

# RVCC FARM BILL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY-BASED AND COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY

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Over the past year, Congress has made historic investments in conservation, ecological restoration, watershed health, and wildfire risk mitigation. Federal agencies now face the enormous and vitally important task of ensuring those dollars result in meaningful outcomes on the ground. The reauthorization of the Farm Bill in 2023 presents a prime opportunity to ensure that federal agencies and their partners have the tools and authorities needed to maximize the use, impacts, and effectiveness of recent investments to achieve lasting conservation outcomes.

Recognizing this unique moment in time, the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC) convened a working group to develop recommendations for the 2023 Farm Bill. Capacity-building quickly rose to the top as our priority topic. In order to ensure the effective use of current investments, there is a need to use the power of Farm Bill programs and authorities to build

capacity of community-based and collaborative partners and efforts. This capacity is crucial for developing the sustained social and physical infrastructure and the enabling conditions necessary to effectively and optimally use federal investments. Building community-based capacity in particular has been recognized as a key means of reducing barriers to access and advancing equity within U.S. Department of Agriculture programs. The recommendations below outline various strategies for Farm Bill programs and authorities that would bolster collaborative and community-based partners and efforts, both in terms of internal resources and capabilities and in their ability to use and access Farm Bill programs.

## Defining community-based, collaborative capacity

Our recommendations focus on solutions that would support and increase capacity for **two types of entities**:

- Community-based entities (including place-based collaborative groups, nonprofits, Tribes, Intertribal groups, Native organizations, and special district governments such as resource conservation districts).
- Entities that support community-based collaborative processes and efforts.

Our recommendations also support the **activities and functions that enable collaborative, community-based approaches** including: relationship-building, coordination, and convening among partners; planning and prioritization; project development and design; partner & landowner outreach and engagement; agency engagement with partners; technical support and resources; grant applications and fundraising; workforce development and training; monitoring, evaluation and adaptive management; financial and administrative operations (indirect); equipment and supplies; influence/involvement in federal decision-making, including co-management.

Avenues to increase community-based and collaborative capacity include:

- Increased access to existing programs and funding sources for the entities named above
- Additional funding or other support (such as technical assistance) for the activities and functions named above
- Increased authority or opportunity to engage in community-based collaborative approaches to land management and conservation, including broader participation of underrepresented or marginalized interests.

## Cross-cutting Themes

### 1 **STANDALONE COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY & COMMUNITY-BASED FUNDING**

Provide dedicated funding for the people, activities, and resources necessary to undertake collaborative and community-based work.

**Justification:** *Effective use and implementation of many Farm Bill programs and authorities requires established partnerships and relationships; stakeholder engagement and support; well-developed plans and proposals; and coordination, administration, and implementation capacity. However, there is little to no funding to support the community-based, collaborative efforts required to create these enabling conditions. Dedicated support is needed for this work, whether through new standalone funding or dedicated funding in existing programs.*

#### **Proposed solutions**

- i. Develop a standalone program that funds place-based or community-based entities working on activities that increase capacity for collaborative conservation activities. Potential models include the Network for Landscape Conservation's [National Landscape Partnerships Fund](#)<sup>1</sup> proposal and the National Community Capacity and Land Stewardship Program proposed in the Wildfire Emergency Act of 2021.<sup>2</sup> Agencies should be encouraged to work with and through partners on program design, funding criteria and distribution, and monitoring.

<sup>1</sup> National Landscape Partnerships Fund key elements include federal funding for cross-boundary and community-grounded partnerships; support focused on backbone coordinating, technical, and administrative capacity; a peer-learning and exchange network for grant recipients; and funding administration by a federally chartered entity.

<sup>2</sup> National Community Capacity and Land Stewardship Program, included in the "Wildfire Emergency Act of 2021" bill (S.1855). Key elements of this program include single or multi-year Forest Service grants; support for planning, collaboration and building community support, implementation, and monitoring activities; purpose of increasing community capacity for land stewardship and ecological restoration activities on national forests, grasslands or adjacent state, private or trust land.

- ii. Authorize the Forest Service, and the National Forest System in particular, to enter into cooperative agreements with eligible parties to support the overall work and capacity support needs of forest and grassland collaboratives working on Federal and adjacent non-Federal lands.
- iii. Modify current programs and authorities to more deliberately incorporate or allow for funding of activities named above (partnership and relationship-building, public outreach, planning and evaluation, coordination, administration, and implementation capacity). This is especially important for programs and authorities that intend to support larger scale, cross-boundary, and/or collaborative projects such as the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership, the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, the Water Source Protection Program, Stewardship Authority, and Good Neighbor Authority.

## 2 MATCH FLEXIBILITY

Increase match flexibility and exceptions to enable greater participation by under-resourced, community-based partners.

**Justification:** Cost sharing requirements often present a barrier to partners' ability to utilize Farm Bill programs. They especially hinder engagement by lower capacity, under-resourced partners and communities, though they also can frustrate efforts to scale up projects because match requirements outmatch the financial resources of even well-funded entities.

### Proposed solutions

- i. Build on Forest Service Chief Randy Moore's Interim Policy Direction regarding expanding cost-share considerations to include in-kind support and waiving or reducing policy match requirements for agreements with Tribal governments, under-resourced partners, and partners serving underserved communities.<sup>3</sup> Consider longer-term or more permanent match flexibility, cost-share reductions, and/or match or cost-share exceptions for community-based entities, Tribes, and partners that serve those entities. Refer to language in the Inflation Reduction Act or the Forest Service's Interim Policy Direction as models.

## 3 COMMUNITY AND TRIBAL CO-MANAGEMENT

Strengthen and support strategies for co-management by local communities and Tribes.

**Justification:** Community-based entities, Tribes, and collaborative efforts build valuable capacity, experience, and empowerment through utilization of programs and authorities that enable co-management approaches. There is a need to maintain and bolster programs and authorities that provide opportunities for these entities to have greater involvement in land management and conservation strategies.

### Proposed solutions include continued support for:

- i. Community Forest and Open Space Program
- ii. Good Neighbor Authority
- iii. Tribal Forest Protection Act (TFPA) and "638" Authority
- iv. Additional opportunities for Tribal co-stewardship, as put forward by entities such as the [Intertribal Timber Council](https://www.itcnet.org/)<sup>4</sup> and the Native Farm Bill Coalition in its report, "[Gaining Ground: A Report on the 2018 Farm Bill Successes for Indian Country and Opportunities for 2023](https://www.nativefarmbill.com/gaining-ground)."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fs.usda.gov/inside-fs/leadership/interim-policy-changes-partnership-and-cooperator-agreements>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.itcnet.org/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nativefarmbill.com/gaining-ground>





## 4 UP-FRONT FUNDING

Consider opportunities to provide advance funding – instead of reimbursements – to enable greater participation by under-resourced partners and landowners.

**Justification:** *It is often challenging for partners and landowners with fewer financial resources to cover the cost of conservation activities up front, and wait to be reimbursed.*

### Solutions

- i. Provide full advance payments (instead of reimbursement payments) for socially disadvantaged producers/landowners or partners serving socially disadvantaged producers/landowners.

## Program/Authority-specific

## 5 JOINT CHIEFS' LANDSCAPE RESTORATION PARTNERSHIP

Create a five-year authorization for the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership (Joint Chiefs) as proposed in the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership Act of 2021 (S.1603), with an emphasis on the expenditure of a portion of discretionary funding for local capacity building, technical assistance, and project development.

**Justification:** *Joint Chiefs' represents a valuable source of support for strategic, cross-boundary wildfire risk reduction, protection of water quality and supply, and wildlife habitat restoration work that is often collaboratively developed and supported. In addition to implementation dollars, funding is needed for activities such as partnership building, proposal development, landowner support and engagement, and technical assistance that are critical to successfully plan and carry out these projects. This funding is most effective when made available well before and separate from project implementation dollars.*

### Solutions

- i. Create a five-year authorization for the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership, as codified in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (based on the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership Act of 2021). Provide Congressional direction that the 20% of funding not explicitly allocated to USFS or NRCS for eligible activities should be used for technical assistance, project development, or local capacity building. Retaining a percentage of programmatic funding for these purposes will continue to support communities in identifying consensus-driven projects that can effectively reduce wildfire risk, protect water quality and supply, and improve wildlife habitat at the landscape scale.

## 6 COLLABORATIVE FOREST LANDSCAPE RESTORATION PROGRAM

Reauthorize the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) and specify an intent for program design and funding to support collaborative engagement and important coordination provided by local partners.

**Justification:** *The unique appeal and success of CFLRP is based in its landscape-scale approach and incorporation of collaborative engagement from planning through implementation of forest restoration projects. Local partners are integral to operationalizing these features and supporting overall project success through assisting with multi-party monitoring, fostering collaborative input and convenings, leveraging resources, and other functions. However, there is no formal or dedicated CFLRP funding source or required Forest Service staffing assistance for partners playing this crucial support role. There could also be consideration of new approaches to planning that create efficiencies by building upon collaboratively developed zones of agreement.*

### Solutions

- i. Reauthorize CFLRP through 2032 and require the Forest Service to develop a staffing plan that provides support to the associated collaboratives.
- ii. Include report language or statutory text to require or encourage the allocation of CFLRP dollars toward non-Forest Service partners to provide coordination, relationship-building, facilitation, and other CFLRP collaborative support functions. This could be support for one FTE or a commitment to allocate a certain percent of funding (others have used 10%) to external coordination.
- iii. [CFLRP 2.0](#): Would allow successful CFLRP projects to develop CFLRP Management Plans (CMPs) consisting of collaborative zones of agreements or other proposals for action, using the 2012 planning rule. The intent is to create a set of “benchmarks,” “zones of agreement,” “screens,” or other “requirements” applicable only to CFLRP projects. The CMP would be the applicable land and resource management plan for all CFLRP activities.

## 7 REGIONAL CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

Modify the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) to make it more accessible to smaller, community-based partners and more supportive of the diversity of activities and capacities needed to accomplish local partners’ goals and outcomes.

**Justification:** *RCPP is an innovative program that encourages larger-scale efforts built on partnership-based approaches. It also has a steep learning curve and requires strong partnerships, skilled and robust administration, and baseline partner capacity to develop strong applications and implement effectively. Further, the program’s structure makes it challenging for smaller, less-resourced organizations to apply and participate.*

### Solutions

- i. Allow for a small percentage of RCPP funding to be used to cover administrative costs.
- ii. Increase the flexibility in partner contribution requirements and eliminate minimum partner contribution ratio.
- iii. Increase the program’s Technical Assistance (TA) cap, and its enhancement TA cap in particular, to allow partners the necessary funding and flexibility to best support project management and delivery.
- iv. Expand the range of activities covered by TA funding to explicitly include capacity-building activities like workforce development, assessments and planning, partnership building and outreach, and research that informs partners’ work.
- v. Offer NRCS planning grants that give potential RCPP applicants the capacity to put together partnerships, learn the program, and develop effective proposals.
- vi. Explore creating a pool of RCPP funding dedicated to small community-based partners and partners with demonstrated history and focus on working with historically underserved groups.



## 8 STEWARDSHIP END RESULTS CONTRACTING AUTHORITY

Reinforce the function of stewardship contracting authority as a tool to support collaborative restoration.

**Justification:** Stewardship contracting authority remains a powerful tool for land management agencies to accomplish restoration through a partnership approach that leverages resources and prioritizes local community benefit. Stewardship contracting is also specifically named in the IIJA as a mechanism for implementing millions of dollars of ecological restoration activities on federal land. With minor modifications, the authority could be more effectively used to support local collaborative priorities and capacity building.

### Solutions

- i. Modify statute to incorporate Forest Service guidance that stewardship retained receipts can be used to support collaboration-related expenses. Forest Service directives state: “Retained receipts may...support the collaborative process by paying for facilitation, meeting rooms, travel, and minor amounts of incidental expenses.”
- ii. Promote the use of 10 and 20-year stewardship contracting agreements or contracts when there is demonstrated support from local partners and collaborative groups.

## 9 GOOD NEIGHBOR AUTHORITY

Enhance the utility of Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) by expanding the revenue retention authority, extending the sunset date, and enabling its use for workforce training and development.

**Justification:** GNA has proven to be a valuable mechanism for implementing important restoration activities. The revenue retention provision of the authority has enabled state agencies to build internal capacity for implementing restoration activities on federal lands. However, this provision has not been extended to counties and Tribes, which some say has disincentivized more widespread use of the authority among these entities and hindered their access to the capacity-building opportunities afforded to states. The 2023 sunset date of the current state-specific revenue retention provision is also problematic for GNA agreements that extend beyond this date and anticipate revenue generation.

### Solutions

- i. We support the following recommendation put forward in the Native Farm Bill Coalition’s [“Gaining Ground” report](#): “Amend the necessary language in the 2018 Farm Bill to give full authority to Tribal Nations and counties to retain and utilize revenue generated from Good Neighbor Authority projects.”
- ii. Extend the revenue provision for states beyond 2023.
- iii. Expand the ability for GNA agreements and revenues to be used for workforce training and development that has direct benefits to restoration implementation.





## 10 TRIBAL FOREST PROTECTION ACT/638 AUTHORITY

Make the Tribal Forest Protection Act (TFPA) and “638” self determination contract authority permanent and create funding opportunities to enable greater Tribal participation.

**Justification:** TFPA and 638 contracting show promise in enabling greater Tribal co-stewardship of federal lands. They should be expanded and funded to fully realize this potential and increase participation by Tribes.

### Solutions

- i. We support the following recommendations put forward in the Native Farm Bill Coalition's [“Gaining Ground” report](#): “Make these 638 authorities permanent and dedicate funding to TFPA 638 contracts.”
- ii. Make clear, via report language or some other mechanism, that funding other than appropriated dollars (such as stewardship retained receipts and K-V dollars) can be used to fund 638 contracts.
- iii. Make TFPA authority and 638 contracting more accessible to Alaska Native Tribes.

## 11 ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION INSTITUTES

Expand the work of Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes across the West.

**Justification:** The Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes fulfill several important functions, including research and monitoring, collaboration, decision support, science communication and application, and a place-based focus. Over the course of their work, the institutes provide valuable technical support to facilitate collaborative, adaptive management approaches to forest restoration that are informed by the best available science. There is a need to expand this model to other parts of the West to help build local-level capacity for strategic, effective, and collaborative restoration and conservation actions.

### Solutions

- i. The Secretary of Agriculture, in consultation with the Secretary of Interior, should explore the establishment of additional Ecological Restoration Institutes across the West that mirror the model established by the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes but include considerations for differences in regional ecological considerations and needs of local land managers and collaborative partners (e.g. greater emphasis on rangelands or greater emphasis on collaborative capacity building). This exploration could consider creation of institutes in Idaho, Nevada, and Utah, which are already identified in PL 108-317, as well as the creation of institutes in Western states that are not identified in this legislation but have similar wildfire risk reduction and forest restoration needs. The establishment and funding of new institutes should not come at the expense of the funding for the three existing SWERIs, nor should it affect the authorizations and requirements articulated in PL 108-317.
  1. Note: Any creation of new institutes would benefit from engagement by and coordination with existing SWERIs as well as a range of stakeholders including potential host institutions and potentially affected entities at local, regional, and national scales.

## 12 WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Support workforce training and development via locally driven economic development strategies.

**Justification:** The implementation of conservation activities – from riparian restoration to hazardous fuels removal – depends on local workforce and private industry capacity. Communities need resources to support workforce and economic development strategies that are appropriate to their local context, including industry type, natural resources issues, and job markets.

### Solutions

- i. Revive the [Forest Service's Economic Action Program](#) to catalyze local industry innovation, employment opportunities, and economic development projects.
- ii. Support local businesses, community-based organizations, and local educational institutions to hire and train local restoration workforces. This can include grants to these entities to incentivize hiring and training.
- iii. Align agency authorities and existing funding streams to provide multi-year community-based economic development funding, similar to the America the Beautiful Challenge.
- iv. Create the 21st Century Civilian Conservation—or Climate Corps— that is tasked with planning, building capacity for, and implementing restoration activities on national forest lands.
- v. Create a new State Prescribed Fire Assistance Program and budget line item within the Forest Service State and Private Forestry program designed to provide financial assistance to state foresters in support of workforce, training, equipment, planning and implementation of prescribed fire programs, including managing certification programs for burn practitioners. Allow flexibility for states to use Tribes, non-governmental and private contractors to fulfill core functions, regrant or pass-through funds as may be needed to achieve fire management goals.
- vi. Support existing models of prescribed fire training in the western U.S. (e.g., Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges) and complement those with additional centers that facilitate training between federal and state agencies and external partners. Prioritize establishing an Indigenous-led training center that can support prescribed fire and cultural burning practitioners

## 13 TECHNICAL SERVICE PROVIDERS

Facilitate the ability for non-NRCS entities to become Technical Service Providers

**Justification:** The availability of Technical Service Providers has become a barrier for effective utilization of NRCS programs in some places. Facilitating the process for local entities to become TSPs increases local capacity for implementing conservation activities.

### Solutions

- i. Facilitate training and certification of non-agency TSPs.
- ii. Improve reciprocity for necessary TSP certifications across agencies, states, and between the private and public sector.
- iii. Allow TSPs to become certified in a bundle or portfolio of conservation and restoration practices rather than requiring unique certification processes for each practice standard or activity.



## Funding Recommendations<sup>4</sup>

Program	FY'22 estimate	FY'23 Budget Request	RVCC Farm Bill Request (annual authorization)
Standalone collaborative capacity funding via: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National Landscape Partnerships Fund</li> <li>and/or</li> <li>National Community Capacity and Land Stewardship Program</li> </ul>	n/a	n/a	\$10 million per program
Community Forest and Open Space Conservation	\$4 million	\$4 million	\$20 million
Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership <sup>5</sup>	--	–	\$90 million
The Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program	\$13.8 million	\$80 million	\$100 million
Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes <sup>6</sup>	\$6 million	\$7.5 million	\$15 million
Landscape Scale Restoration	\$14 million	\$20 million	\$20 million
Regional Conservation Partnership Program	\$300 million	\$300 million	\$300 million
Environmental Quality Incentives Program	\$1.850 million	\$2.025 billion	\$2.025 billion
Conservation Stewardship Program	\$800 million	\$1 billion	\$1 billion
Agricultural Conservation Easement Program	\$450 million	\$450 million	\$450 million
Healthy Forests Reserve Program (or equivalent program, such as the proposed Forest Conservation Easement Program)	–	\$20 million	\$100 million
Community Wood Energy and Wood Innovation Program (Community Wood)	\$10 million	\$10 million	\$10 million
Wood Innovation Program	\$8.4 million	\$15 million	\$15 million
Implementation via Tribal authorities <sup>7</sup>	–	–	\$11 million

<sup>4</sup> Sources: <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/30a-2023-FS.pdf>; <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2023-usda-budget-summary.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act formalized the JCLRP and authorized \$180 million (for FY2022 and FY2023 only)

<sup>6</sup> The Southwest Forest Health and Wildfires Prevention Act of 2004 authorized the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes at \$15 million annually

<sup>7</sup> In the Forest Service's FY 2023 Budget Justification, the Forest Service stated that it will "utilize \$11 million of base funds from multiple programs to increase equity for Tribes to expand utilization of the Tribal Forest Protection Act (TFPA), the TFPA 638 pilot, and other authorities which allow Tribes to participate in stewardship contracts and other agreements."