



Regional Conservation Partnership Program In-Depth

Q&A with Tom Miewald, Oregon's Regional Conservation Partnership Program Coordinator

June 2021

As Oregon's RCPP coordinator, Tom Miewald coordinates a portfolio of landscape and watershed scale conservation investments that support the working lands. RVCC and WLA interviewed Tom to learn more about the program and how it can be used by place-based groups and organizations. Below is an edited summary of that interview.

Q: What sort of work does RCPP intend to support?

A: The intent is to leverage funds, to do things that no one organization can do by themselves, and to support efforts that are trying to build momentum. RCPP adds financial and technical assistance to get projects to a level of their own through a five-year process. There is a clear emphasis on people having skin in the game, which is primarily represented through partner contributions.

Q: What activity types are appropriate for RCPP?

A: RCPP brings together a number of NRCS capacities and mechanisms. It is possible and encouraged to mix and match different NRCS programs and practices such as those available through the Conservation Stewardship Program, Agricultural Land Easements, and the Conservation Reserve Program. Basically, anything that NRCS can do, including the whole breadth of EQIP-type activities, can be done within RCPP. The most successful projects are those that combine watershed and land management practices.

The Alternative Funding Arrangement (as opposed to RCPP "classic") is where NRCS is trying to do things that the agency normally doesn't do. This version of RCPP tries to get partners to think about potential innovations and potential practices that haven't been done before. That could include, for example, developing new mechanisms for payment for performance (such as a mechanism where the lead partner develops a system where producers are paid for the amount of water they conserve or carbon sequestered). The AFA opens doors that aren't there in other NRCS tools.

Q: How should partners go about determining if their project would be competitive and is the right fit for RCPP?

A: There are multiple pathways to get to a RCPP, but the key is to work early and often with the local NRCS District Conservationists and Basin Team Lead or Area Conservationist. A lot of times projects come about through existing EQIP or CSP projects where the RCPP project is an extension of the NRCS relationship, and the logical next step. Once you have a viable idea, work with the RCPP coordinator to make sure what you're doing meets with RCPP guidelines. Every project proposed in Oregon got funded this year because the project leads worked with NRCS through the process. The second important element for developing a successful RCPP proposal is to work with leaders in the community and in the legislature to let them know what you're doing and get their support. Projects should also fit within statewide priorities set through NRCS processes. Oregon, for example, has Conservation Implementation Strategies, which are kind of like RCPP projects in that the district conservationist works with partners to identify something that NRCS should focus on in a particular area. The intention is to help the state move away from random acts of conservation. A RCPP could align with, or it could be developed separately from and could serve to complement, an existing CIS or other state-level prioritization. It is quite often that there is a CIS in an existing geography and a RCPP is developed that helps meet those needs.

Q: How would partners determine whether to go after RCPP “classic” or AFA?

A: If what you want to do with a project doesn't really fit or isn't covered under NRCS's set of existing tools and practices, and you have a partnership and match, then look at AFA. Another situation would be if the lead partner wants to be in the driver's seat on the project. With RCPP classic it's more of a shared job. RCPP classic isn't a grant and it's more of a shared job and a partnership with NRCS -- that's important to clearly understand. With RCPP classic, NRCS is in the passenger seat telling the partner how to drive while with an AFA NRCS is in the backseat along for the ride, not playing a leading role but there to help with the governmental side of things such as NEPA and contracting. When considering an AFA it's important to ask if the partner proposing the project wants to take a lead role and if they have capacity to take on that role.

Q: Could you elaborate on the importance of proposals aligning with and complementing local priorities, county long-range plans and state-level conservation strategies? What are some examples of projects that have done this well?

A: The Tillamook Watershed Partnership project recently got funded in Oregon. The project builds from a local prioritization process for fish barriers that needed to be taken out. NRCS looks for science-based prioritization and landscape conservation plans, but RCPP does not fund much of that science and planning. We definitely look for projects that have done the science and the prioritization processes, then RCPP can come in as a tool to fund the work.

Q: Can you very generally explain the various categories of funding available through RCPP?

A:

- A maximum of 70% of funding goes to financial assistance (FA) that funds on-the-ground work
- A maximum of 18% goes to technical assistance (TA), which supports implementation, including work

with landowners to put assistance on the ground.

- A maximum of 7% goes to technical enhancement assistance (TEA), which includes communications, outreach, project management, and measuring and monitoring outcomes.
- A minimum of 5% of funding must go toward supporting NRCS technical assistance.

Q: Under what criteria would you consider a waiver on match and/or any adjustments to some of the breakdown on funding buckets?

A: There are limited instances of these types of waivers. The only time Tom has seen a waiver for partner contribution was when there was no TA requested. The 1:1 match is seen as an important “milestone” in the project proposal. Last year Tom also saw a waiver given when the partner wanted more financial assistance than the 70% maximum.

Q: We get a lot of questions from local organizations that can't cover overhead and administration costs in the same way that larger national organizations can. Does NRCS have advice for smaller local organizations that are rich in networks and understanding of natural resource issues but don't necessarily have the financial resources to provide that match?

A: You are correct that NRCS doesn't cover overhead expenses, but those overhead costs can be used as a partner contribution (match). Another option is to find funding sources that cover overhead and consider those to be the partner contribution.

Q: Are there any examples of creative ways that people have come up with match?

A: There is some flexibility in terms of what counts as match. Anything that is spent within the geography of the project, addresses the same resource concerns, and is spent within time that project gets awarded can be counted as match. Some projects have been using things that were ongoing through different efforts, such

as development of web-based tools for prioritization as RCPP match. In Oregon, the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board is a big co-contributor. Easements can also be used as match. NRCS is really looking for packages of projects where RCPP can be additive.

Q: Can the landowner's contribution to their portion of a cost-share program count as match?

A: No

Q: What federal funding sources can be used as match for RCPP projects?

A: Anything that isn't USDA money. So DOI, NOAA money are all possibilities. However, one of the ranking criteria looks at the amount of federal vs non-federal dollars, so there is a bit of a downgrade if a project relies too much on federal funds.

Q: What types of partners could participate in RCPP both in a direct project management sense and in an indirect support role? Are there any interesting/unexpected partner types that are worth noting?

A: On the partner level there's the lead partner and then there are contributing partners, who can be anybody who contributes to and is interested in the project. NRCS likes to see projects with a large number of partners and a high diversity of partners, such as tribes, local governments, watershed groups, and working lands-focused groups. NRCS also likes to see public-private partnerships. Serving as the lead partner is a lot of responsibility to take on. Partnerships have run into problems when organizations serving as the lead partner don't have capacity to manage hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars in NRCS funding as well as the equivalent amount of money or in-kind partner match. The monitoring and tracking and administering of grants and agreements requires significant capacity. The lead partner also needs to have the organizational longevity to do a 5-year project. Project management and leadership capacity are both important as well.

Q: Which NRCS and FSA programs are available for funding through RCPP under the Final Rule?

A: Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, PL-566 (Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act) projects, Conservation Reserve Program, Healthy Forests Reserve Program, Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

Q: What should partners be considering when including CSP and/or CRP within an RCPP project?

A: A big consideration for both CRP and CSP is making sure there are landowners who will participate in these programs. CSP has been the least well received of the programs and there were a few projects where we couldn't expend funds allocated in CSP.

Q: How do the RCPP "versions" of these NRCS programs compare to how they operate outside of RCPP?

A: For CRP or CSP for example, RCPP versions of the landowner contracts would be pretty much the same as how they are structured outside of RCPP. We really want people to base their proposed practices off of existing NRCS programs. With easements though there are some different considerations from the Agricultural Land Easement and Agricultural Conservation Easement programs. For example, RCPP has a defined set of minimum deed terms that differs from ACEP. If a partner wants to propose a new practice standard for something, they have to develop a proposed or interim practice, which we can do under RCPP. So there are more flexibilities, such as more flexibility with payment schedules, but we want it to rhyme with existing NRCS practices.

Q: How much specificity and detail should partners provide in terms of programs used and how money will be allocated in the application and what portion of those specifics are modified/solidified after the application has been approved?

A: We ask for a fairly detailed budget by year along with the amount that will come from partner contributions. We do like it when groups name the practices they want to use but they don't need to identify where exactly they will implement them because that happens through the processes of applications and ranking. It's good to have a pretty strong framework and then the contents will move around a bit from the time of the proposal to the time of the agreement. After a project gets funded, it then goes through a programmatic partnership agreement process where the nitty gritty of what a project will look like gets developed. Then partners develop supplemental agreements and contracts, which are used to obligate money.

Q: Can you explain the difference between program contracts and supplemental agreements?

A: Supplemental agreements are a new mechanism for obligating funds. Before developing contracts or supplemental agreements, partners will enter into a programmatic partnership agreement, which outlines a general framework of the partnership but doesn't obligate funds. For technical assistance, everything goes through supplemental agreements, so that's a new process of defining deliverables. Contracts are used for financial assistance.

Q: Do you know of any examples of RCPP projects being used to complement other Forest Service funding sources or programs like Joint Chiefs, CLFRP, LSR, or Forest Legacy Program?

A: One of the projects that got funded in eastern Oregon looks at forest and fire resiliency, and the Forest Service in eastern Oregon is doing complementary work on the national forest. RCPP can be a great tool to integrate private lands into a project. NRCS can't fund work on

industrial timber lands but it can fund work on non industrial timber lands.

Q: Does NRCS like to see project proposals that cross state boundaries? What is a good scope and scale for a RCPP project?

A: It can be good to have cross-state collaboration that can add another dimension but is not unwieldy. NRCS tries to get partners to work on a geography that's actionable so these RCPP projects tend not to be big giant multi state efforts. Our philosophy is to pick a geography that's actionable-where you can show conservation outcomes. There is a sweet spot. PL-566 (RCPP watershed projects) projects tend to have smaller footprint, for example, because of the nature of how much they can do and the size of a watershed.

Q: What sort of guidance are you putting out for partners on how to quantify and report project outcomes?

A: We have a few documents we provide to partners that offer some guidance regarding expectations and examples of minimum expectations. We also give a lot of leeway to partners on thinking about approaches to monitoring and reporting outcomes. The 7% cap on funding that can be spent on things like measuring and monitoring outcomes isn't a lot and we realize that assessing outcomes is not the easiest thing to do. For example, if a project is focusing on salmon recovery the question of whether the project will benefit salmon populations in five years is hard to determine because there are so many factors that influence those populations. Modeling is one of the tools that we say can be used if it is based on good science. It's good to have a mix of modeled vs real outcomes and to have something that builds on existing monitoring frameworks and networks. We like to see economic and social outcomes too, such as how many jobs has this project produced and how has it had an economic impact such as increasing yields or water budgets for producers.