

Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Improvement Program (VPA-HIP) Frequently Asked Questions

GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. Topic – Program general information

QUESTION- Where can we find the recording of the informational webinar held on May 19, 2026?

ANSWER- The webinar recording will be posted to the VPA-HIP website along with the transcript. <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/voluntary-public-access-and-habitat-incentive-program>

2. Topic – Submission

QUESTION- How are proposals submitted?

ANSWER- All proposals must be submitted through Grants.gov. (<https://simpler.grants.gov/opportunity/374d076a-f7fc-42d9-949b-ea30370f606a>).

3. Topic – Grants Management

QUESTION- If awarded, will NRCS utilize ezFedGrants to manage the award and reporting?

ANSWER- Yes, ezFedGrants will be the software used for program management of the projects.

4. Topic – Funding

QUESTION- Please explain why the full appropriated \$70 million is not available this year.

ANSWER- The appropriations show the total amount that a program is provided for a specific period. Agencies do not have to release all of that funding at once. In this case, additional funding will be offered to the public in another fiscal year.

5. Topic – Award Date

QUESTION- The NOFO states that an estimated award date will be September 30th, how likely is that?

ANSWER- This date is an estimate, so grants will not begin until a fully executed agreement is in place that is signed by both parties. Since agreement negotiation can take time, this date is estimated.

6. Topic – Start Date

QUESTION- Is the award date and the project start date the same?

ANSWER- As an applicant, you can always include a budget start date in your statement of work that is different from the award date. The award date is the date that the agreement is fully executed. The start date is the date the grantee begins to incur costs to the project. Grantees can request a start date after the award date to accommodate various project activities such as lining up with a planting season, a growing season, school semesters; you can be allowed to set the start date

later than the award date if it better aligns to budget costs. For the purposes of the agreement, project start dates cannot precede the award date.

BUDGET QUESTIONS

7. Topic – Pre-award costs

QUESTION- If we have time-dependent purchases that need to be made for our project, and they are before the project start date; can we get approved for pre-award costs?

ANSWER- [Pre-award costs](#) are allowed in the federal regulations for grants. The agency allows pre-award costs for both federal and non-federal funding in special circumstances. Requests for pre-award costs are submitted during agreement negotiation and are approved for only a certain amount of time. Costs that do not fall into that time period cannot be applied. In addition, approval of pre-award costs does not mean the award will successfully be negotiated and therefore they are only reimbursable if a successful agreement negotiation takes place.

8. Topic – Technical Assistance Cap

QUESTION - Does the 10% technical assistance cap apply toward partners, subawards, and staff time that are under contract by the state agency to help implement the program?

ANSWER – The intent of the program funding is to ensure incentive funding to producers to encourage opening private land to public access. Therefore, the 10% technical assistance cap includes grantee personnel costs in addition to personnel costs in sub-awards or contractor costs that are used to enroll landowners in public access program or to implement wildlife habitat improvements program lands. Although non-federal cost share is not a requirement of this award, and is no longer used as a ranking criteria of proposals, it is not unexpected that each project team will need to provide additional technical assistance through their own funding to complete a project.

9. Topic – Indirect costs (NFO/2CFR200)

QUESTION – Are indirect costs allowed and are they also allowed for our subawards? Can a subaward apply a higher indirect cost rate than the grantee maybe using?

ANSWER- Yes, the VPA-HIP program allows awardees to charge indirect costs to their awards. In addition, subawards can also charge indirect costs. Indirect costs are capped at 15% unless the applicant has a negotiated indirect cost rate agreement (NICRA) with the federal government. In these cases, the grantee can apply their NICRA rates. Sub-awards have to follow the same rules as grantees, so they also can either apply 15% or the amount of their negotiated NICRA. Contractors cannot apply indirect costs to awards; only sub-awards can. Sub-awards can apply their own NICRA rate; they cannot use the grantee's NICRA rate. All organizations have the right to apply their NICRA rate as long as it is current.

10. Topic: Program Income

QUESTION – If a program supported by this award collects program income from some of the activities, can this funding be additional funding used for the project?

ANSWER- Yes, programs are allowed to generate [income](#) from project activities during the life of the award and this income needs to be spent on the project activities. If the project team cannot spend this funding on additional activities that are already approved and fall under the current project

objectives, they will need to use this funding instead of a portion of the federal funding. If this causes additional activities to be created that align with the project goals, but are not already approved, these will need to be approved by the award agency.

11. Topic – Incentive structure Check and combine with AGI eligible duplicative question

QUESTION- Can VPAHIP programs be leveraged to provide incentives for specific species access, such as deer in areas where hunter access for deer population management is lacking?

ANSWER- Yes, VPA HIP incentive payments for public access need to be focused on wildlife-dependent recreational activities. Applicants should describe what activities will be promoted and allowed on the land that is open for public access. This can include activities for a single species.

12. Topic – Subaward agreements

QUESTION- Can a landowner agreement be signed prior to the grant execution?

ANSWER- In most situations, no. According to the USDA General [terms and conditions](#) (page 18), the requirements that apply to the Federal award recipient flow down to subrecipients and therefore when they enter into a formal written agreement with the subrecipient, it needs to address the requirements of the federal award. Subrecipient agreements are legally binding only after the formal execution of the contract, which must happen on or after the official start date of the federal award.

AGI, HEL, WC and eligibility

13. Topic – AGI

QUESTION- Regarding the AGI requirements, you stated a project can be set up in a way that makes the public the beneficiary and not the landowner. How can we determine when the public is considered the beneficiary as compared to the landowner, who is receiving the payment?

ANSWER- In most situations, applicability of AGI will not apply. The main goal of the program is to give the public access to private lands that they normally cannot use for fishing, and other wildlife-dependent recreation. Because of that, the public—not the landowner—is considered the beneficiary.

States or tribes may provide financial incentives to landowners or procure goods and services to meet the requirements of their grant agreement. These payments, by themselves, do not make the landowner a program beneficiary, and they do not trigger AGI rules the way other conservation programs might.

However, a state or tribe could design a project where the landowner does become a beneficiary. This would happen when VPA-HIP funds are used in a way that mainly benefits the landowner rather than the public.

For example, if the project uses VPA-HIP funds to install habitat improvements on private land and the public is not allowed to access the improved area, then the landowner receives the primary benefit. Up to 25% of VPA-HIP funding can be used for habitat improvements, so this situation is possible.

If NRCS selects a project where the landowner is considered a beneficiary, all land and producer eligibility rules apply, including AGI requirements. In those cases, state or tribes would need to request that landowners/producers who require eligibility visit their local FSA Office to ensure that farm records exist and eligibility provisions are met. This is a self-certification that the awardee provides assurances to the project state, when applicable.

When the public is the beneficiary (AGI NOT triggered):

- Will apply to most VPA-HIP projects.
- When the payment to the landowner is compensation for allowing public access and habitat improvements for **public use**.
- The public receives the main benefit.

When the landowner is the beneficiary (AGI IS triggered):

- When VPA-HIP funds improve habitat on private land;
- AND the improvement does not result in public access;
- The landowner receives the primary benefit.

14. Topic – Self-certification

QUESTION- Please re-review the Producer Eligibility information concerning HEL, AGI, duplicative payments and how this does NOT apply to the typical landowner. Requiring state agencies to determine and "self-certify" these requirements is preventative for many states that have historically used VPA-HIP.

ANSWER- If your project only provides access, and does not include habitat improvement work, then you most likely don't need to worry about this section. However, if the project included wildlife improvement work, then depending on the type of work, the NRCS may need to ensure that the producer is not also participating in another USDA conservation program which is providing payment for the same work. Should NRCS select a project that triggers this section, then NRCS will coordinate with the State or Tribe to ensure it is met.

The provision that the state agencies will self-certify is applicable in cases where eligibility is going to be required. Awardees will have to work with those state NRCS offices and ensure the landowners complete the required eligibility documentation with their local Farm Service Agency office.

These requirements are not expected to be triggered by most (if not all) proposals submitted by States or Tribes. However, the inclusion of these requirements in the VPA-HIP Notice of Funding Opportunity is required to ensure all federal funding actions are compliant with Executive Orders of the President.

15. Topic – FSA Registration

QUESTION- To determine if land is eligible, do they need to have a Farm and Tract #?

ANSWER- Yes, in cases where eligibility is going to be applicable, then it would require that the land is registered with the USDA Farm Service Agency which requires a farm and tract number, highly erodible land and wetland determination.

16. Topic – AGI- Other covered programs

QUESTION- If the property being enrolled in VPA is in a USDA program like CRP or WRP, then AGI is already met correct?

ANSWER- AGI would have been verified at the time the producer enrolled in the other USDA programs. However, if AGI is applicable for VPA-HIP, the producer/landowner would need to ensure AGI eligibility in the year that they will receive VPA funding.

17. Topic – AGI HEL WC- Incentive Payments only

QUESTION- Just for clarification--if a state simply provides a payment to landowner (say \$5 an acre) for providing public access--no AGI, HEL WC required? Only required if paying to do habitat work or land improvement on landowner's land

ANSWER- That is correct. Payment for providing access only would not trigger the need for meeting USDA eligibility for the landowner nor the land.

WRE/WRP and interaction with other NRCS programs

18. Topic – Program Duplication or involvement with other NRCS programs

QUESTION- Can land enrolled in CSP also be enrolled for access via VPA-HIP funds? If so, please provide an example of how VPA-HIP funds would be considered duplicative on land enrolled in CSP.

ANSWER- Yes, land enrolled in CSP can also be enrolled in VPA-HIP, but habitat improvement practices installed through CSP would not allow for the same conservation practices to be installed using VPA-HIP funds on the same land.

19. Topic – WRE/WRP land

QUESTION- A subset of the funds was designated for WRE/WRP lands. If you do not have a project on WRE/WRP lands, do you have to complete a waiver?

ANSWER- If there are no WRE or WRP lands in the project area, please request a waiver to remove the need for the promotion requirement. Work with your local NRCS State office to find out if these lands are in the project area.

20. Topic – Enrollment in other programs

QUESTION- The NOFO also emphasizes land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). Are you wanting applicants to focus on CREP acres similar to WRE?

ANSWER- No, CREP acres do not have to be the primary focus, but those acres would be eligible for VPA-HIP and must check for possible duplicative practices. Conservation practices that were already installed with CREP or CRP funding would not be allowable for installation with VPA-HIP funding.

21. Topic – WRE/WRP

QUESTION- It was previously stated that the WRE/WRP is public information. Is this information available from the state NRCS office?

ANSWER- Yes, NRCS can provide a GIS layer to let you know exactly where those are located, and it is public information. The Easements Program Division also provides public access for the location of easements via these websites:

<https://www.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=60cb4564f7b4461ca9a61fa224c066ba>
<https://www.conservationeasement.us/>
<https://farmlandinfo.org/statistics/pald/>

22. Topic – WRE/WRP

QUESTION- Regarding the WRE/WRP question answered above - Can NRCS also provide mailing info for those WRE lands to assist with outreach?

ANSWER- NRCS will provide as much information as they legally can, but it might not be the full mailing address and it might not be down to the farm and tract number. There are other ways to promote the program without having the exact landowner contact information such as documenting how you intend to promote access to private lands with WRE and WRP in your state.

23. Topic – WRE/WRP – Reaching landowners

QUESTION- If an existing 1619 agreement is in place, can you get landowner information from NRCS?

ANSWER- NRCS can work with awardees to develop a 1619 cooperator agreement, not the applicants, so there may still be limitations. There are other ways to promote the program without having the exact landowner contact information such as documenting how you intend to promote access to private lands with WRE and WRP in your state.