
LAND & WATER CONSERVATION FUND Open Project Selection Process and Project Scoring Criteria

Iowa Department of Natural Resources
State Parks, Forests and Preserves Bureau



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PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) was established by Congress in 1964 to provide outdoor recreation opportunities to all Americans. The fund supports the LWCF State and Local Assistance Program, which provides 1:1 matching grants to states and through states to local governments for the acquisition and development of public outdoor recreation areas and facilities.

The National Parks Service (NPS) oversees the LWCF State Assistance Program and has delegated administration of the program to each state. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) administers the program at the state level.

IOWA'S ANNUAL APPORTIONMENT

The LWCF program is funded through revenue generated from off-shore oil and gas drilling. LWCF monies are apportioned to the states each year in accordance with a formula contained in the LWCF Act. Over the last five years, Iowa's average annual apportionment has been approximately \$2.8M. Any unexpended balance reverts to a special reapportionment account (SRA), which Iowa must request be reapportioned back to Iowa. Annual apportionment and any SRA funds can be used towards funding projects each year.

In the event that requests exceed the annual apportionment plus SRA funds available for local projects, applications will be recommended for funding based on the priority rating system. Projects will be fully funded (per application request) until the difference cannot fully fund the next in line. Any remaining amount will be offered to the next highest-rated project to partially fund their request. If this applicant does not accept partial funding, the amount will be offered to the next in line, until an applicant accepts or the program runs out of eligible projects (applications rated 60 points or higher).

Once funding recommendations are complete for the year, if any projects withdraw within the cycle, the award amount could be re-allocated in the following ways: first, to any eligible projects that received partial funding and/or second, to the next eligible project for full or partial funding. If the withdrawal happens within 90 days of the next funding cycle, the funding will be added to the next cycle's SRA funds. If re-allocation is needed, the Program Lead will inform the Review and Selection Committee of the change.

Iowa divides its annual apportionment into two shares; 50% for state projects and 50% for local projects. Administrative rules that govern the program in Iowa can be found in [Iowa Administrative Code 571.27](#). Local entities are eligible to receive annual assistance of up to \$250,000 per project. State projects must adhere to federal program goals, align with priorities identified in [Iowa's Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan \(SCORP\)](#), and meet the criteria of Iowa's priority rating system but are selected through a different process than local projects.

OPEN PROJECT SELECTION PROCESS

The National Parks Service requires each state to develop an Open Project Selection Process (OPSP) by which LWCF grant proposals are scored and recommended for funding. The LWCF Act requires that a state's OPSP include objective criteria and standards for selection that are based on each state's priorities as identified in the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). Additionally, each state's OPSP must establish a public notification process and meet the following goals:

- Provide for public knowledge of and participation in the formulation and application of the project selection process;
- Ensure all applicants are aware of the availability and process for obtaining LWCF assistance, provide opportunities for all eligible agencies to submit applications and have them considered on an equitable basis;
- Provide a measurable link, through published criteria, to specific outdoor recreation needs and priorities identified in SCORP;
- Assure the distribution of LWCF assistance is accomplished in a non-discriminatory manner and ensure a fair and equitable evaluation of all applicants;
- Support locally led and designed conservation efforts;
- Create more parks in underserved communities; and
- Honor Tribal sovereignty and support the priorities of Federally-Recognized Tribes.

PRIORITY RATING SYSTEM

The LWCF Act requires that each state shall develop a priority rating system that includes (at a minimum): criteria that emphasize priorities and needs identified in SCORP, encourages public participation, recognizes the need for accessibility to the greatest extent practical, and requires conformance to LWCF eligibility and evaluation criteria.

Applications for local projects are first reviewed by the Iowa DNR LWCF Local Program Lead to ensure they meet federal and state eligibility requirements. A rating system, based on criteria developed by the LWCF Local Program Lead with support from the Review & Selection Committee, will be utilized to rank and score applications. The scoring criteria will be reviewed every five years in conjunction with Iowa's SCORP or as needed. Iowa's LWCF scoring matrix is found in Appendix B. The scoring criteria includes:

- Project Goals Align with SCORP Priorities and Other Recreation or Local Plans
- Assessment and Description of Local Need and Impact
- Demonstration of Partnerships and Local Support
- Impact on Underserved Communities and Accessibility
- Sustainability of Design and Future Maintenance
- Bonus - No Prior Assistance

PROJECT SELECTION PROCESS

Once a project has been determined to be eligible by the Local Program Lead, applications are shared with the Review & Selection Committee. The Review & Selection Committee is comprised of five members with two alternates. The committee structure is governed by Iowa Administrative Code 571.27. The Review & Selection Committee review, assign initial scores, and rank the applications using the scoring matrix in Appendix B. A public review meeting is held, with applicants present, to assign final scores and ranking. The Review & Selection Committee, along with the Local Program Lead, compile the list of recommended projects for approval from the DNR Director.

The LWCF Local Program Lead conducts pre-award site inspections and compiles any remaining project needs. The Iowa DNR and Iowa's assigned NPS Program Officer work together to finalize applications and request final NPS approval and award.

FUNDING CYCLE

Each state is required by the LWCF program to institute a recurring funding cycle and the cycle must occur at least once every two years. Iowa Administrative Code 571.27 describes Iowa's application timing. Per IAC 571.27, Iowa shall publish on its website the date and time for submitting a funding proposal providing at least 90 days' notice. Grant applications will be accepted and reviewed on an annual basis. The current cycle's timeline will be updated in Appendix A of this document annually. Amendments will be reviewed year-round. If an applicant requests a change in budget or scope during the pre-award phase, the Program Lead will consult with the Review and Selection Committee. Amendments requested after award will follow the NPS amendment process.

APPLICANT NOTIFICATION

To ensure that all eligible applicants are informed on the availability of assistance, information is posted on the Iowa Department of Natural Resources [Land and Water Conservation Fund website](#). The following information will be reviewed annually and updated as needed: application due date, application form(s), application guidelines, Iowa's Open Project Selection Process, a link to Iowa's most recent SCORP, and other supporting documents as needed or required. Additionally, Iowa DNR's LWCF Local Program Lead will send direct emails to partner organizations and, when feasible, attend conferences and host educational seminars to promote the funding opportunity.

PROGRAM ASSISTANCE

The Iowa DNR LWCF Local Program Lead, along with other Iowa DNR staff as applicable, will provide technical assistance to applicants. Applicants are encouraged to contact the LWCF Local Program Lead early and often while working on project proposals. Questions on local LWCF project applications can be directed to Iowa DNR LWCF Local Program Lead:

Jessica Flatt, Iowa DNR, 6200 Park Ave Ste 200, Des Moines IA 50321; 515-975-8569; jessica.flatt@dnr.iowa.gov

NATIONALLY COMPETITIVE OPPORTUNITIES

The National Parks Service, along with other federal partners, periodically offer additional funding opportunities under the authority of the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act. Examples include the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP) and the Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program (REPI). For these programs, project selection occurs at the national level and awards do not count against State apportionment funds for the formula grant program. As the State Lead Agency, Iowa DNR may solicit proposals, provide application materials, and assist eligible applicants through the application and submission process. Iowa DNR is responsible for ensuring that allocated funds are used in a manner consistent with the LWCF Act and Manual. Iowa DNR will make the determination on which applications to forward to the National Parks Service and will conduct an initial review of applications for completeness and eligibility; evaluate projects based on program criteria; and ensure that applications are consistent with priorities outlined in Iowa's SCORP. State application deadlines may differ from NPS deadlines to allow for these reviews.

APPENDIX A. OPSP TIMELINE (2025)

- December 13, 2024 - LWCF cycle dates for 2025 are determined. Application and guidelines posted on website.
- March 14, 2025 - Applications due to Iowa DNR.
- May 2025 - Review and Selection Committee meets, ranks applications, and prepares a list of recommended projects. Approval of proposed projects is requested from DNR Director.
- June 2025 through August 2025 - LWCF Local Program Lead conducts pre-award site inspections.
- September 2025 through March 2026 - Local Program Lead works with applicants on additional project needs and compliance items. NPS conducts initial review of projects, NPS opens Notice of Funding Opportunity (dates vary annually), and projects are submitted as they are finalized.
- January 2026 through September 2026 - NPS will obligate funding and approved projects will receive a notice of award and grant agreement.
- Year Round - Grant application consultation, payments and closeouts, final inspections, five year inspections, and amendments.

Applicants should plan for 12-24 months from time of application to execution of grant agreements.

APPENDIX B. LWCF GRANT APPLICATION SCORING CRITERIA AND MATRIX

The following criteria and scoring matrix will be utilized to score and rank applications. A project will not be recommended for funding with a score of less than 60.

Criteria 1: Project Goals Align with SCORP Priorities and Other Applicable Recreation or Local Plans (0 - 30 Points)

- Applicant must clearly define the goals of the project (long and short term) and describe how project goals meet one or more of the current SCORP priorities.
- Applicant may also illustrate how project goals meet priorities described in any of the following: [Iowa Wildlife Action Plan](#); [Iowa Forest Action Plan](#); [Wetland Program Plan for Iowa](#); [Iowa DOT Bicycle and Pedestrian Long Range Plan](#); and/or other applicable local or regional planning, trails, recreation, parks, or open space plans or initiatives.

Criteria 2: Assessment and Description of Local Need and Impact (0 - 30 Points)

- Application must describe how project goals will meet one or more local outdoor recreation unmet needs. Assessment of need should include consideration of number of people served (regional/city wide/neighborhood); lack of resources or age / condition of resources; specific needs of user groups; and distance to other recreation opportunities. Application should provide details on how the project will provide community-wide benefits with consideration given to public recreational infrastructure, economic impacts, public health, and community engagement.
- For acquisition, application should describe why the parcel/property is a high priority and will serve current or future needs of the community/area based on the type of property/park.

Criteria 3: Demonstration of Partnerships and Local Support (0 - 20 Points)

- Application should clearly explain all project partners and cooperators and how they are involved (examples:

financial, in-kind, volunteer, maintenance, professional services).

- Applicants should describe how local input and participation was solicited during planning and/or how the impacted community supports the proposed project.

Criteria 4: Impact on Underserved Communities and Accessibility (0 - 10 Points)

- Application should describe how project goals will positively impact identified underserved communities within the project area. Applicant can use suggested tool(s) or other local parameters/tools if well documented. Suggested tools: [CDC's EJI Explorer](#) or [EPA's EJScreen](#).
- For the purposes of the state LWCF project review, underserved communities are described as populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, who have been systemically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civil life. This can include racial/minority status, income disparities/poverty levels, employment status, age, and/or other social vulnerabilities.
- Describe how the project will increase accessibility through public transit connections, walkability, ADA improvements, and/or language inclusivity. Explain how the project could address the health and wellness of older adults, at-risk youth, persons with disabilities, etc.

Criteria 5: Sustainability of Design and Future Maintenance (0 - 10 Points)

- Describe how project materials have long lifespans and/or are low maintenance, project implements inclusive design, and/or design reduces environmental impacts.
- Application should describe how the project area/site will be maintained into the future, including responsible agencies and organizations.
- For acquisition describe how the property could impact climate change resilience, connectivity within the natural world or the community, and/or meet future or current recreational needs.

Bonus: No Prior Assistance (5 Points)

- Applicant will receive 5 bonus points if the project site has not received prior LWCF assistance.

SCORING MATRIX

Criteria 1	0-7 points	8-15 points	16-23 points	24-30 points
Alignment with SCORP Priorities & Other Rec Plans	Project goals not stated or unclear. Project demonstrates low association to priorities in Iowa's SCORP or other applicable plans.	Project goals are stated and loosely correlate to SCORP but specifics are lacking or not well defined.	Project goals are identified and strongly correlate with at least one SCORP priority.	Project goals are clearly defined and align in a robust manner with SCORP and other applicable recreation plans. Specific examples are given and described.
Criteria 2	0-7 points	8-15 points	16-23 points	24-30 points
Local Need & Impact	Application provides little or no demonstration or explanation of local need or project impact.	Description of need or impact is lacking. Little to no discussion on benefits to the community.	Applicant states need and defines impact. Applicant describes benefits.	Application includes a clear description of need and provides measures to show the extent of impact.
Criteria 3	0-5 points	6-11 points	12-17 points	18-20 points
Partnerships & Support	Project does not demonstrate partnerships or collaboration. Application does not describe how local input was collected or considered.	Application describes few partnerships. Application has few descriptions on how community input was solicited or incorporated.	Application includes partnerships and collaboration and describes how community input was considered in the project.	Partnerships, relationships, and support are clearly described. Project will extend community collaboration. Local input was solicited, considered, and incorporated.
Criteria 4	0-2 points	3-5 points	6-8 points	9-10 points
Underserved Communities & Effects on Accessibility	Project goals and outcomes do not address underserved communities and project does not increase accessibility.	Project goals and outcomes are tied to underserved communities but impacts are not clearly stated. Impacts to accessibility are few or not clearly described.	Application utilizes tools or describes impacts to underserved communities. Positive impact(s) to accessibility are described.	Strong correlation between project outcomes and positive impacts to underserved communities. Tools used and referenced. Increased accessibility for multiple indicators.
Criteria 5	0-2 points	3-5 points	6-8 points	9-10 points
Sustainability & Maintenance	Application does not describe how long-term care of site will be achieved. Little to no description on how project design is inclusive or low maintenance.	Long term maintenance responsibility is not clear. Materials and design benefits are not described in detail. Reasons or need for acquisition are unclear.	Maintenance and design for the project is described. Acquisition would provide positive impact to at least one listed parameter (connectivity, recreational needs, etc.).	Application clearly describes long term maintenance and responsibility for site. Design is thoughtful and inclusive. Acquisition is necessary to meet local need(s).
Bonus	0 points		5 points	
Prior Assistance*	Project area / park has previously received LWCF assistance		Project area / park has not received LWCF assistance	

*Use the mapping tool on Iowa's [LWCF website](#) to determine if a project area/park has received previous assistance.