedGrants-cfo@usda.gov

[Grants & Agreement Division: FPAC.BC.GAD@usda.gov](mailto:FPAC.BC.GAD@usda.gov)

CIG website - www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/cig

Appendices

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