

Long Island Sound Watershed Regional Conservation Partnership Program

(LISW-RCPP) – Healthy Forest Reserve Program

For Vermont Only

Request for Proposals

Pre-Screening Applications Accepted June 23, 2020 – July 24, 2020

Overview

The Long Island Sound Watershed Regional Conservation Partnership Program (LISW-RCPP) is a landscape scale initiative that covers the geographic area of Long Island Sound (the Sound) and its watershed (HUC 01100007). In 2014, seven non-governmental organizations (NGOs) applied for and received a grant amount of \$10 million from the US Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) under the Regional Conservation Partnership Program.

This group of NGOs along with stakeholders and regional partners are coordinating the development and implementation of a comprehensive working lands program with three critical foci. These include 1) nutrient management and soil health; 2) protection of non-industrial forestland, and 3) working lands adaptation/resilience. Through increased levels of regional coordination, the partners of the LISW-RCPP aim to better leverage all resources by connecting with existing state and federal programs and catalyzing innovative watershed-scale public/private partnerships.

The purpose of the LISW-RCPP - Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) is to assist landowners, on a voluntary basis, in helping to achieve outcomes representing the second focus area: restoring, enhancing and protecting forestland resources on private lands through permanent conservation easements.

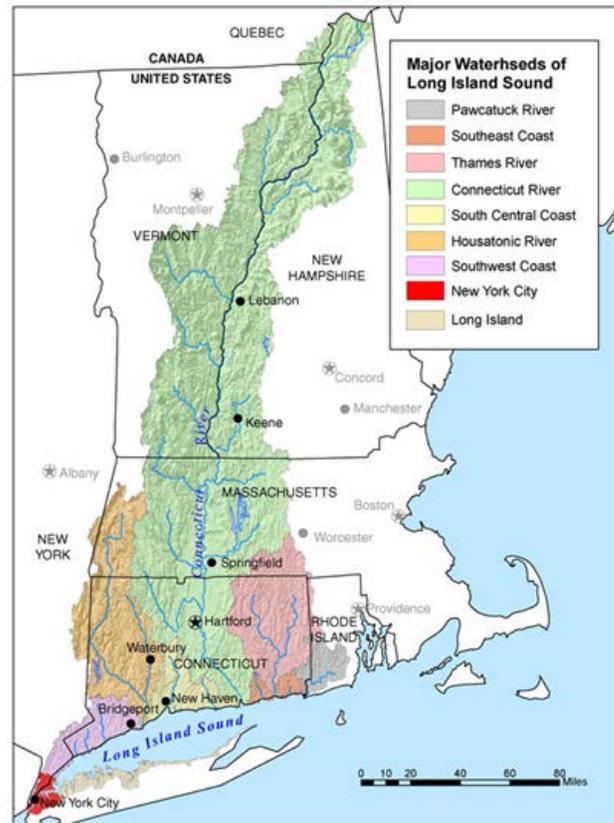


Figure 1: Major Watersheds of the Long Island Sound Watershed

The objectives of the LISW-RCPP-HFRP are to:

- Promote the recovery of endangered and threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA);
- Improve plant and animal biodiversity;

- Enhance carbon sequestration; and,
- Protect drinking water supply resource areas.

The LI Sound Watershed Conservation Imperative

The Long Island Sound Watershed is in a remarkable time of challenge, transition – and opportunity. The region has extraordinary natural resources that are invaluable to both wildlife and people. Millions of acres of forests and other natural habitats clean our water, shelter our rich array of biodiversity, provide flood resilience during severe weather events, and mitigate climate change through carbon sequestration and storage. These lands also provide billions of dollars to the regional economy from tourism, recreation, and forest management. Forest lands also provide local communities with outdoor recreation, local wood, fuel, jobs, and more. These regional landscapes represent the natural infrastructure without which we cannot live. We must protect our region’s vital natural heritage to sustain us today as well as the many generations that follow.

Primary Resource Concern: Excess Nitrogen

The primary resource concern addressed by the LISW-RCPP is excess nutrients in stormwater runoff from working lands within the watershed and from the conversion of agricultural and forest lands to urban uses resulting in urban stormwater runoff. The US Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) Long Island Sound Study has identified nitrogen as the primary driver of severe hypoxic conditions in the Sound. As a result, in 2000 both Connecticut and New York adopted a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) for dissolved oxygen laying out the necessary nutrient reductions needed to restore the health of the Sound. Additionally, excess nutrients are also impacting upland water resources within the watershed, including public drinking water supplies where severe algal blooms in surface water reservoirs reduce the effectiveness of chlorine in treating for pathogens.

One Solution: Protect Privately-Owned Working Forestland from Development that also Benefits Rare Species Habitat and Water Quality

The LISW-RCPP includes a robust forest land protection program, funded through the targeted application of \$3.25 million in Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP) funding, and aimed at bolstering the long-term health of the watershed. Protecting and sustaining land as forest is critical both for reaching the nitrogen reduction goals of the TMDL and providing drinking water supply protection. Permanent land protection also addresses many of the secondary resource concerns including biodiversity and forest fragmentation. More specifically, the LISW-RCPP values the permanent protection of forestland owned by individual and family forest owners that are vulnerable to development or fragmentation, and that contain critical or significant habitat that sustains biodiversity and drinking water supply areas. Parcels submitted to this RFP will be

evaluated on how well they address a number of priority natural features and their contribution to large landscape conservation connectivity.

The Role of Strategic Large Landscape Conservation Initiatives

The LISW-RCPP seeks to use HFRP funding as a catalyst for conservation and management of individual and family-owned woodlands in different kinds of landscapes throughout the watershed. Our partners recognize that all great conservation happens through the combination of multiple sources of funding and the engagement of various groups and agencies. The LISW-RCPP also wants to ensure that the investments of its many partners and that of taxpayers results in leveraging the greatest ecological, economic, and social benefits in different parts of the watershed. We want to encourage this outcome by prioritizing the expenditure of HFRP funds in areas that meet statutory purposes, but that also protect drinking water supply areas.

The watershed is comprised of urban, suburban, exurban, pastoral, and more remote wildlands and woodland landscapes, all of which may, under greater levels of conservation, contribute to the long-term health of the Sound. However, more than 80 percent of the LI Sound Watershed is in private hands, much of it in small family ownerships. To facilitate greater habitat connectivity, water quantity, and quality, and ecological resilience, particularly in a time of climate change, we need to consider the status of surrounding parcels to an extent that may stretch to thousands, tens, and hundreds of thousands of acres. Fortunately, there are regional-scale conservation initiatives working throughout the watershed. These include twenty “Regional Conservation Partnerships” or RCPs that seek to increase the connectivity of land protection projects through greater private-public coordination. And it includes at least two strategic conservation designs that link intact habitats across state boundaries such as “Connect the Connecticut,” within the entire CT River watershed and “Natures Network” across the northeastern United States.

While any landowner may apply for HFRP funding, the LISW-RCPP HFRP Pre-Screening Application requires landowners to partner with a conservation land trust. The LISW-RCPP will screen and rank applications elevating those that best meet the requirements of the HFRP, and that result in greater ecological, social, and economic benefits and leveraged funding. The LISW-RCPP will use geographic information systems (GIS) to estimate potential benefits from each application and to rank pre-screening applications. The LISW-RCPP will then submit their list of high-quality pre-screening applications to the NRCS State Conservationists in VT for their consideration.

Benefits and Match Requirements

Landowner protections will be made available to landowners enrolled in the LISW-RCPP-Healthy Forest Reserves Program (HFRP) who agree, for a specified period to restore or improve their land for threatened or endangered species habitat. In exchange, they avoid certain regulatory restrictions under the Endangered Species Act on the use of that land.

The LISW-RCPP-Healthy Forest Reserves Program (HFRP) offers one enrollment option: [Permanent easements](#) (held by the U.S.A. – although overlay easements are allowed) for which landowners will receive 75 to 100 percent of the appraised value of the easement on the enrolled land though only 25 to 75 percent will be paid for through expenditures of LISW-NRCS HFRP funding (up to \$400,000 per project) plus 100 percent the average cost of the approved conservation practices. The 2020 HFRP Grant Round is for parcels where at least 95% of the land area is within the LISW in the State of VT only.

Table 1: Examples of How HFRP Funding Can Be Used in Combination with Other Sources of Funding so that Landowners Receive at Least 75% of Appraised Value of the HFRP Easement as Cash

Total HFRP Easement Fair Market Value	NRCS-RCPP-HFRP Funding 25% to 75% of HFRP Easement FMV	Other Non-Federal Funding 25% to 75% HFRP Easement FMV	Landowner Donation 0% to 25% HFRP Easement FMV
Example #1: \$400,000	\$100,000 to \$300,000	\$100,000 to \$300,000	\$0 to \$100,000
Example #2: \$600,000	\$150,000 to \$400,000 (max)	\$150,000 to \$400,000 (max)	\$0 to \$150,000
Example #3: \$1 million	\$250,000 to \$400,000 (max)	\$350,000 \$750,000	\$0 to \$250,000

The 2020 LISW-RCPP-HFRP program (in VT only) can contribute from 25%-75% of the appraised value of the easement and a maximum of \$400,000 per project. Landowners can provide up to 25% of the appraised value as a donation and no more. Non-federal funding must cover the remainder. Table 1 (above) illustrates some examples of how a mix of federal and non-federal funding (including a landowner donation of easement value) can work to produce the required 75% cash funding to landowners.

All transaction costs associated with the conservation easement are covered by the LISW-RCPP-HFRP. These project-related costs do not count towards the \$400,000 maximum limit on payments for easements.

There may be project management, construction, or maintenance tasks associated with the prescribed

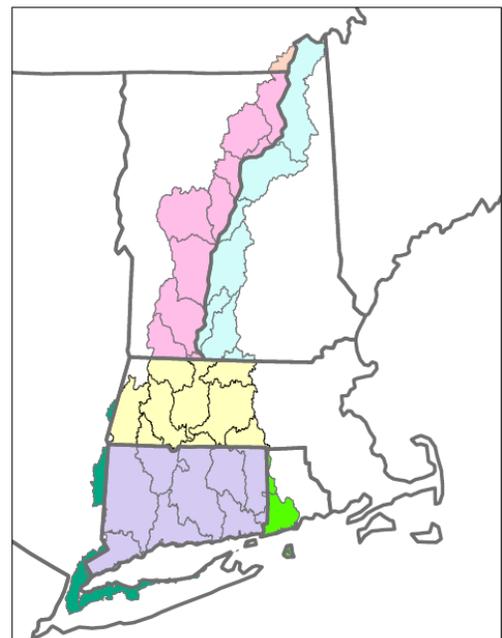


Figure 2: The Long Island Sound Watershed by Catchment and State – Highstead 5/18/16

restoration activities. Some of these upfront costs will be covered by the LISW- RCPP-HFRP on a case by case basis.

Pre-Screening Application Procedures and Deadlines

In cooperation with NRCS, the LISW-RCPP is administering a pre-screening application process to focus attention on regional priorities in addition to what is required by statute. At the completion of each Enrollment Period, the LISW-RCPP will submit to NRCS State Conservationists a list of high-quality applications based on eligibility and ranking criteria whose values for each parcel will be measured through the use of geographic information systems (GIS), when that data is available.

Landowners are invited to visit the [LISW-RCPP-HFRP webpage](#) to download the LISW-RCPP-HFRP Pre-Screening Application Form.

In filling out an application, interested landowners are encouraged to seek the assistance of a conservation land trust, conservation organization, and or a member of one of the twenty Regional Conservation Partnerships (RCPs) in the LI Sound Watershed.

An online mapping tool is available to assist landowners and their partners in estimating a project's eligibility and relative ranking based on the Ranking Criteria.

Complete applications will include:

1. LISW-RCPP HFRP Pre-Screening Application Form (pages 1-7) (click [here](#) to download)
2. NRCS Form NRCS-CPA 1200, Conservation Program Application (click [here](#) to download)
3. A copy of an Assessor's map showing the applicant's parcel with its map, block, lot numbers, and acres clearly shown
4. A locus map, GIS map, or screen shot of the online mapping criteria tool showing the parcel's location in relation to eligibility and ranking criteria
5. A letter of landowner intent
6. Any long-term forest management plan associated with the parcel/project.

Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible for enrollment in the LISW-RCPP-HFRP:

1. The applicant must be an individual or entity having legal ownership of private land.
 - a. Private land is defined by the HFRP manual as "land that is not owned by a local, State, or Federal government entity. Private land also includes land that meets the definition of "acreage owned by Indian Tribes."

- b. The term “landowner” refers to an individual or eligible entity. Landowners may also include all forms of collective ownership, including joint tenants, tenants in common, and life tenants.” A land trust is considered an eligible entity. For a land trust to apply for funding under HFRP as a landowner, it must have a DUNS# and a SAM#.
 - c. By legal ownership, the landowner must have clear title to the land. The LISW-RCPP may have funding to cover the costs of a title search for a well-ranked project.
2. The land must be:
- a. Located within the LI Sound Watershed.
 - b. Due to the presence of habitat*, able to restore, enhance, or measurably increase the likelihood of recovery of:
 - i. Federal-listed endangered or threatened species
 - ii. State-listed endangered or threatened species
 - iii. Candidate endangered or threatened species
 - iv. Species of special concern as identified by NRCS Chief, or
 - v. State species of greatest conservation need
3. The conservation organization or agency working with the applicant has known or likely sources of the funding outside of the covered by NRCS.

*Note that for the purposes of the LISW-RCPP, the presence of habitat will be at the least determined by whether the parcel in question contains or abuts areas depicted in geographic information systems (GIS) data layers as habitat capable of supporting at least one of the following surrogate species (all are rare migratory birds): Wood Thrush, Louisiana Waterthrush, Blackburnian Warbler, Northern Waterthrush, Red-Shouldered Hawk, and Prairie Warbler, as shown on the LISW-RCPP’s online mapping tool.

For a complete list of eligibility requirements go to the [LISW-RCPP-HFRP web page](#) and scroll down to download the Pre-Screening Application Form.

Ranking Criteria

Fourteen ranking criteria will be used to provide each applicant’s project parcel with a score. Highly ranked parcels or projects will either contain or abut land with particular natural features, be found in counties with specific development pressures, and be located near other priority lands such that the HFRP easement would result in measurably contributing to priority resources at the regional or large landscape scale as described in the criteria details below. The eligibility and ranking criteria can also be found in the Pre-Screening Application Ranking Worksheet. Download a copy of the Pre-Screening Application Ranking Worksheet from the LISW-RCPP-

HFRP [website](#). Each state with pre-screening applications will have its own ranked list of projects.

A. Sustainability

- 1. The pre-screening application package contains a long-term (10+ years) forest management plan completed by a professional forester and a landowner statement of intent signifying their willingness to have land managed as habitat in perpetuity.**

SCALE: Active long-term forest management plan attached = 50 points, landowner statement of intent attached = 50 points, both = 100 points.

B. Natural Resource Features

- 1. The number of acres of land in the LI Sound Watershed.**

SCALE: 1 point per acre for parcels given a range of 0 to 100 by acre from 1 to 100. Any parcel over 100 acres is given the maximum points (100).

- 2. The number of acres of forestland.**

SCALE: 1 point for each acre to be treated with an HFRP easement and 1 point for each forested acre. A 100% forested parcel of 50 acres or more is given the maximum points (50).

- 3. The land is capable of supporting a known federally-listed species.**

SCALE: 1 point for each acre of land that contains habitat capable of supporting a known and documented federally-listed species. A parcel of 100 acres or more containing habitat supportive of a documented federally-listed species is given the maximum points (100). Please see the “Habitats for Surrogate Species” in the webmap, or supply a list of documented listed species on the property.

- 4. The number of acres in surface drinking water source protection areas.**

SCALE: 1 point for each acre of land within a surface drinking water supply protection area. Any parcel with over 50 acres within a surface drinking water supply protection area is given the maximum points (50). Each state drinking water program has a GIS map of PUBLIC water supplies (not private domestic wells) which are referred to as “drinking water source protection areas.” Due to security issues, most states do not allow “drinking water source protection areas” at the parcel level to be made available to the public. In order to determine whether the parcel you are

interested in conserving is located in a designated “drinking water source protection area,” please contact Kira Jacobs directly:

Kira Jacobs
Source Water Protection Program
U.S. EPA
617-918-1817
jacobs.kira@epa.gov

5. The number of acres in an area defined as within 100 feet of the centerline of a stream or the edge of a larger river, or shore of another waterbody

SCALE: 5 points for each acre of land within a 100-foot buffer as measured from the bank or high water mark associated with the surface water. Any parcel with over 10 acres in the buffer area is given the maximum points (50).

6. The number of acres in an area defined as having above average resiliency to climate change.

SCALE: 1 point for each acre of land within a ¼ mile of an area of land with above average resiliency to climate change according to The Nature Conservancy’s maps and analyses. Any parcel over 50 acres is given the maximum points (50).

7. The number of acres defined as being within or abutting areas containing habitat or core forests:

- a. Including as a priority core habitat or forest in the State Wildlife Action Plans and State Forest Action Plans, respectively.
- b. Included in the CT River Watershed Landscape Conservation Design (connecttheconnecticut.org) Tier 1 Cores, Tier 2 Cores, or Tier 1 Core Connectors, or included within the Nature’s Network Cores or Connectors
- c. Prioritized by Regional Conservation Partnerships or other large landscape conservation or stewardship initiatives. Applicant’s should include evidence of RCP prioritization with their materials.

SCALE: 0.33 points for each acre of land within each of these three categories of priority habitat or forest cores or connectors. Any parcel having 100 or more acres of land in a priority habitat or forest cores or connectors in all of these three categories is given the maximum points (100).

C. Development Pressure Factors

1. Population Change, 2014 (U.S. Census v4 estimate) - 2010 (U.S. Census)

SCALE: Population change is county based. 0 points for a 0% growth rate, 10 points for a growth rate 0.1-0.9 times the state rate, 20 points for a growth rate of 1-2 times the state rate, 0 points for a growth rate >2 times the state rate.

2. Population Density (Persons per Square Mile, 2010 (U.S. Census))

SCALE: Population Density is county based. 0 points for a density < 0.5 the state population density, 10 points for a density 0.5-0.9 times the state, 20 points for a density of 1-3 times the state, 0 points for a density >3 times the state.

3. Annual Conversion of Forestland to Development in 2014 (New England Landscape Futures Project; USGS NLCD; Jeon et al. 2014; US FIA 2014)

SCALE: Conversion of Forestland to development is county based. 0 points for a decrease of 0% or less, 10 points for a decrease of 0.01 - 0.02 percent, 15 points for a decrease of 0.03 - 0.06 percent, 20 points for a decrease of 0.07 - 0.13 percent, 30 points for a decrease of 0.14 - 0.26 percent, 0 points for a decrease of > 0.26 percent.

D. Large Landscape Connectivity Factors

1. The amount of protected land near the parcel.

SCALE: 0 points for less than 100 acres of protected forest land w/in ½ mile of parcel, 25 points for 101 - 500 acres w/in ½ mile, 50 points for 101 - 500 acres w/in ¼ mile of parcel, or 100 points for >500 acres or more of protected land w/in ¼ mile of the parcel.

2. The amount of other managed habitats including properties managed by a professional forester near the parcel (some acres will be estimated by LISW-HFRP using aerial photography, but applicants are encouraged to include supporting information if available to ensure that the parcel gets all the credit it is entitled to.)

SCALE: 0 points for less than 100 acres of managed forest within 1 mile of the parcel, 50 points for 100-200 acres within 1 mile, and 100 points for more than 200 acres of managed forest within 1 mile of the parcel.

3. Parcel ability to maximize the protection of contiguous acres devoted to priority natural resource features.

SCALE: 40 points if abutting other forestland containing priority natural resources, and 100 points if parcel links two noncontiguous protected forestland parcels that support one or more priority natural resource features (the priority natural resource features are shown in the ranking criteria “Natural Resource Features.”).

Pre-Screening Application Process Schedule 2020

- Tuesday, June 23, 2020: Launch of the LISW-RCPP-Healthy Forest Reserve Program and Opening of the Pre-Screening Application Process.
- Enrollment Period: Tuesday, June 23, 2020 – Friday, July 24, 2020. Applicants will have 30 days to submit their application packets for the LISW-RCPP-HFRP.
- August 7, 2020: LISW-RCPP will submit their ranking of the pre-screening applications to NRCS for review and processing. LISW-RCPP will contact the conservation organization partners to inform them of their applicants’ projects’ ranking status.
- September 1, 2020: NRCS to contact applicants.
- November 1, 2020: NRCS to seek signed agreements with landowners.
- May 14, 2021: NRCS closes easements with match provided by landowner and conservation organizations.

Completed pre-screening applications should be received by email sent to blabich@highstead.net no later than Friday, July 24, 2020:

For more information about this program, and or for assistance, please contact Bill Labich, Chair of the LISW-RCPP Forest Land Protection Technical Committee, and Highstead Foundation’s Senior Conservationist at blabich@highstead.net

County	Points Population Change, 2018 - 2010 (US Census).	Points Population Density (Persons per Square Mile, 2010)	Points Annual Conversion of Forestland To Development (NLCD, 2001-2016)
Addison	0	10	15
Bennington	0	10	15
Caledonia	0	10	0
Essex	0	0	0
Orange	0	10	0
Orleans	0	10	0
Rutland	0	20	15
Washington	0	20	0
Windham	0	10	0
Windsor	0	10	0