**RCPP Project Outcomes Guidance**

The 2018 Farm Bill places a new emphasis on outcomes reporting for RCPP partners and projects. Below is an excerpt from the Farm Bill’s Manager’s Report:

“The Managers emphasize the importance of a partner’s duty to quantify the environmental outcomes of their RCPP projects, and partners are encouraged to assess and report on the economic and social outcomes of their projects, as partners may be able to encourage increased adoption of conservation practices. The Managers expect the Secretary to provide guidance to partners on how to quantify and report on the outcomes of their projects. This guidance should include methods and tools that can be used to quantify outcomes at varying scales appropriate to projects (regional, state, county, watershed, field, etc.), and for the various natural resource concerns addressed by projects.”

NRCS is embarking on an ambitious effort to use RCPP as a proving ground for the development and reporting of conservation (and even economic and social) outcomes of conservation projects. RCPP awardees and NRCS will work collaboratively to develop and report on outcomes, using an adaptive approach to improving outcomes reporting over the life of a project.

Historically, RCPP partners have been required to report on project deliverables, which are distinct from project outcomes. Below are informal definitions:

**Deliverables**: Tangible work products that a RCPP lead partner is responsible for providing as a condition of the partner agreement. Examples of project deliverables include the number of closed conservation easements, number of Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans completed, acres of cover crops implemented, acres of pollinator habitat created, number of Partner TA-funded conservation plans written, etc.

**Outcomes**: Quantified/modeled conservation, economic and social impacts of RCPP project activities. Examples of outcomes are pounds of nitrogen runoff avoided, tons of carbon sequestered, cost savings to producers, number of neighboring producers adopting the practice, decision factors leading to producer adoption of a soil health management system, etc.

RCPP partners are required to report annual progress on achieving deliverables and to report on project outcomes progressively, with the final report including total project outcomes (realized and projected future outcomes). Conservation or natural resource outcomes are required while economic and social outcomes are desired, to the extent practicable.

This document serves as guidance for RCPP partners to facilitate reporting of conservation, economic and social outcomes. RCPP applications must explicitly describe partners’ plans for quantifying and reporting on outcomes, with further development of the methodology expected during agreement negotiations. State RCPP Coordinators are available to assist with this task, and with outcomes reporting during the life of RCPP projects. The national RCPP team will provide quality assurance to outcome methods and reports to ensure that the data obtained is usable and appropriate to represent the outcomes of RCPP under reporting requirements of the Government Performance Results Modernization Act (2010) and Congressional reporting.

**Conservation Outcomes (Required)**

**Why should partners evaluate conservation outcomes?**

Quantifying the results of conservation implementation gets to the very heart of why people undertake conservation in the first place—is our water quality improved? Are there more gopher tortoise in our longleaf pine ecosystems? Are we sequestering more carbon through improved forest management? Measuring and reporting outcomes represents the true conservation value of NRCS (and partner) investments.

**What are indicators used to measure conservation outcomes?**

The ability to develop, measure and report on conservation outcomes of RCPP projects will vary by project type, natural resource concern, and available tools and methods. The most straightforward projects are likely those that propose implementation of land management/restoration practices to address water quality—estimation models to quantify nutrient reductions, temperature reductions, etc. exist for most parts of the country, and the use of conservation practices that have known conservation benefits can facilitate outcomes quantification. Projects focusing on conservation easement implementation may be more challenging. In many cases, NRCS will rely on partner knowledge and local expertise to draw correlations between conservation actions and specific outcomes generated for a given geographic area.

**How can these indicators be evaluated over time?**

For RCPP, NRCS has developed the customizable conservation outcomes template below. The example provided is for wildlife resource concerns but the template is easily modified for water quality, water quantity and soil health. For other resource concerns for which the template is not easily customized, lead partners are expected to work with State RCPP Coordinators to develop a template(s) appropriate for their projects. State RCPP Coordinators may engage with NRCS technical experts for guidance in customizing outcome frameworks.

*Customizable Template Sample:*

With the RCPP investment of **A** dollars matched by **B** partner contributions over **C** year (s) we have made a lasting improvement to the biodiversity of the **D** (geographic region) over initial benchmark (H) by improving **E** acres habitat and increasing our {priority species} population by **F** to a naturally sustainable size that will benefit the region for **G** years.

**A** = Total RCPP funds dispersed over **C** period of time

**B** = Partner contributions (cash and in-kind)

**C** = Defined number of years

**D** = Defined geographic area in the RCPP agreement

**E** = Acres of wildlife habitat improvement practices for the RCPP project

**F** = F and G are to be modeled or estimated figures based on the best professional judgement of a scientific expert

**G** = Connected to reference in F (define assumptions such as regeneration time, lifespan, population dynamics, etc.)

**H** = benchmark conditions developed for the outcome from the partnership agreement. Each outcome should have a benchmark against which to measure E and F.

**Economic Outcomes (Optional)**

**Why should partners evaluate economic outcomes?**

critical to driving lasting adoption of conservation practices and systemsnegatively and sustainedanalyses

**What are economic indicators that we can evaluate to measure outcomes?**

Economic indicators provide a quantifiable measure of the financial impacts of implementation of conservation practices on a farm, ranch of forestland. Economic indicators that may be used to report outcomes include (but are not limited to):

* + Conservation cost effectiveness—the cost to the producer of practice implementation vs. conservation benefits.
  + Economic/financial benefits—the impact of conservation implementation on net profit, the value of farmland/farm assets, etc.
  + Valuation of ecosystem benefits—benefits to downstream beneficiaries, local economies, etc.

**How can these indicators be evaluated over time?**

Partners measuring economic outcomes will need to collect financial information from producers and measure baseline economic indicators at the outset of the project, and then evaluate change in those economic indicators over time. A case study approach is a commonly used means of reporting on the economic and financial impacts of conservation implementation. For economic and financial analyses, partners should refer to the NRCS technical note on developing economic case studies, [available here](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/technical/econ/data/?cid=nrcseprd1298423). Applicants are encouraged to consult the resources available on [this NRCS website](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/technical/econ/costs/).

Partners are also free to explore other analytical approaches, in consultation with their State RCPP Coordinator(s). Examples of project-based economics analyses include two documents ([ONE here](https://farmdocdaily.illinois.edu/2019/03/tillage-passes-and-returns-on-corn-soybean-farms-in-east-central-illinois.html) and [TWO here](https://farmdocdaily.illinois.edu/2019/03/the-economic-advisability-of-lowering-2019-nitrogen-application-rates-on-corn.html)) developed by Illinois Corn Growers as part of their Precision Conservation Management RCPP project.

Development and implementation of an approach to quantify economic outcomes quantification should be viewed as an opportunity for RCPP lead partners to engage non-traditional RCPP partners such as ag lenders and data platforms in pursuit of innovative and replicable analytical models for future projects. Partners planning to report on economic outcomes should make sure that the effort is overseen by a qualified staff person or third party.

**Social Outcomes (Optional)**

**Why should partners evaluate social outcomes?** Reporting of social outcomes can inform strategies to increase adoption of conservation practices and systems in pursuit of lasting change beyond the duration of an RCPP project. indicators analyses

**What are social indicators that we can evaluate to measure outcomes?**  Factors included in evaluation may include (but are not limited to):

* Characteristics of producers and forestland owners
* Farm, forest or ranch characteristics
* Perceptions of characteristics of conservation practices
* Social capital of project participants
* Community characteristics
* Timing of conservation adoption
* Evaluation of management capabilities
* Conservation adoption motivations
* Technical assistance needs
* Information/Education needs
* Financial assistance needs to motivate conservation adoption

**How can these indicators be evaluated over time?**

Partners measuring social outcomes should measure baseline social indicators at the outset of the project and then evaluate change in those social indicators over time. In measuring social outcomes of an RCPP project, partners should maintain a focus on the factors motivating or influencing landowners and communities to adopt—and maintain-- conservation approaches.

Partners may wish to refer to the Social Indicators Data Management and Analysis (SIDMA) tool. SIDMA was developed by the Great Lakes Regional Social Indicators Team, and provides resources for measuring, organizing and analyzing social indicators related to conservation practices. While SIDMA was developed for use in water quality projects, extrapolation of its methods to other resource concerns is generally straightforward.

To explore and use the online tool, SIDMA (Social Indicators Data Management and Analysis), visit the [SIDMA website](http://www.iwr.msu.edu/sidma). Partners who conduct an analysis of social outcomes of their project should make sure that this effort is overseen by a qualified staff person or third party.

**Critical Conservation Area (CCA) Modeling**

Projects that overlap with NRCS Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) watersheds and resource concerns may be directed to coordinate collection of conservation outcomes data with a member of the CEAP team to facilitate agency modeling of RCPP outcomes.

**Quantification Tools Appendix**

The RCPP website is home to an appendix of science-based tools and methodologies available for the quantification of conservation outcomes. Tools are available for water quality and greenhouse gas emissions/sequestered carbon modeling. For resource concerns without readily available and widely applicable quantification tools (i.e. wildlife or air quality), lead partners are asked to work closely with RCPP State Coordinators to develop an acceptable outcomes measurement approach.

**Congressional Reporting**

NRCS is required to submit an RCPP report to Congress every two years. The report includes information on the conservation benefits and outcomes of RCPP projects, as well as process toward meeting conservation goals in CCAs. Outcomes reported to NRCS by lead partners will be included in Congressional reports.