

514.21 Establishing Ranking Criteria

A. Purpose

- (1) The ranking process enables the State Conservationist to prioritize enrollment offers by determining projects that most merit enrollment. However, this process does not guarantee or entitle the applicant to funding.
- (2) The State Conservationist, with advice from the STC, establishes a weighted ranking process to prioritize all eligible applications, considering the factors described in this subpart. Give priority to those applications that provide the maximum wildlife benefits associated with restoration and protection of wetland functions and values, considering all associated acquisition and restoration costs and the duration of the enrollment.
- (3) The State Conservationist will develop a form to record the ranking criteria, develop a process to collect data, rank the applications, and select projects for funding. The ranking system's point spread should be sufficient to allow differentiation between applications.
- (4) The State Conservationist may develop multiple ranking forms or establish funding pools to address variability in habitat types offered for enrollment. The development of multiple ranking forms or funding pools may be necessary to facilitate enrollment of diverse habitat types that otherwise may be difficult to compare within a single set of ranking criteria. Funding pools also allow flexibility to ensure priority habitat types that would not compete as well with other habitat types may still be selected.
- (5) These State-developed ranking forms will be made available to the public through the State's WRP Web page.

B. Ranking Criteria Overview

The ranking criteria for easements, contracts, and restoration cost-share agreements will emphasize—

- (i) The environmental benefits of enrolling the land.
- (ii) Cost effectiveness of enrolling the land to maximize the environmental benefits per dollar expended.
- (iii) Whether the landowner or others, are offering to contribute financially to the enrollment, to leverage Federal funds.
- (iv) The extent to which the purpose of the program would be achieved on the land.
- (v) The productivity of the land.
- (vi) The on-farm and off-farm threats, if the land is used for production of agriculture commodities.

C. Environmental Benefit Considerations

The ranking process will include consideration of the wetland functions and values as defined in subpart H of this manual, and—

- (i) The environmental benefits of enrolling the land, including but not limited to—
 - Habitat for migratory birds and wetland-dependent wildlife.
 - Habitat for threatened, endangered, or other special-status species.
 - Protection or restoration of native vegetative communities.
 - Habitat diversity and complexity.
 - Water quality protection or improvement.
 - Attenuation of floodwater flows.
 - Water quantity benefits through increased water storage in the soil profile or through groundwater recharge.
- (ii) The likelihood that the site will retain its habitat functions and values after the enrollment period ends.

Note: The ranking process should consider the physical site conditions and ownership pattern that may result in some form of increased protection, such as a separate conservation easement or purchase agreement.

- (iii) The extent to which the original hydrology can be restored.

Note: Hydrology restoration potential must comprise at least 50 percent of the potential points awarded for environmental benefit considerations. To receive hydrology restoration ranking points, hydrology restoration or enhancement practices must provide hydrologic conditions suitable for the needs of the native wetland-dependent wildlife species that occurred in the area and appropriate for the wetland functions and values that existed prior to manipulation.

- (iv) Duration of the enrollment, with priority given to permanent easements over shorter-term enrollment options.

D. Economic Considerations

- (1) At a minimum, the ranking process should include the following cost considerations:
 - (i) Estimated easement or 30-year contract cost per acre, if appropriate.
 - (ii) Estimated restoration costs.
 - (iii) Partnership contributions that reduce NRCS costs will be reflected positively in the ranking process. The State Conservationist must ensure NRCS has financial control for the full amount of funding. When a landowner or other entity is offering to contribute funds for a part of the projected restoration or easement costs, the part being pledged to the program as a means of receiving favorable ranking, must be under NRCS financial control.
 - (iv) A cost-benefit comparison. Applications that have a lower cost per environmental benefit ratio will receive higher rankings.
 - (v) Potential near- and long-term management, repair, replacement, or operation and maintenance costs.
- (2) During the ranking process, cost factors may be estimated using comparable market value, geographic area rate caps, landowner offers, established restoration costs, and pledged partner contributions.

E. Special Considerations

- (1) States may also include special considerations in the ranking process, such as—
 - (i) Priority geographic regions.
 - The State Conservationist, with advice from the STC, has the authority to give priority to certain geographic regions of the State where restoration of wetlands may better achieve State and regional objectives. Additionally, an easement offer, in a priority geographic region, may be accepted before other individual easement offers that rank higher but are outside the priority region.
 - This policy provides an opportunity for the State Conservationist, in consultation with the FWS, to begin a WRP initiative in an area that has been determined important for WRP involvement, regardless of specific individual site ranking.
 - (ii) Priority wetland habitat types. The State Conservationist, with advice from the STC, has the authority to prioritize certain habitat types to receive additional ranking consideration. Unique, rare, or declining habitat types, identified for protection, and restoration, may be identified, and prioritized in the State's ranking criteria.
 - (iii) Projects in special water-quality target areas.
 - (iv) Creating contiguous wetland areas under easement protection, such as along river corridors or within drainage districts.
 - (v) Enhancing effective restoration of previously enrolled land.
 - (vi) Reducing habitat fragmentation and boundary management problems.

Example: In-holdings in the conservation area would potentially exhibit marginal wetland functions, but, if enrolled, would enable substantial restoration and enhancement of the surrounding area.

- (vii) Promoting adjacent landowner participation.
- (viii) Enhancing long-term protection of previously restored wetlands. When a wetland has previously been restored, but not fully protected by an easement, as described in section 514.14G, the restoration will be considered a positive attribute in the ranking process.
- (ix) Excessive permitting requirements or permitting requirements that require excessive time to secure. Higher priority should be given to areas where successful restoration work will not be complicated by unusual permit problems.

Example: If there are State or local permitting processes that are complex and lengthy, the site may not warrant further consideration. At a minimum, the permit question should be fully incorporated into the site consideration.

- (x) The level of complexity for engineering design, practice application, and operation and maintenance.

Note: The State Conservationist, in consultation with the STC, may elect to establish a minimum easement size to ensure program objectives are achieved, to ensure easement management effectiveness, or improve program efficiency, as long as the minimum does not unintentionally exclude high quality applications, such as critical habitat for threatened and endangered species, or prevent participation by limited-resource farmers and ranchers.