US Forest Service
FY2019 Land and Water Conservation Fund “Core” Criteria and Guidance:
Evaluation and Scoring Criteria for Land Purchase

LWCF “Core” projects are evaluated using the Core Criteria and Guidance in a two-stage process which is competitive and merit based. Land purchase proposals are first evaluated at the Regional level, then Regions send top ranked projects to the Washington Office (WO) for review by a national panel comprised of an inter-disciplinary team of WO and Regional representatives. Eight to ten national panelists review and score the proposals. Panelist’s scores are averaged to determine a final score. The National Panel finalizes a draft prioritized list of land purchase projects to recommend for funding. This project list is reviewed by Agency leadership then forwarded to the Office of Management and Budget through the Department of Agriculture, for release with the President’s budget request to Congress in February.

The criteria used to evaluate land purchase projects proposed by the Forest Service and funded by the Land and Water Conservation Fund appropriations are comprised of elements in:

- Section 7 of the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1966, as amended;
- Section 5 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended; and
- Forest Service Strategic Goals as stated in the Forest Service’s Strategic Plan 2015-2020.

Forest Service Strategic Goals and Core Values

**STRATEGIC GOAL: Sustain Our Nation’s Forests and Grasslands**

- Foster resilient ecosystems
- Mitigate wildfire risk
- Conserve open space

**STRATEGIC GOAL: Deliver Benefits to the Public**

- Provide abundant clean water
- Strengthen communities
- Connect people to the outdoors

**CORE VALUES: Excel as a High-Performing Agency**

- Support effective, efficient and transparent business practices
- Leverage strengths and partnerships
Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) Purposes
Title 1, Section 7 of the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act provides authority for the “acquisition of land, waters, or interests in land or waters” and directs the National Forest System (NFS) to use LWCF funds to acquire “Inholdings within (a) Wilderness areas of the NFS, and (b) other areas of national forests as the boundaries of those forests exist on the effective date of this Act, or purchase units..., all of which other areas are primarily of value for outdoor recreation purposes.”

Endangered Species Act invocation of LWCF
Section 5(a) and (b) of the Endangered Species Act, state: (b) “Funds made available pursuant to the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965, as amended, may be used for the purpose of acquiring lands, waters, or interests therein” to (a) “establish and implement a program to conserve fish, wildlife and plants, including those which are listed as endangered species or threatened species pursuant to section 4 of this Act.”

Scoring Criteria, Points, Weighting and Other Required Information

6 scored criteria worth 110 points total, 1 unscored section
Total possible score: 113 points
- The Regional Ranking criterion is determined at the Regional evaluation
- 3 “extra” points possible added to the national panel average score to complete “final phases”
- Operation and Maintenance Section is required but not scored

1.) 25 points: Recreation and Recreational Access
This criterion evaluates the degree to which the acquisition creates or enhances opportunities for recreation, and access to recreation 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.
2.) 15 Points: Watershed Protection/Climate Change

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. This criterion can be quantified in terms of degree of importance a specific tract will contribute to larger stated watershed protection and restoration goals. Acquisitions can protect high functioning watersheds, or, provide needed opportunities to restore impaired watersheds. 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.

• Award points based on the degree to which acquisitions contribute to watershed improvement, protection or restoration. More points could be given to parcels complementing or integrated with Agency watershed restoration projects such as CFLRP.

Understanding that connecting and restoring watersheds and protecting diverse habitats equate to protections against climate change, what other data or information supports this acquisition as one that is important to meet Forest Service goals with respect to building resilient ecosystems that can more readily adapt and mitigate conditions brought on by climate change?

• More points will be awarded to tracts that support Administration and Forest Service objectives regarding climate change mitigation and adaptation, ecological restoration and resiliency, and support for local economies.

3.) 15 Points: Threatened and Endangered Species and Habitat

Land acquisition provides an opportunity to protect or restore habitats for fish, wildlife and plants at risk. Assign points based on the acquisition’s capacity to protect or restore habitats for endangered, threatened, or candidate species as classified under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and/or designated Forest Service sensitive species.

• Award points based on the degree to which acquisitions protect intact or highly functioning habitat where T&E species are known or expected to be, or, lands that may be restored for listed endangered species followed by threatened, candidate, and lastly Forest Service sensitive species.
4.) *15 Points: Proposal Tract Location (forced ranking)*

This Criterion supports the specific language in the LWCF authority for the Forest Service that directs the Agency to acquire lands in 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, and Wilderness Study Areas. Please ask the WO if there are any questions about which designations are eligible. Points are awarded by a forced ranking.

Acquisitions within a CDA receive 15 points followed by non-Congressionally designated areas that have a special NFS designation that receive 10 points, then “regular” NFS lands receive 5 points and lastly proposed acquisitions outside of NFS boundary receive 0 points. For those projects that have multiple tracts in various locations, the points allocated will be based on the number or tracts and where they fall relative to the four criteria and the acreage of those tracts. Example 1: Four tracts with 2 in Wilderness and 2 within NFS boundaries in areas without any special designation. (2x5 + 2x15)=40/4 = 10 points.

Example 2: Two tracts in with 1 in a roadless area, and 1 within NFS boundaries without any special designation: (1x10 + 1x5) =15/2 = 7.5 points. This approach averages the score based on where the tracts are located. Regions can decide if they want higher scoring tracts in CDAs to compete on their own or if they can help an assemblage of tracts do better.

**15 points: Inside Congressionally Designated Area (forced ranking).** Acquisitions within a Congressionally Designated Area such Wilderness, Wild and Scenic River Corridors, National Scenic Areas, National Recreation Areas, National Historic and Scenic Trail Corridors, or other special management or emphasis areas designated by Congress.

**10 points: Area with special designation by NFS plan.** 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 or other special designation per NFS planning goals within National Forest or Grassland boundaries. If you are not sure if a tract is in or out of a NFS designation please contact Nancy Parachini at 202-570-9009.

**5 points: Inside NFS boundaries.** Proposed acquisitions that are within NFS boundaries but not included in a special designation or CDA receive 5 points.

**0 Points.** Outside NFS boundaries-excludes National Historic and Scenic Trails
5.) **15 Points: Connecting Communities/Partner Support**

This criterion evaluates a project based on the degree of support for the acquisition. The focus is on partnerships and community support and interest for an acquisition. 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, youth education. How is the acquisition part of an effort by the Forest Service to add value to the community? Who are the partners and supporters? Why is this support important? If the proposal is forwarded to the National Panel, proponents are strongly encouraged to submit letters of support to supplement the nomination, particularly support from locally elected officials, members of Congress, adjoining landowners and community members. **Are there current support letters from local groups and elected officials? If not previously provided, they can be provided with the proposal or provided upon request.**

- More points will be awarded to projects that clearly demonstrate that the acquisition provides a benefit for the local community.

6.) **25 points: Regional Ranking**

**Regional Ranking:** This criterion is scored at the Regional evaluation. The Region can apply 25 points based on Regional factors and goals. The National Panel will not rescore this criterion. It will import the Regional Score into each national evaluation.

The points may be allocated in any configuration but **in total** cannot exceed 25 points. Example point allocations:

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<th>Project 1-20 points</th>
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<td>Project 2-5</td>
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Regions may choose to award points based on specific Regional goals and circumstances. For example, tracts that may require more points could be those with important cultural features, or are extremely threatened, or for whatever reason may be important and warrant more points to be competitive. Project fact sheets will
require Regions to explain the rationale for how Regional Ranking points were awarded.

7.) Operation and Maintenance—not scored
This criterion is not scored but the information is important and required by Congress. 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? Or does the acquisition incur costs? Is the cost outweighed by a longer term benefit? Please try to describe how the acquisition makes a net positive contribution to operation and maintenance measured in terms of verifiable cost savings or other quantifiable efficiencies.

Additional Information, Attachments and Panel Considerations

Additional Information Page
Page four of the fact sheet can be used to include any additional information for any of the criteria. Additional information however is not required.

Photos and other attachments
One page of photos is allowed. No additional attachments are allowed other than support letters

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. Please try to provide a “vicinity map” that shows where the tract(s) are located in a landscape context relative to NFS boundaries, roads, cities, and other protected lands. Individual maps for each tract should be included.

Extra Points-National Panel
Project Completion. In order to try to ensure that partially completed projects or tracts reach completion, a project before the National Panel review will receive an extra three points to the average score of a project ONLY if the request is for the final phase or tract(s) and is $3.0 million or less. 3 points

Unobligated Balances and Readiness
The panel will use the following information to inform decisions about project funding.
- **Unobligated Balances.** Unspent funds from prior years’ appropriations. Projects with unobligated balances two (2) years old or older. Also, the Region’s ability to obligate funds awarded in prior fiscal years can be considered.

- **Readiness.** Per Congressional Direction the following due diligence must be addressed in the fact sheet:
  1. Whether or not the landowner has signed an option;
  2. Whether or not an appraisal is finished if the proposed value is based on an approved appraisal to Federal standards, or a market analysis.

- **Budget Considerations:** The Panel’s recommendations will take account of anticipated appropriation levels.

- **Project Definitions:**
  - **Phased acquisition:** A single ownership can be comprised of large or multiple parcels within one purchase option which can be divided into smaller parts in order to be acquired over more than one year due to anticipated limited funding.
  - **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.