



\$310 Million Is On The Table. Is Your Proposal Actually Ready?

AUGUST 24

2026 RCPP DEADLINE

Winning the RCPP funding is only half the fight. NRCS is not going to ask whether you can run a producer program at scale, but they are absolutely going to find out. This is the checklist that makes sure the answer is yes, before you hit submit.

42

Checklist points across 5 categories

5

Common mistakes that sink strong proposals

20 MIN

Free application review with our team

Before You Submit: How To Use This Checklist

Ever stared down a \$310 million funding notice and felt the excitement curdle into "okay, but can we actually pull this off?" We have been in that room with dozens of RCPP applicants, and here is the pattern we see every single cycle: the proposals that win, and then actually deliver, are the ones where someone stress-tested the operations before they wrote the last paragraph.

This checklist is built from what we have seen across dozens of producer-facing programs. It is organized into five categories that mirror how NRCS actually evaluates RCPP proposals, plus how program administrators actually survive year one.

- ☐ **Work through each section in order.**
Strategic fit comes before proposal writing. Data design comes before enrollment opens.
- ☐ **Check the box only if it is true today.**
Not "we plan to." Not "we could." If it's aspirational, leave it unchecked and flag it as a to-do.
- ☐ **Use the benchmarks on page 5 to sanity-check your numbers.**
If your projected staff capacity does not match reality, NRCS reviewers and your own team will find out eventually. Better now.
- ☐ **Bring unchecked boxes to your 20-minute review.**
That is exactly what the call at the end of this checklist is for.

A

Strategic Fit & Eligibility

7 CHECKPOINTS

- ☐ **Our organization type qualifies as an RCPP lead partner.**
Nonprofit, cooperative, university/extension, conservation district, Indian tribe, water district, or producer association.
- ☐ **We already have real relationships with the producers we intend to enroll.**
RCPP was built to fund partners with existing trust on the ground, not to build that trust from scratch.
- ☐ **We have identified which track fits our program: Classic or AFA.**
Classic run-through NRCS contracts and easements. AFA gives us direct control over program design.
- ☐ **We know which resource concern our project leads with.**
Soil health, water quality, or wildlife habitat. NRCS ranks proposals on how clearly this is addressed.
- ☐ **We can articulate how our project incorporates precision agriculture or technology-enabled targeting.**
- ☐ **We have reviewed the Farmers First priorities and can point to specific alignment.**
- ☐ **If applicable, we have explored the \$30 million tribal-led set-aside for fit.**

B

Proposal Competitiveness

8 CHECKPOINTS

- ☐ **Our proposal narrative leads with producer impact, not internal process.**
Reviewers are scoring conservation outcomes, not our org chart.
- ☐ **We have quantified our enrollment target and shown our math.**
Vague participation numbers read as guesses. Specific numbers read as a plan.
- ☐ **We can name the exact conservation practices producers will adopt.**
- ☐ **Our budget reflects the true cost of enrollment, verification, and reporting, not just incentive payments.**
- ☐ **We have a credible plan for reaching producers who are historically underserved by NRCS programs.**
- ☐ **Our proposal shows we understand the 75 percent farmer/practice cost-share requirement.**
- ☐ **We have letters of support or partner commitments lined up before submission.**
- ☐ **Someone outside our writing team has read the proposal cold and can summarize it in one sentence.**
If they cannot, a reviewer will not either.

C

Data & Reporting Design

7 CHECKPOINTS

- ☐ **We started with our final NRCS reporting deliverable and worked backward.**
Not the other way around. Collecting data you cannot report on later is wasted effort.
- ☐ **We have defined exactly what verification documentation each practice requires.**
- ☐ **We know whether we need geo-tagged, timestamped photo verification, and how we will collect it.**
- ☐ **Our data fields match what county committees and funders actually ask for.** HIGH RISK
- ☐ **We have a plan to centralize farm records digitally, not in personal inboxes or scattered spreadsheets.**
- ☐ **We have staged our data collection: eligibility first, heavier documentation after commitment.**
- ☐ **We can generate a compliance-ready report without manual reconciliation the week before a deadline.**

D

Operational Infrastructure Before Enrollment

8 CHECKPOINTS

- ☐ **We have run at least one internal test application before opening enrollment.**
This is the single most skipped step and the one that causes the most cleanup later.
- ☐ **A producer can determine their own eligibility in about five minutes.**
- ☐ **Our enrollment process does not ask for everything up front.**
- ☐ **We have estimated staff review time per application and it is realistic at scale.**
- ☐ **We know our program's real operational ceiling, not just our funding ceiling.** HIGH RISK
- ☐ **We have a structured support channel for participant questions.**
So one staff member is not fielding the same question fifty times.
- ☐ **We are not relying on spreadsheets as our primary active management system.**
- ☐ **We have a plan for what happens to program knowledge if a key staff member leaves mid-cycle.**

- ☐ We have a payment disbursement plan with an audit trail NRCS and funders can follow.
- ☐ We can produce reports segmented by location, commodity, or demographic on demand.
- ☐ We have accepted that producers submit imperfect data first and built in a correction step.
Programs that reject imperfect early submissions lose participants. Programs that guide correction keep them.
- ☐ We know how many direct staff touches our current process requires per participant.
Well-run programs get this down to 1-3. Manual ones run 6-10.
- ☐ We have a communication cadence planned for after approval, not just during enrollment.
- ☐ We have identified who owns program continuity if our point person changes roles.
- ☐ We have a realistic timeline from award notification to first producer enrolled.

Know Your Numbers Before NRCS Does

Most RCPP expansion plans fail for one reason organizations size their program to their funding instead of their operational throughput. Here is what well-structured programs actually look like.

<10 MIN

Time for a producer to complete initial enrollment in a well-built program

5-15 MIN

Realistic staff review time per application once workflows are standardized

80-95%

Completion rate with guided digital enrollment, vs. under 40% for manual, document-heavy processes.

50-100

Participants one FTE can manage with fully manual processes

500-1,500

Participants one FTE can manage with structured digital workflows

1,000s

Participants one FTE can manage with automated intake, notifications, and tracking

Five Mistakes That Sink Strong Proposals

Winning an RCPP award and then delivering on it are two different skill sets. Here is where we consistently see well-funded, well-intentioned programs get stuck.

Launching before workflow testing.

- 1 Opening enrollment without running internal test applications almost always surfaces unclear instructions, missing fields, and approval bottlenecks you will spend months cleaning up.

Collecting everything up front.

- 2 Asking for all possible information at application slows adoption and increases abandonment. Stage it: eligibility first, then contracting, then verification, then reporting documentation.

Underestimating participant support needs.

- 3 Approval is not the finish line. Without structured support, staff end up handling hundreds of individual emails instead of administering the program.

Relying on spreadsheets for active management.

- 4 Spreadsheets struggle the moment you are tracking applications, approvals, payments, and communications at the same time. The cost is not just time, it is trust in your own data.

Designing for perfect data instead of real behavior.

- 5 Producers submit approximate information first and refine later. Programs that reject imperfect early submissions see lower participation than programs that guide correction over time.

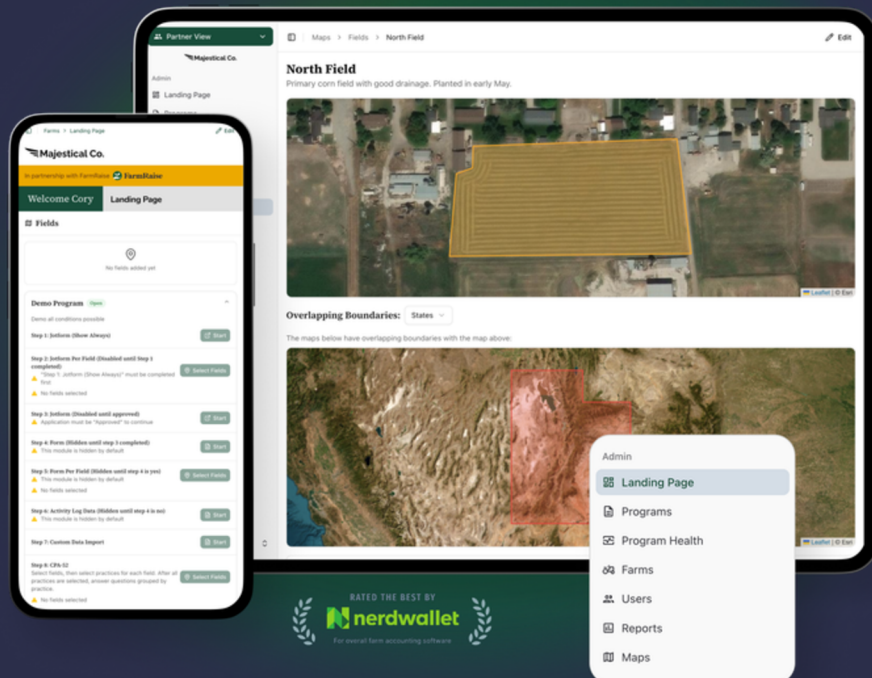
You Have The Checklist. Now Let's Pressure-Test The Proposal.

Every unchecked box on the last six pages is a question an NRCS reviewer, or your own staff six months from now, is eventually going to ask.

Let us help you close the gaps while there is still time before August 24.

**Want us to review your application before submission?
Schedule 20 minutes to walk through it with us.**

Book a free 20-minute review at farmraise.com or reach us directly at taylor@farmraise.us



FarmRaise supports nonprofits, cooperatives, universities, and tribal governments administering RCPP Classic and AFA projects, with digital enrollment, on-farm verification, payment disbursement, and compliance reporting built for federal requirements.