WASHINGTON STATE CONSERVATION COMMISSION

SUSTAINABLE FARMS & FIELDS

PROGRAMMATIC GUIDELINES

Effective on July 1, 2025.

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Section 1: Introduction and Overview of Sustainable Farms and Fields Grant Program

Program Overview:

The Sustainable Farms and Fields (SFF) grant program was established in statute during the 2020 legislative session with strong bipartisan support, and support from a wide range of stakeholders. The goal of the program is to increase the implementation of climate-smart practices to increase carbon sequestration and reduce carbon dioxide equivalent (greenhouse gases, GHG) emissions on farmland, rangeland, and tidelands in Washington through voluntary incentives. Not only do these practices help mitigate the global impacts of climate change, they increase resiliency to drought, flooding, and other environmental stressors related to climate change. The numerous co-benefits of these practices include improved air and water quality, and increased habitat for wildlife, pollinators, and fish. Implementation of precision agriculture can reduce fossil fuel consumption, further reducing GHG emissions. Moreover, these climate- smart practices help producers save money in their farming operations.

Legislative Intent:

The intent of the 2020 Sustainable Farms and Fields legislation: Findings—Intent—2020 c 351: "The legislature finds that Washington's working agricultural lands are essential to the economic and social well-being of our rural communities and to the state's overall environment and economy. The legislature further finds that different challenges and opportunities exist to expand the use of precision agriculture for different crops in the state by assisting farmers, ranchers, and aquaculturists in purchasing equipment and receiving technical assistance to reduce their operations' carbon footprint while ensuring that crops and soils receive exactly what they need for optimum health and productivity. Moreover, the legislature finds that opportunities exist to enhance soil health through carbon farming and regenerative agriculture by increasing soil organic carbon levels while ensuring appropriate carbon to nitrogen ratios, and storing carbon in standing trees, seaweed, and other vegetation. Therefore, it is the intent of the legislature to provide cost-sharing competitive grant opportunities to enable farmers and ranchers to adopt practices that increase appropriate quantities of carbon stored in and above their soil and to initiate or expand the use of precision agriculture on their farms. This act seeks to leverage and enhance existing state and federal cost-sharing programs for farm, ranch, and aquaculture operations."

Program Overview:

The Sustainable Farms and Fields grant program is established under RCW 89.08.610 through 89.08.635.

Definitions:

Climate-smart practices: for the purpose of SFF, climate-smart practices are those practices used on agricultural land, rangeland, and tidelands that reduce greenhouse gas emissions or sequester (store) carbon.

Carbon dioxide (CO2) equivalent emission: a metric measure used to compare the emission impacts from various greenhouse gases based on their relative radiative forcing effect over a specified period of time compared to carbon dioxide emissions (RCW 89.08.610.) In other words, A carbon dioxide equivalent, or CO2eq, is a unit for measuring greenhouse gases. It allows for the comparison between diverse gases like carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide.

Carbon dioxide (CO2) equivalent impact: a metric measure of the cumulative radiative forcing impacts of both carbon dioxide equivalent emissions and the radiative forcing benefits of carbon storage. (RCW 89.08.610). Having a beneficial CO2eq impact means reducing overall greenhouse gas emissions and/or sequestering carbon."

Pollinator habitat: an area of land that is or may be developed as habitat beneficial for the feeding, nesting, and reproduction of all pollinators, including honey bees, as determined by the department of agriculture.

Precision agriculture: "a management strategy that gathers, processes and analyzes temporal, spatial and individual data and combines it with other information to support management decisions according to estimated variability for improved resource use efficiency, productivity, quality, profitability and sustainability of agricultural production" (International Society of Precision Agriculture, ISPA). Climate-smart precision agriculture strategies are meant to reduce GHG emissions.

The following definitions of "historically underserved producers" are derived from 7 24 C.F.R. Sec. 1470.3 (2022) with additional detail where noted provided by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Outreach and Advocacy definitions.

Beginning farmer or rancher means a person or legal entity who:

1. Has not operated a farm, ranch, or nonindustrial private forestland (NIPF) or who has operated a farm, ranch, or NIPF for not more than 10 consecutive years. The requirement in this paragraph (1) applies to all members of a legal entity who will materially and substantially participate in the operation of the farm or ranch.
2. In the case of a contract with an individual, individually, or with the immediate family, material and substantial participation requires that the individual provide substantial dayto-day labor and management of the farm or ranch, consistent with the practices in the county or State where the farm is located.
3. In the case of a contract with a legal entity or joint operation, all members must materially and substantially participate in the operation of the farm or ranch. Material and substantial participation requires that each of the members provide some amount of the management or labor and management necessary for day-to-day activities, such that if each of the members did not provide these inputs, the operation of the farm or ranch would be seriously impaired.

In the case of a contract made with a legal entity, all members must meet these requirements.

Historically underserved producer means a person, joint operation, legal entity, or Indian Tribe who is a beginning farmer or rancher, socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher, limited resource farmer or rancher, or veteran farmer or rancher.

Limited resource farmer or rancher means:

1. A person with direct or indirect gross farm sales not more than the current indexed value in each of the previous two fiscal years (adjusted for inflation using "prices paid" by the Farmer Index as compiled by the National Agricultural Statistical Service); and
2. Has a total household income at or below the national poverty level for a family of four or less than 50 percent of county median household income in each of the previous two years (to be determined annually using Department of Commerce data).
3. A limited resource farmer or rancher also includes a legal entity or joint operation if all individual members independently qualify under paragraphs (1) and (2) of this definition. A self-determination tool is available to the public and may be completed on-line or printed and completed hardcopy at https://lrftool.sc.egov.usda.gov/.

Socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher means a producer who is a member of a group whose members have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudices without regard to its members' individual qualities. The USDA NRCS further defines socially disadvantaged as an individual or entity who is a member of a socially disadvantaged group. A socially disadvantaged group is a group whose members have been subject to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual qualities. Socially disadvantaged groups consist of the following:

- American Indians or Alaskan Natives
- Asians
- Blacks or African Americans
- Hispanics
- Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders

For an entity, at least 50 percent ownership in the farm business must be held by socially disadvantaged individuals.

Note: Gender alone is not a covered group for the purposes of NRCS conservation program authorities. The term entities reflect a broad interpretation to include partnerships, couples, legal entities, etc.

Veteran farmer or rancher means a producer who meets the definition in section 2501(a)(7) of the Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990, as amended (7 U.S.C. 2279). 7.U.S.C. 2279 defines veteran farmer or rancher as a farmer or rancher who has served in the Armed Forces (as defined in SECTION 101(10) OF TITLE 38) and who—

(A) has not operated a farm or ranch;
(B) has operated a farm or ranch for not more than 10 years; or
(C) is a veteran (as defined in section 101 of that title) who has first obtained status as a veteran (as so defined) during the most recent 10-year period.

A legal entity or joint operation can be a Veteran Farmer or Rancher only if all individual members independently qualify.

Section 2: General Policies

SCC Grants and Contracts Policies

Unless explicitly stated in these programmatic guidelines, recipients of SFF funding must follow policies and procedures established in the Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC) Grant and Contract Procedure Manual. This includes following SCC Cultural Resources Review Process. If you have questions about how to apply this process to a particular project, please reach out to your regional manager or Cultural Resources coordinator Jean Fike (JFike@scc.wa.gov).

The following types of projects do not require a Cultural Resource review and do not need to fill out a Cultural Resources Complied Statement form.

- Technical assistance-only or outreach-only projects
- Purchase of equipment for lease or sharing
- Purchase of seed, seedlings, or amendments for distribution without a particular site identified.

All other types of projects including any on-the-ground practice implementation must follow the Commission's Cultural Resource Review Process and will require a Cultural Resources Complied Statement form for payment.

Eligible Applicants

The Sustainable Farms and Fields program is open to conservation districts and other public entities that possess the expertise to provide technical assistance and/or capacity to implement climate-smart practices:

- Conservation districts
- State Agencies
- Colleges, universities, and extension offices
- Federally recognized Tribes
- Counties
- Cities, towns, and other municipalities
- Special purpose districts

Administration of the Sustainable Farms and Fields program (RCW 89.08.615)

Up to fifteen percent (15%) of funds may be used by SCC to develop, or to consult or contract with private or public entities, such as universities or conservation districts, to develop:

- An educational public awareness campaign and outreach about the sustainable farm and field program; or
- The grant program, including the production of analytical tools, measurement estimation and verification (MEV) methods, cost-benefit measurements, and public reporting methods. Eligible costs associated with MEV development may include efforts led by WSDA for soil sampling and laboratory analysis, as well as data management and analysis.

No more than five percent (5%) of the funds may be used by SCC to cover the program's administrative costs.

SCC shall seek to maximize the benefits of the grant program by leveraging other sources of money, such as state, nonstate, public, and private.

Application timeline and review process

The Sustainable Farms and Fields grant cycle begins at the beginning of each state fiscal year, in the month of July. SCC, in consultation with Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA), Washington State University (WSU), Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), and Natural Resources and Conservation Services (NRCS) will review and select projects based on established prioritization metrics (see Section 5). If funding remains after the first application deadline, additional application deadlines will be announced. The applicant shall be notified by SCC if the application was not selected.

General Requirements

All best management practices (BMPs) must meet NRCS conservation practice standards and specifications, or an SCC-approved practice as outlined in the Grant and Contract Policy and Procedure Manual. An implemented BMP must be maintained for the duration of its estimated NRCS design lifespan.
Any applications involving lands leased from a state agency the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) must include the department's approval in the application.
Speakers at workshop cannot self-promote their own company or products.

SFF funding may be used for conference attendance if the applicant is speaking or presenting at the conference with information about projects/programs that have been or will be implemented under SFF. The expenses related to conference attendance should be included in the project budget at the application stage with sufficient detail for review and pre-approval by the program manager.

Applications

All proposals must be entered into a Formstack application (available on the SFF webpage when applications are being accepted) and contain a detailed description of projects and climate-smart practices, as well as estimated CO2 equivalent impact benefits (i.e., carbon sequestered and/or carbon dioxide equivalent emissions reduced) using COMET Farm, COMET Planner or a similar, SCC-approved model. All projects besides equipment sharing and technical assistance-only projects must be entered into SCC Conservation Practice Data System (CPDS) upon receipt of the award notification.
Conservation districts and other public entities may apply for a single grant from the commission that serves multiple farmers that have been pre-identified in the application. For example, a district might submit one application to provide climate-smart technical assistance or to develop "Carbon Farm plans" (i.e., less comprehensive than conservation farm plans) for farmers and ranchers who have already requested assistance.

Applicants can submit more than one application per fiscal year. For example, a conservation district may submit an application to provide, e.g., technical assistance or cover crop seed for multiple farmers as well as additional applications to implement climate-smart practices for individual farmers.

Additionally, multiple conservation districts and/or other public entities may partner to apply for funding to bundle innovative climate smart practices implemented on multiple farms or ranches at a larger or regional scale.

Funding Amounts

No more than 20% of total annual SFF funds may be awarded to any single grant applicant. The maximum cost-share per landowner or operator per fiscal year is $100K unless a waiver is provided by SCC Executive Director or delegate.

Applicants may add up to 25% of project costs in Technical Assistance funds, if needed to implement the project. Technical assistance funds may include overhead and staff travel. An overhead of up to twenty-five percent 25% is allowed to be billed based on actual hours worked for applicants' staff only. Overhead may not be charged by landowner or operators.

Equipment Purchases & Equipment Sharing

If the purchase of combustion engine-powered equipment is necessary to implement climate-smart practices in a cost-share project, the equipment must be new, or, if used, must have reasonably low mileage/hours, or be in good, working, serviceable condition. The goal is to replace older, high-emission combustion engine-powered equipment with equipment that emits lower emissions.

Districts applying for funds to operate an equipment-sharing program are strongly encouraged to have policies that establish a schedule of rental fees, and handling and inspection procedures that will be used for the loaning out and maintenance of the equipment. Consult regional managers for examples of policies in place at other districts. For any equipment to be shared among multiple districts, an inter-local agreement (ILA) managing the use of equipment is required. **The FEMA equipment usage rates** provides a good example. SFF can fund trailers for equipment sharing but can't fund insurance or registration. SFF can fund staff time to receive the equipment, provide staff training related to the equipment, and set up rental program. SFF cannot provide ongoing funding for the equipment rental program.

One equipment sharing application can be funded per fiscal year per conservation district or other public entity.

Project Timing

Materials purchased for distribution to producers for implementation of climate-smart practices (e.g., cover crop seed) must be received by the applicant and the BMP must be implemented by June 30. The exception to this requirement is for small amounts (e.g., seed packets) distributed for planting without a specific location identified (for example, as part of an outreach event).

Work must be underway on all awarded SFF projects within 120 days of the funding allocation. Work may include technical assistance efforts or the actual implementation of BMPs.

Because SFF is funded through the state operating budget, which runs from July 1-June 30, all projects and practices must be completed no later than June 30 of each year. All technical assistance costs must be vouchered for in the month following the incurred expenditures.

Section 3: Fundable Projects

Allowable Uses of SFF Funding:

Allowable uses of Sustainable Farms and Fields grant funds include the following, based on RCW 89.08.615(6) and 89.08.615(9). A proposed project may include multiple categories of funding.

- **Cost share:** For the implementation of climate-smart BMPs, including the purchase of equipment when necessary. Cost-share projects are typically larger in scale and scope than materials and supplies projects.
- **Technical assistance:** Including services to landowner or operators, such as the development of site-specific "carbon farm plans" (i.e., less comprehensive than conservation farm plans) to increase climate-smart practices that increase carbon sequestration and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. These practices include but are not limited to those that increase soil organic matter levels, increase usage of precision agricultural practices, and reduce livestock GHG emissions.
- **Equipment sharing:** Conservation districts, separately or jointly, may apply for grant funds to operate an equipment-sharing program. Conservation districts may also apply for grant funds on behalf of farm, ranch, or aquaculture operations coordinating as individual businesses or as formal cooperative ventures serving farm, ranch, or aquaculture operations to purchase shared equipment.
- **Materials and supplies*:** Including the purchase of seed, seedlings, spores, animal feed, and amendments for use in implementing climate-smart practices. Materials and supplies projects are intended to involve limited trialing of a practice on a small portion of an operation, implemented with no or minimal TA. Projects of a larger scale should be applied for as cost share.
- **Demonstration*:** This type of project utilizes practices that are not commonly used in a specific region or type of operation/site and showcases the applicability of a technique/ technology for natural resources conservation. The BMPs demonstrated must show local land-users how new technology or innovative methods can conserve natural resources. New and innovative practices include entirely new technologies that have not been utilized on a widespread basis, and those that have yet to be adopted in a regional or operational context. A demonstration project may pay up to 100% for such practices on private or public land, regardless of the district approved cost share rate, on a one- time basis. A demonstration project must be pre-approved by SCC.

  An applicant may apply for SFF funds to demonstrate the use of new or innovative climate-smart technologies and/or practices to local producers. SFF Demonstration projects can be one of two types:

- **Type A demonstration projects** showcase a practice ***eligible*** through SFF that is not commonly used in an area and must include an outreach component.
- **Type B demonstration projects** are used to gather more information about the feasibility and impact of a practice that is ***not yet eligible*** but shows promise as a climate-smart practice.

Allowable Uses of SFF Funding (Continued):

- **Annual payments:** To enrolled participants who have executed a contractual commitment with SCC for verified carbon storage or carbon dioxide equivalent emissions reduction. No contract for carbon storage or changes to management practices may exceed twenty-five years. A program for annual carbon storage payments is under development and not part of the current funding opportunity at this time.
- **Other equipment purchases or financial assistance:** As deemed appropriate by SCC to fulfill the intent of RCW 89.08.610 through 89.08.635, to be evaluated on a case by case basis.

Funding Options for Conservation Districts:

Conservation districts applying for materials and supplies projects or demonstration projects should indicate in the application whether they intend to use the ***District Implemented Project*** (DIP) approach or the ***Cost Share*** approach. Generally, projects that provide a clear benefit to the farm/operation fit better as cost share while projects providing primarily environmental benefits make better DIP projects. Refer to the DIP section of the Grants and Contracts Policy and Procedure Manual for more details.

Section 4: Eligible Climate-Smart Practices

Climate-smart practices include NRCS practice standards for greenhouse gas emission reduction and carbon sequestration, and NRCS Climate Smart Agriculture and Forestry (CSAF) Mitigation Practices for Fiscal Year 2023. SCC may approve additional practices as deemed appropriate. This list is not exhaustive and will be updated as additions are made to the NRCS list of climate-smart CPS and SCC list of approved climate-smart practices.

Additional practices may be proposed to the program manager by February 1 to be considered for the list of eligible practices for the next application window. The list of SFF approved climate-smart practices will be updated, as needed, by the SFF Technical Advisory and Review Committee and the link to the currently approved practices will be updated before each application window opens.

Section 5: Prioritization of Proposed Projects

SCC, in consultation with WSDA, WSU, NRCS, and WDFW will prioritize grant applications based on the ability of the proposed projects to increase carbon sequestration and reduce carbon dioxide equivalent emissions. Other factors that may be considered to prioritize applications include but are not limited to: geographic distribution, commodity distribution, farm size, DEI, and creation of riparian or pollinator habitat to ensure that the SFF funds are implemented broadly and fairly.

Increasing carbon dioxide equivalent impact benefits

Applications will be prioritized based on the ability to increase carbon sequestration and/or reduce carbon dioxide equivalent emissions through the following activities (RCW 89.08.620(2)):

(a) Increase the quantity of organic carbon in topsoil through practices including, but not limited to, cover cropping, no-till and minimum tillage conservation practices, crop rotations, manure application, biochar application, compost application, and changes in grazing management;

(b) Increase the quantity of organic carbon in aquatic soils;

(c) Intentionally integrate trees (i.e., agroforestry), shrubs, seaweed, or other vegetation into management of agricultural and aquacultural lands, with preference for native vegetation where practicable and appropriate;

(d) Reduce or avoid carbon dioxide equivalent emissions in or from soils;

(e) Reduce nitrous oxide and methane emissions through changes to livestock or soil management;

(f) Reduce or avoid carbon dioxide equivalent emissions through increased energy efficiency or reduced fuel use; and

(g) Increase usage of precision agricultural practices to reduce fossil fuel emissions.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI):

Projects that serve historically underserved producers (as defined by NRCS, see definitions section) will be ranked higher. Historically underserved producers include the following categories of farmers or ranchers: Limited Resource, Beginning, Socially Disadvantaged, or Veteran.

Fish and Pollinator Habitat Creation:

Projects that create riparian buffers or other fish habitat enhancements, or that create pollinator forage/habitat will be receive higher prioritization. Conversely, projects that damage fish and wildlife habitat will be downgraded.

Partnerships:

Applications submitted by public entities will be ranked higher if they are partnering with their local conservation districts.

Sustainable Farms and Fields Prioritization Scoring Metrics:

These scoring metrics are developed and approved by the SFF prioritization committee consisting of SCC, WSDA, WSU, NRCS, and WDFW staff. Last updated for FY26.

In the case of special one-time appropriations administered within Sustainable Farms and Fields, commission staff will work with a separate advisory committee for the purpose of crafting and adopting scoring criteria specific to those one-time appropriations.

Project Type	Technical Assistance	Cost Share	Materials & Supplies	Equipment Sharing	Demo
Potential of the proposed projects to increase carbon sequestration and reduce carbon dioxide equivalent emissions (e.g., using COMET Planner, COMET Farm, NRCS Qualitative Ranking)	-	5	5	5	5
Creation of riparian buffers/fish habitat	-	1	1	-	1
Creation of pollinator habitat	-	1	1	-	1
Partnerships/collaboration	2	2	2	2	4
Benefit to multiple land owners/ managers	2	2	2	2	2
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	2	2	2	2	2
Completeness of application materials submitted	2	2	2	2	2
Fits within program priorities	2	2	2	2	2
Clearly demonstrates or describes ability to complete project (including expanding existing project, having producers identified prior to application, achievable timeline for project completion)	6	6	6	6	6
Total Possible Score*	**16**	**23**	**23**	**21**	**25**

*Note that projects will be compared across categories by considering the score received as a percentage of total maximum possible score.

In addition to considering the above metrics, the selection committee may seek to distribute funding based on categories: geography, land use type/commodity type served, farm size served. The selection committee may choose to award extra points to applicants (CDs and other public entities) as well as to applications including land owners/managers that have not previously been awarded SFF funding.

Section 6: Reporting and the SFF Measurement and Estimation Verification System (MEV)

SCC consults regularly with WSDA, WSU, NRCS, and the Washington Soil Health Initiative (WaSHI) to improve the SFF MEV system for estimating, measuring, and/or verifying sequestered carbon, and/or reductions in carbon dioxide equivalent emissions.

For the first five years of the SFF grant program, SCC anticipates using COMET Farm to estimate cumulative GHG emissions reduced and/or carbon sequestered by the implementation of climate-smart practices funded through SFF. The carbon equivalency metrics, or global warming potentials (GWPs), used in the COMET dataset were first published in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fourth Assessment Report (AR4), and are consistent with methods used in the Inventory of United States Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks. Currently utilized GWPs (IPCC 2021 AR6) are as follows:

- 1 ton of CO2 = 1 ton CO2eq
- 1 ton of CH4 = 20.8 tons CO2eq (fossil origin) / 27.2 tons CO2eq (non fossil origin)
- 1 ton of N2O = 273 tons CO2eq
- 1 ton of C = 3.7 tons CO2eq

Project managers will be responsible for using COMET Farm for estimating project impacts, except in situations where it's not possible to use COMET Farm due to limitations of the tool. In these cases, project managers will work with SFF program manager to identify the appropriate tool for estimating CO2eq impact.

COMET estimates based on these carbon equivalency metrics in region- and practice-specific models will be used in the first five years of the SFF grant program. Where possible, program partners will evaluate and update practice-specific models used by the SFF program. Participants who commit to contracted long-term carbon storage will be required to verify quantities of carbon sequestered through a more robust sampling methodology established by WSDA, WSU, the Washington State Soil Health Initiative (WaSHI), and/or third party verifiers where necessary or appropriate.

Districts or other public entities receiving funds for non-TA projects will be required to submit photos (before and after) as part of the reporting process.

Districts or other public entities receiving equipment sharing awards may be required to report annually on shared equipment use for up to 10 years or the length of time that the piece of equipment is part of the equipment sharing program. This reporting will contribute to long-term data collection to track climate-smart practices funded through Sustainable Farms and Fields.

The following information will be reported annually:

- Equipment type;
- Fiscal year of equipment purchase;
- Whether the equipment is still owned by the organization and part of an equipment rental program;
- which practice(s) are the focus of this equipment purchase;

Section 6 (Continued)

For the fiscal year:

- Number of producers using this equipment purchased through these funds;
- Number of acres impacted by use of this equipment;
- Estimated CO2eq impact of equipment (based on per acre estimate completed at application stage).

SCC, WSDA, WSU, and/or district staff will coordinate with the SFF applicant and, with reasonable notice to the recipient of SFF funding, monitor the results of the funded projects. Monitoring may include collecting soil samples, which will be used to improve the Measurement and Estimation Verification (MEV) system.

SCC shall maintain a public list of projects and pertinent information, to be updated annually. Data may include a summary of state and federal funds, private funds spent, landowner or operator and other private cost-share matching expenditures, the total number of projects, and an estimate of carbon sequestered or carbon dioxide equivalent emissions reduced.

Landowner or operators who receive SFF funding will have the option to allow their business to be listed in SCC's public biennial SFF report.