

Questions and Answers for Conservation Innovation Grants On-Farm Conservation Innovation Trials (OFT)

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NOTE: Questions that were repetitive are clustered together and only one answer is provided.

Administration

1. Where is the link to the application and process?

The following link gives access to the site that hosts the National Funding Opportunity (NFO) for On-Farm Trials: <https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/view-opportunity.html?oppld=349853>

As described in the NFO, all applications must be submitted through grants.gov.

See section D of the NFO for more information about creating a grants.gov account and submitting a proposal.

2. What is the expected number of awards under the on-farm trials portion?

We estimate awarding between 15 and 25 grants.

3. How do we get additional questions answered?

Further questions should be emailed to NRCSCIG@usda.gov.

4. Do we need to identify if we are applying for funds under the *Soil Health Demonstration Trials (SHD)* priority?

Yes, you are required to identify which priority the proposal addresses in the Project Information tab of the application. The NFO identifies five main priorities, they are as follows: irrigation management technologies; feed management and enteric methane reduction; grazing lands; nutrient management; and soil health demonstration (SHD) trials

Funding and Budget

5. Where can I find more information on administrative (indirect) costs? Can I claim them as a part of my partner match?

Section IV.F in the NFO addresses indirect costs (also known as administrative costs or overhead). Indirect costs are usually a general fee that organizations include in funding requests that represent the general costs of doing business, and may include many incidentals such as internet, electricity, copy machines, building costs, etc. For On-Farm Trials, indirect costs cannot be reimbursed by NRCS funding.

6. Are indirect costs allowable for subawards?

Yes. The prohibition on On-Farm Trials funding reimbursing administrative costs only applies to the lead partner, the entity with which NRCS has a direct agreement.

7. How are costs reimbursed under an On-Farm Trials agreement?

In general, awardees submit monthly or quarterly reimbursement requests using a standard form known as a SF-270. Advances are available in certain circumstances.

8. Can equipment be purchased with federal funding and incentive payments?

Yes, funds can be used for equipment in some instances. Equipment critical to implementing an innovative approach, providing technical assistance (TA) or carrying out an On-Farm Trials evaluation would be an allowable cost since those are eligible expenses. Guidelines for purchasing equipment with federal funding are very specific and sometimes require a grantee sell acquired equipment at the end of the project to meet the terms of the agreement. Please review the federal regulations carefully (see §2CFR [200.313](#) and [200.439](#)) before including specific equipment purchases in your proposal. In general, Federal funds may not be used to purchase facilities- related equipment (e.g. office space or a barn).

9. Is On-Farm Trials funding available for more than making incentive payments to producers?

Yes, On-Farm Trials funding can be used for the three components required of each project:

- 1) Incentive payments to producers to implement innovative approaches.*
- 2) Technical assistance to help producers implement innovative approaches.*
- 3) Evaluation of conservation, economic, and social impacts of the On-Farm Trials.*

Additionally, OFT funding can be used to cover direct administrative costs associated with a project.

10. Can OFT funds be used for outreach and education?

Yes, funds for outreach and education would fall under technical assistance

11. Should we include allowable direct administrative expenses (e.g. filling out reports, organizing meetings) in the budget?

Direct administrative expenses should be included when they can be specifically attributed to the project work.

12. Can NRCS staff be involved in providing technical assistance?

For On-Farm Trials, NRCS gives preference to partner entities that are able to wholly supply the implementation TA for On-Farm Trials projects, either on their own or through working with technical service providers (TSPs) or other qualified entities and individuals.

13. Does the project budget need to include costs for NRCS associated with compliance, eligibility and environmental evaluations?

No. Most OFT awardees will not have any project costs associated with producer eligibility or environmental evaluations. The exception would be an applicant that anticipates needing an environmental assessment to inform the environmental evaluation. This would be relevant for projects that do not use NRCS practice standards and are not reasonably limited in context and intensity to allow an NRCS environmental compliance specialist to conclude that there are no expected negative environmental impacts.

14. Though it is not preferred, if partners request NRCS to provide some technical assistance (TA) toward the project, would that need to be included in the budget?

Yes, all TA expenses required to carry out the project must be estimated in the application. NRCS will consider the information through the application review process. Projects selected for an award that include NRCS-provided TA are subject to negotiation prior to execution of the On-Farm Trials agreement.

15. Do we need a support letter from NRCS?

Applications should not include support letters from NRCS staff. State Conservationist reviews are a component of the On-Farm Trials review process.

16. Is training an allowable cost?

Training producers to help them implement a practice, system or technology is an allowable cost and is considered TA. On-Farm Trials funding may not be used to train personnel providing TA to producers.

17. How will producer incentive payments be processed?

Incentive payments must be paid directly from awarded entities to participating producers. It is the lead partner's responsibility to establish a means for paying producers.

18. Is there any assistance to help determine appropriate incentive payment structures or amounts?

Applicants are wholly responsible for proposing the amount and composition of incentive payments. [NRCS payment schedules](#) may be useful to partners as they develop incentive payments proposals. Incentive payments may be comprised of foregone income, land rental, conservation implementation-related equipment, construction costs, evaluation costs, or other considerations necessary to facilitate effective execution of an on-farm trial. This is not an exhaustive list but is intended to provide some basic guidance that encourages maximum creativity. The overall framework for making the payments will just be evaluated as a part of the overall project by the peer panel. Payments may not be provided to a producer for a conservation practice, system or approach for which the producer has already received, or is contracted to receive, funding through another NRCS or USDA program.

19. Can a private engineering consultant receive funds for technical assistance?

On-Farm Trials awardees may sub-contract with third-party providers to deliver technical assistance to participating producers. Sub-contract arrangements, if they will be used, should be included in On-Farm Trials applications.

20. What percentage of the total request should be allocated for incentive payments to producers, relative to technical assistance and evaluation?

There is no required ratio of the various cost categories. NRCS is asking applicants to propose and justify expenses for incentive payments, technical assistance and evaluation costs.

Eligibility - Partners and Producers

21. If a farmer is NOT eligible for EQIP, can they still participate in the project if they are willing to forego any financial assistance?

Non-EQIP eligible producers are allowed to participate in OFT projects by providing data but are not eligible to receive any direct benefits paid for by project funds.

22. Can government agencies be sub-recipients for the grant, i.e., working in a team with universities and growers on a project?

Non-federal government agencies can be recipients or sub-recipients on the grant. Federal agencies may not receive funding through On-Farm Trials, but employees of non-NRCS Federal agencies may participate in an On-Farm Trials project.

23. Can an individual producer submit a proposal?

Individuals are not eligible applicants. The On-Farm Trials statute limits eligible entities to:

- *private entities whose primary business is related to agriculture;*
- *nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with experience working with agricultural producers; and*
- *non-Federal government agencies.*

A farm business could qualify as a for-profit entity whose primary business is related to agriculture. To be competitive, a farm business would need to have the experience and capacity to manage a federal award of this size.

Producers are best served as participants in a project (receiving technical assistance and incentives to adopt a practice that they may otherwise not be willing to try) and often not well positioned to be the lead partners (managing producer recruitment, technical assistance, payments and evaluations, along with the grant administration).

24. Can the extension of a state university receive an On-Farm Trials award?

Yes, if the extension of the state university is considered a non-federal government agency or other eligible entity (see NFO for definition), they may be eligible to receive funding.

25. Can On-Farm Trials take place on indoor farms?

Yes, provided the proposed project addresses one of the On-Farm Trials priorities and the participating producers are eligible for NRCS payments.

26. We have a range of producers we have been working with from small to very large, some of which may not meet the Farm Bill's Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) restrictions. Can I include a producer that does not meet AGI limits in the application?

AGI waivers can only be requested and granted after an On-Farm Trials project begins. A project that relies heavily on the participation of producers that exceed the AGI limitation may be vulnerable because AGI waivers are not guaranteed. AGI waivers may only be granted when a NRCS analysis determines that the conservation activity in question would take place on "lands of special environmental significance" and the activity would address the issue that classified that land as being of special environmental significance. Producers who do not meet the eligibility requirements, including the AGI limitation, can only participate in an OFT project by providing data. They are not eligible to receive any direct benefits paid for by project funds.

27. Does the proposal need to identify all of the producers that are participating, or can producers be selected after the grant is awarded?

The proposal does not have to identify participating producers. Applications, however, must demonstrate that the applicant can recruit enough producer participants to implement the project.

28. Is there a selection process we need to follow to identify producers?

No, there is no recommended process. It is the responsibility of applicants/awardees to identify and secure the participation of producers.

29. Is there any preference given to working with producers already involved in conservation practices vs. producers who have not utilized those practices?

Incentive payments must go to producers who are implementing the innovative approach in question for the first time. If an application, for example, is proposing to increase the adoption of denitrifying bioreactors, producers who have already implemented a bioreactor cannot receive an incentive payment for simply maintaining the practice.

30. One of our potential producer participants is prohibited by shareholders from disclosing financial information about the operation, does this automatically disqualify him from participating?

Any producer getting an On-Farm Trials incentive payment must consent to registering with Farm Service Agency (if they are not already registered) and undergoing AGI, Highly Erodible Wetlands/Wetlands Conservation, and EQIP-eligibility checks.

31. Are participants required to have a conservation plan signed by a certified conservation planner (CCP)?

Producer participants are not required to have a conservation plan for the purposes of On-Farm Trials.

32. I plan to have two to three farmers involved in the trail. Would that be enough for the program?

The number of producers that participate in an OFT project will vary depending on the expense and complexity of the practice being implemented. Previously awarded OFT projects range in producer participants from five to upwards of 200. On balance, NRCS would like to see more rather than fewer participating producers—the intent of On-Farm Trials is to increase the adoption of innovative approaches and technologies. Larger number of producers also increases the statistical confidence of On-Farm Trials evaluation results.

33. Can the same technology be deployed on multiple farms and will each farm be funded?

NRCS anticipates that On-Farm Trials projects will involve multiple participating producers on multiple fields and farms. An application proposing implementation on a single farm or a small number of fields will not yield robust enough information to develop a credible project evaluation.

34. We have a CSP contract that we are currently under, can there be any overlap between On-Farm Trials and the CSP practices?

On-Farm Trials funding cannot be used to provide payments to producers for a practice that a producer is already receiving funding for from another NRCS or USDA program.

35. If a producer has a current CSP contract can we still use that land as an evaluation/data collection point as they are not receiving an additional payment?

Yes, if the producer is not receiving On-Farm Trials funding, the land and practices in question can still be used for data collection and evaluation.

Eligibility – Project Topics and innovation

36. Will additional points be given to proposals that address multiple priorities?

We welcome projects that have benefits that cover more than one priority categories, but peer panel reviewers will evaluate how well your project addresses the primary priority under which it is being competed. Including features that cross over priority categories does not provide an applicant with any inherent advantages or disadvantages over projects that address one priority category.

37. Can you give examples of new technology? If it is on the market but hasn't been thoroughly tested but some farmers are using it is that new?

The criteria for innovative approaches in On-Farm Trials is broad. The NFO states that NRCS will fund On-Farm Trials projects proposing the implementation of innovative approaches that have already been shown to provide conservation benefit. Applicants are responsible for sufficiently describing how their proposed approach fits the criteria in the NFO.

38. How is "proven conservation benefit" defined or is it spelled out in the full notice of funding opportunity?

Applicants are responsible for justifying the known conservation benefits of their proposed innovative approach. The criteria outlined in the NFO should be reviewed carefully to help guide the justification.

39. If we have a technology that has been used overseas that improves irrigation management and soil health can we still apply?

Yes, you can apply an innovation with a conservation benefit proven overseas if the On-Farm Trials work will be carried out in the United States and U.S. Territories (e.g. Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands, Pacific Islands).

40. Could this include implementing current NRCS conservation practices offered through the EQIP program or are we talking about different proven conservation practices?

The criteria for what constitutes an innovative approach is very broad for On-Farm Trials. An existing conservation practice funded through EQIP may be quite common in one part of the country or agricultural sector but considered innovative in another. It is the applicant's responsibility to justify the innovative nature of their proposed approach.

41. Can practices that have been proven but don't necessarily have an NRCS practice standard be funded?

Proposed innovative approaches do not have to be a part of a current NRCS conservation practice standard.

42. Would testing of biological products that are already on the market qualify for on-farm trials?

This program is not designed to test new products, but instead it is designed to support more widespread adoption of practices that, for whatever reason, have not been widely adopted.

Criteria – General

43. What do we need to do to get a four or five-year project approved?

A proposal for a four or five-year project must have an action plan and timeline that justify the project duration. Projects may last up to five years to support 1) adaptive management over multiple crop years; and, 2) adequate data collection and analysis to support evaluation of innovative approaches.

44. Can projects be carried out in multiple states?

Yes.

Criteria - Evaluations

45. What type of data from the project will NRCS be asking for from the awardees? Such as detailed individual data or aggregated and anonymized data?

The evaluation component of On-Farm Trials projects requires both data collection and analysis to reach conclusions about the conservation and economic impacts of innovative approach implementation. NRCS may request access to data collected on individual farms and fields. NRCS operates under strict producer privacy and confidentiality regulations, so the use of individual producer data is safeguarded.

46. Are the evaluation protocols and methods listed?

Outside of the Soil Health Demo Trial, applicants are responsible for proposing an evaluation approach for the conservation and economic evaluation component of their projects. Evaluation methods may be negotiated prior to agreement execution.

47. Are letters of support REQUIRED? If not required, do they improve overall score of proposal?

Letters of support are not required but are allowed. They may or may not be considered by the review panel.

Specific only to the Soil Health Demonstration Trial

48. For the Soil Health Demo trials: Have the evaluation protocols been established? If so, what are they?

Eligible entities receiving Soil Health Demo Trial awards agree to follow consistent soil health assessment protocols to evaluate the impacts of practice and system implementation. The standard SHD dataset requirements and methods are available on the [CIG website](#) under "More Information for CIG On-Farm Trial Soil Health Demo Awardees."

49. Is the Soil Health Demo Trial a separate application?

No, the Soil Health Demo Trial is one of five priority areas within On-Farm Trials.

50. For the soil health demo trial evaluations, is there a specific cost per sample or per producers that we can use to build our budget?

No, we do not have an established cost per sample or producer for the SHD. Applicants must propose these costs as part of their budget.

51. Will the soil health demos have minimum or maximum acreages?

No, there is no direct minimum or maximum acreage. Each project needs to be substantive and large enough to provide a scientifically robust data set for evaluation.

52. Is there any special consideration for organic practices under the Soil Health Demoss?

No.

Definitions and examples:

53. What defines historically underserved producers?

NRCS considers members of the following groups to be historically underserved producers: socially disadvantaged, beginning, limited resource, and veteran farmers and ranchers.

A definition of each group can be found at

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/people/outreach/slbfr/>.

Miscellaneous

54. Can I submit my proposal to both CIG classic and OFT in the same cycle?

The same proposal should not be submitted to both the CIG Classic and OFT competitions. CIG Classic, another competition of the Conservation Innovation Grants, funds the development and piloting of new approaches and technologies. CIG Classic is better suited for projects that are focused on early stage exploration of a new technology or practice.

55. If a project is highly successful, will there be an option to seek additional funding during the project's lifespan?

No, there is no provision for renewing or adding additional funding during a project's lifespan.