


Criteria and Guidance for the Evaluation and Scoring of Proposals for Land

USDA Forest Service-National Forest System  FY2026 Land and Water Conservation Fund

This guidance lays out direction and criteria for nominating Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) projects for the FY2026 appropriation cycle. The passage of the Great American Outdoors Act in 2020, which provided permanent and full funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, afforded an unparalleled opportunity to nominate projects to achieve critical land conservation purposes.

Note: Consult with the WO prior to resubmitting a tract or project that has been previously submitted.

Process for Nominating Land Purchase Projects

LWCF purchase core projects are nominated via a two-stage process which is competitive and merit-based. These two stages are:

1. Land purchase proposals are evaluated at the Regional level and submitted to the Washington Office (WO).
2. A national panel (comprised of an interdisciplinary team of subject matter experts with knowledge of the criteria) develops a ranked list of purchase projects to recommend for funding. After Executive Branch approval, the list is transmitted to Congress for its consideration as part of the appropriation process.

Evaluation Criteria for LWCF Land Purchase Projects

Criterion	Points
1. Recreation/Recreational Access	20
2. Watershed Protection/Climate Resilience	15
3. Threatened and Endangered Species and Habitat	15
4. Tract Location (Forced Ranking)	15
5. Connecting Communities/Partner Support	15
6. Regional Ranking	20
7. Management Efficiencies and Cost Savings	(not scored)
8. Urgency of Acquisition	10
9. Threats to the Integrity of the Land	10
10. Even Geographic Distribution of Projects (National Panel Score)	10
11. Benefits to Justice40 Communities	10
Total Points	140

Project Types

Phased acquisition:

One large tract with one owner, divided into 2 or more smaller parts (“phases”) to be acquired over more than one year.

On-going project

acquisitions: Multiple discrete tracts, often under different ownerships, in the same landscape that are grouped under a general heading that is often repeated for several years. Tracts that make up the project are often prioritized for acquisition until the project is complete.

Single acquisition: A single acquisition that can be completed in one purchase.

There are 11 total criteria for evaluating nomination proposals - 10 scored and one unscored - with a total possible score of 140 points per nomination.

These criteria are derived from multiple laws, executive orders, and agency goals. See Appendix 1 for a detailed list.

Written Narratives

Provide a succinctly written narrative for each criteria using the attached Land Acquisition Proposal form.

- Use the Unit/Forest name as the official project name
- Identify projects that could be phased over multiple years in the Type of Project section
- Be sure to record the estimated acres of the project or phases
- Be sure to mention the cost of each phase, if applicable
- Base your estimated purchase price on a comparative market survey or appraisal, whichever applies

We strongly encourage you to request core project funding for projects that cannot be funded any other way, i.e. with Recreation Access or Critical Inholding funds.

Scoring Criteria and Points

1. Recreation and Recreational Access – Up to 20 Points

This criterion evaluates the degree to which the acquisition creates or enhances opportunities for recreation and recreational access on National Forests and Grasslands. More points will be awarded to acquisitions that provide significantly new or improved recreational opportunities in support of Administration and Forest Service goals and objectives. Please describe the recreational opportunities provided, who the users will be, and the degree of added capacity for increased visitor use.

Questions to address in the narrative may include:

- Does the acquisition solve a specific access problem or overcome a barrier to access?
- Does the acquisition increase or enhance recreation for Justice40 communities, and if so, which ones?
- Is the proposed acquisition along a National Scenic or Historic Trail? (These projects will be strongly considered.)
- What is the size and configuration of the tract relative to National Forest System lands?
- Would the acquisition open or increase recreation on other publicly accessible lands, and if so, to how many acres of other lands?
- What types of key recreational access needs would the land provide? Would this access include significantly new or improved recreational opportunities?
- Has the public indicated that more or improved access is needed in this area?
- Would this acquisition address recreational access needs included in the Region's response to Sec. 4106 of the Dingell Act identifying areas available for recreation that had no (or significantly restricted) public access? These areas can be found in the Forest Service report at [John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act | US Forest Service \(usda.gov\)](#) These projects will be strongly considered.

Comparative Market Survey (CMS) – Used to determine the pricing point of a property and consists of a survey of recently sold, similar properties in an applicable market area that evaluates its features, size, location, and other details in relation to similar properties to develop a pricing point/median price. A market survey does not need to be conducted by an appraiser.

2. Watershed Protection and Climate Resilience – Up to 15 Points

The Forest Service’s Watershed Condition Framework provides a nationally consistent, science-based approach to evaluate watershed conditions and apply integrated improvement and restoration techniques based on local characteristics. Acquisitions can protect high functioning watersheds already resilient to climate change or provide needed opportunities to restore

Resilience refers to a system’s ability to return to its former condition after a disturbance (such as climate change).

impaired watersheds and increase their functioning and resilience.

Support for acquisitions should be described in terms of how a particular tract fits in with Forest Service watershed management goals once the tract is acquired, and not the condition of the parcel while in private, State, or other ownership.

Points to consider when evaluating a project’s potential to enhance climate resilience and protect watersheds:

- Potential to enhance or restore freshwater and brackish wetlands, spring, seeps and karst areas, streams and rivers, ponds or lakes;
- Carbon sequestration or potential for carbon sequestration (e.g., forests, forest restoration, highly productive plant communities, peatlands);
- Areas that provide habitat that would be reduced elsewhere due to climate change;
- Habitat types and ecosystems that are naturally resilient to climate change effects (e.g., forests, spring systems);
- Areas that provide opportunities for infrastructure decommissioning, re-connecting fragmented landscapes, or restoring impacted systems;
- Land that offers opportunities for cost sharing and partnerships for implementation of the USFS Climate Change Response Network;
- Watershed functions (water detention, groundwater recharge, stabilization of sediment and soils, conveyance of materials (water, sediment, seeds nutrients, organisms; and/or
- Ecosystem processes (connectivity, habitat complexity-biodiversity, nutrient, water, and material cycling)

Points will be awarded based on the degree to which acquisitions contribute to climate resilience and watershed improvement. More points will be awarded to tracts that support Administration and Forest Service objectives regarding climate change mitigation and adaptation, ecological restoration, and resiliency.

3. Threatened and Endangered Species and Habitat – Up to 15 Points

Land acquisition provides an opportunity to protect or restore habitats for fish, wildlife, and plants at risk. Proposals are scored based on the tract or tract’s capacity to contribute to the recovery of endangered, threatened, proposed or candidate species as classified under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and their potential to benefit populations of designated Forest Service Species of Conservation Concern or Regional Forester Sensitive Species. A Threatened and Endangered (T&E) scoring table must be included for points to be awarded under this criterion. Narratives should include enough background information to provide context for points awarded in the table. See Appendix 2 for the T&E scoring table.

4. Proposal Tract Location (forced ranking) – Up to 15 Points

This criterion supports the specific language in the LWCF authority for the Forest Service that directs the Agency to acquire lands with higher levels of protection like Congressionally

Designated Areas (CDA) such as Wilderness. It also recognizes that Forest Plans designate areas for specific uses or needs such as an inventoried Roadless areas, proposed Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers areas, Wilderness Study Areas, and old growth or mature forests. To find out if the project contains old growth or mature forest, a national map is available in the [Climate Risk Viewer](#). Additionally, there are 21 priority landscapes identified in the 10Year Wildfire Strategy recognized by this criterion. The [initial 10 landscapes](#) were designated in 2022, along with [11 additional landscapes](#) added in early 2023.

Please ask the WO if there are any questions about which designations are eligible. Points are awarded by a forced ranking, as described in the table below.

Points	Description
15	Acquisitions within a priority Wildfire Strategy landscape
15	Acquisitions within a Congressionally or Presidentially Designated Area such Wilderness, Wild and Scenic River Corridors, National Scenic Areas, National Recreation Areas, National Historic and Scenic Trail Corridors, National Monuments or other special management or emphasis areas designated by Congress or the President of the United States.
10	Acquisitions that are within an Inventoried Roadless Area, Wildlife Management Area, proposed Wilderness, Wilderness Study Area, or Wild and Scenic River Corridor, research natural areas, old growth or mature forest, or other special designation per National Forest System (NFS) planning goals within National Forest or Grassland boundaries.
7	Proposed acquisition protects some vital function or feature of an adjacent tract with a special designation. An explanation of the importance of the tract should be included in the “Additional Information” section. An example would be acquisition of a tract to prevent incompatible development directly adjacent to a Wilderness. Tract can be inside or outside of the NFS boundary.
5	Proposed acquisitions that are within NFS boundaries but not included in a special designation.

If there are multiple tracts, points for each tract will be totaled and divided by the number of tracts to create an average point score for the project.

5. Connecting Communities/Partner Support – Up to 15 Points

This criterion evaluates a project based on the degree and breadth of public support for the acquisition. The focus is on partnerships and community support and involvement, particularly in Justice40 communities such as Tribal areas. Projects with support letters from Tribal communities will be strongly considered.

- Does the acquisition help the Forest Service work in partnership with the local community and provide a benefit? Example: acquisitions that support gateway community planning, locally used trail systems, or youth education.
- How is the acquisition part of an effort by the Forest Service to add value to the community? More points will be awarded to projects that clearly demonstrate that the acquisition provides an economic benefit for the local community or helps deliver a needed service to the community.
- Is there a broad variety of partners and supporters?
- Why is this support important?

- Is there archaeological value, Tribal or local or national cultural or historic value?

Letters of support are strongly encouraged to supplement the nomination, particularly from locally elected officials, members of Congress, adjoining landowners, Tribes, local organizations focused on environmental justice, and community members. Please ensure that the letters are from the current year and submitted with the proposal. Support letters submitted after the deadline will not be accepted. If there is support without letters, please list those supporters and this will be taken into consideration for additional partial points. Links to videos may be included, if applicable.

6. Regional Ranking – Up to 20 Points per Region

This criterion is scored during the Regional evaluation and regions must explain the rationale for how the points were awarded. Points should be awarded based on importance to LWCF, Administration, and Forest Service goals not captured by the other criteria listed here that speak to the significance of the proposed project. Points should not be used to bring lower-ranking project scores up to match the scores of higher-ranked projects.

7. Management Efficiencies and Cost Savings - not scored

This criterion is not scored but the information is important and required by Congress. Consider the following:

- How does the acquisition improve the ability of the acquiring unit to perform its work and deliver benefits to the public with greater efficiency and lower costs?
- Will it consolidate forest ownership and allow the Forest Service to better manage goals, such as improving climate change refugia, mitigate fire risk, etc.? If so, how?
- How does the acquisition make a net positive contribution to management efficiencies measured in terms of verifiable cost savings or other quantifiable efficiencies?

8. Urgency of Acquisition – Up to 10 Points

Describe the circumstances and readiness of the purchase. Factors to consider include:

- Has a willing seller been identified and does the landowner have realistic expectations?
- Has an initial appraisal been initiated? Or, has market research been initiated?
- Does the Forest Service or a partner have a signed purchase option with the landowner?
- Has a partner purchased the tract and are they holding it for Forest Service acquisition?
- Is the landowner ready to wait until funding is secured?
- Is this land under threat of development if not purchased quickly?

9. Threats to the Integrity of Land and Ecological Connectivity– Up to 10 Points

Many forests have significantly fragmented ownership within the unit boundary which make forest management difficult. The integrity of the land can be at risk due to altered fire regime, ecological conversion, and development. Additionally, guidance from the White House Council on Environmental Quality encourages Federal agencies to promote greater connectivity to sustain biodiversity. Connectivity also enables wildlife to adapt to fluctuating environmental conditions by conserving wildlife corridors. By acquiring land that increases ecological connectivity with other NFS lands, the Forest Service can manage the land to help address these threats.

Ecological Connectivity is the degree to which landscapes, waterscapes, and seascapes allow species to move freely and ecological processes to function unimpeded. **Wildlife Corridors** are distinct components of a landscape, waterscape, or seascape that provide connectivity.

Points	Description
10	Provides ecological connectivity or has unique resources in a unit that has less than 2/3 publicly owned lands and connects to current NFS lands
5	Connects to current NFS lands

10. Even Geographic Distribution (National Panel score) - Up to 10 Points

This criterion is aimed at ensuring an even distribution of projects throughout the country, per the 2019 Dingell Act. Once all projects are ranked, the National Panel will consider how the projects are geographically distributed across the country.

11. Benefits to Justice40 Communities - Up to 10 Points

In response to [Executive Order 14008](#), this criterion takes into consideration the Justice40 Initiative. The White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) launched the [Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool \(CEJST\)](#) to ensure benefits of Federal programs are reaching communities overburdened by pollution. This tool also helps identify communities that meet the threshold for at least one of the tool’s categories of burden and corresponding economic indicator or are on the lands of a Federally Recognized Tribe.

Justice40 Initiative: A Federal Government goal that 40 percent of the overall benefits of certain Federal investments flow to disadvantaged communities that are marginalized, underserved, and overburdened by pollution.

Use the [Screening Tool](#) to determine if your project is located in a disadvantaged community, and award points as follows:

Points	Description
10	Acquisition project is located in a Justice40 ¹ community
5	Acquisition project is located in a partial Justice40 ² community

Additional Information, Attachments, and Panel Considerations

Additional Information Page

Use this page to include any additional pertinent information. If used to supplement the information provided for one of the 11 criteria, identify which criteria you are supplementing.

Photos and Other Attachments

Limit your attachments to the following documents and/or links:

- One page of photos – not to exceed 1 megabyte
- Current support letters – no more than 1 year old
- Legislative map – See Maps section below for more information
- Link to video, if applicable

¹In the Screening Tool, a “Justice40” community is called a “disadvantaged” community.

²In the Screening Tool, a “partial Justice40” community is called a partially disadvantaged community.

Maps

Maps must be submitted in the legislative map standard outlined in [Interim Directive 1510-2011-1](#). Proposals may include as many maps as necessary, within reason. Include the following:

- Vicinity map that shows where the tract(s) are in a landscape context relative to NFS boundaries, roads, cities, and other protected lands
- Individual maps for each tract, if applicable
- Use green to represent National Forest and Grassland areas and Red to indicate tracts proposed for acquisition
- Map features need to correspond to locations, features and other elements described in the narrative. For instance, if the narrative describes a trail, be sure to show the trail on the map

Unobligated Balances

Unspent funds from prior years' appropriations and projects with unobligated balances two (2) years old or older will be taken into consideration. Large unobligated balances affect a Region's ability to prioritize new projects.

Forest Service Policy

The following policy guidance can be found in Forest Service Manual (FSM) 5400-Landownership:

1. Give priority to acquisitions that would consolidate National Forest System lands within existing National Forest boundaries (FSM 5403.1, Policy 1), providing there is no indication of opposition to the acquisition of the property;
2. Acquisitions should meet goals and objectives of Forest Land and Resource Management Plans (Forest Service Manual 5403.1, Policy 11);
3. Nominate properties as free of encumbrances as possible. Avoid acquisitions subject to special conditions or covenants that limit the rights of the United States to manage the lands for National Forest purposes (Forest Service Manual 5403.1, Policy 21).
Nominations with outstanding mineral estates must be clearly identified in the Land Acquisition Proposal Form.