

Program Description

September 2004

Conservation Innovation Grants

Overview

Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG), authorized under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), is a voluntary program 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. Under CIG, EQIP funds are used to award competitive grants to non-Federal governmental or non-governmental organizations, Tribes, or individuals. CIG funding will be available for single- or multi-year projects.

Authority

Section 1240H of the Food Security Act of 1985 was amended by section 2301 of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Public Law 107-171), and established CIG with funding from EQIP. The Secretary of Agriculture delegated the authority for EQIP to the Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), who is a vice president of the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC).

Scope

CIG is available in the 50 States, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Guam, the Virgin Islands of the United States, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

How Conservation Innovation Grants Work

Funding for CIG is announced each year through a Request for Proposals (RFP). Funds for single- or multi-year projects will be awarded through a nationwide competitive

grants process. CIG competitions will emphasize projects that have a goal of providing benefits over a large geographic area. These projects may be watershed based, regional, multi-State, or nationwide in scope.

Applications should demonstrate the use of innovative technologies or approaches, or both, to address a natural resource conservation concern or concerns. The natural resource concerns eligible for funding through CIG will be announced in the RFP, and may change annually.

Complete applications are evaluated by a technical peer review panel and scored against criteria identified in the RFP. Scored and ranked applications will be forwarded to an NRCS Grant Review Board. The Grant Review Board will make recommendations for project approval to the NRCS Chief. Final selections will be made by the Chief. Awards will be made through a grant agreement.

At least 50 percent of the total cost of the project must come from non-Federal matching funds (cash and in-kind contributions) provided by the grantee. The grantee also is responsible for providing the technical assistance required to successfully complete the project. NRCS will provide technical oversight for each project receiving an award.

Eligibility

Entity or Individual: To be eligible, CIG applicants must be an Indian Tribe, State or local unit of government, non-governmental organization, or individual.

Project: To be eligible, proposals must:

- Involve producers who are eligible for technical or financial assistance under EQIP.
- Describe a project to develop an innovative conservation approach or technology, or both.
- Address one or more of the CIG natural resource conservation concerns identified in the RFP.

Application Process

The CIG application process is outlined below:

1. When funds for CIG become available, a Request for Proposals (RFP) is published in the *Federal Register*, and on www.grants.gov, to solicit project proposals from Federally-recognized Tribes, State and local governments, and non-governmental organizations and individuals.
2. Interested eligible entities and individuals have 60 days from the publication of the RFP to submit proposals to NRCS.
3. Peer review panels score and rank proposals against the evaluation criteria described in the RFP. Ranked proposals are forwarded to a Grant Review Board.
4. An NRCS Grant Review Board certifies the rankings from the peer review panels, and ensures that the proposal evaluations are consistent with program objectives. The Board then makes recommendations for awards to the NRCS Chief.
5. Final award selections are made by the Chief.
6. Selected applicants enter into grant agreements with NRCS. Following signature by NRCS and the grantee, grant funds are obligated.

Identifying Natural Resource Conservation Priorities

The five CIG natural resource conservation concerns for fiscal year 2004 were identified through an information gathering process that

included the NRCS State Conservationists, other Federal agencies, and agricultural and environmental stakeholders. The natural resource concerns may be reviewed and updated each year to ensure that CIG continues to address critical resource conservation needs.

Grant Agreements

Once selected, grant recipients must work with the designated NRCS official to finalize and sign grant agreements, incorporating all necessary project requirements. A grant agreement is the legal instrument with which the Federal government establishes partnerships with State, Tribal, or local government entities or non-governmental organizations.

Documentation of Progress on Funded Projects

Grant recipients are required to submit quarterly progress reports to NRCS. These reports will describe the applicant's progress towards the purposes and goals of the project and document adherence to program guidelines. In addition, a final report must be submitted to NRCS upon completion of the project.

For More Information

If you need more information about CIG, please contact Kari Cohen, P.O. Box 2890, Room 5239-S, Washington, D.C., 20013, phone: (202) 720-2335, fax: (202) 720-4265.

E-mails may be sent to: cig@usda.gov.

Additional information, including *Federal Register* notices, is available on the World Wide Web at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/cig>.



Visit USDA on the Web at:
<http://www.usda.gov/farmbill>

Note: This is not intended to be a definitive interpretation of farm legislation. Rather, it is preliminary and may change as USDA develops implementing policies and procedures. Please check back for updates.