

# Open Project Selection Process

## Land and Water Conservation Fund

Nebraska's Open Project Selection Process has been designed and implemented to assure equal opportunity for all eligible project sponsors and the general public to participate in and benefit from the Land and Water Conservation Fund State Assistance Program. The process provides open and objective criteria and standards for the selection of projects meeting high priority needs identified in Nebraska's Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan.



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## Introduction

Nebraska's established Open Project Selection Process (OPSP) is in accord with National Park Service Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) State Assistance Program Manual requirements and adheres to procedures aimed at accomplishing the following goals:

1. Provide the fullest opportunity in Nebraska for knowledge of and participation in the LWCF State Assistance Program;
2. Provide an equitable basis for the selection process; and
3. Assure funds are distributed in a non-discriminatory manner, especially regarding minority, elderly, disabled and other underserved populations.

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission is designated by the Nebraska Unicameral to carry out the purpose and objectives of the LWCF Act on behalf of the State of Nebraska. Per Nebraska enabling legislation, Revised Statute 37-906, forty percent of the federal funds annually allocated to the State of Nebraska are reallocated to state projects and sixty percent to the projects of political subdivisions. When political subdivisions have submitted approved projects in excess of available funds during any fiscal year, the Commission shall consider all such approved projects and use the factors of equity, population and need in determining allocations thereto of available funds.

## Priority Rating System

Project applications for LWCF assistance are reviewed, scored, and ranked by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission from applications submitted by sponsors statewide. All proposed projects must meet the following minimum eligibility requirements before consideration for funding under the Land and Water Conservation Fund Program.

- Must be in accord with and place strong emphasis on conformance with the action plan and priority projects identified in the current Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP): A Guide to an Active Nebraska (2021 – 2025).
- Show evidence of public participation related to the project (e.g., public comment surveys, meetings, etc.) and include, at a minimum, a current signed and dated resolution from the sponsor's governing body to support the proposal for LWCF assistance.
- Designed in conformance with the appropriate current design standards for the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 (ABA) (P.L. 90-480), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, and the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- Conform to eligibility requirements outlined in Land and Water Conservation Fund State Assistance Program Federal Financial Assistance Manual, Vol. 69 and application requirements published by Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

The priority rating system was developed by the Commission's Planning and Programming Division for selecting projects to ensure the fair and equitable evaluation of all eligible acquisition, development, and renovation projects. Project selection criteria and standards were developed utilizing statewide public survey data along with input from the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP)

Technical Advisory Committee, Internal Review Committee, and Public Interest Committee. The following priorities were identified for developing criteria and standards:

- Projects which conform with and carry out provisions of the LWCF Act of 1965 as amended and Nebraska Revised Statutes.
- Projects in which implementation hinges solely on public funds appropriated specifically for outdoor recreation purposes to assure the most efficient management of public recreation funds.
- Projects which benefit society rather than a select group of users.
- Projects which conform to an accepted and approved comprehensive plan.
- Projects which address existing need as opposed to projected need.
- Projects which propose facilities encouraging active participation rather than those of a spectator nature.
- Projects which meet or exceed standards to improve accessibility to meet the needs of the elderly, low-income, physically challenged persons, or other special population demographics.
- Projects which assure conservation of open space within urban centers.

## **Project Selection Process**

The selection process begins with receipt of application which is acknowledged a letter from Planning and Programming Division of Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Applications are reviewed to ensure they meet minimum eligibility requirements. Ineligible applicants are notified by Commission staff with an explanation for refusal and recommendations for future submissions. Eligible project proposals are scheduled for a pre-award on-site inspection.

Following on-site inspections, project applications and supplemental materials are forwarded to the LWCF Selection Committee. A minimum of three Commission staff review, score and rank each application utilizing the Priority Rating System. Project proposals are presented in priority order to Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Board of Commissioners for final approval at a duly advertised public meeting. Applicants are notified of Nebraska Game and Park Commission's fiscal year funding recommendations. Projects selected for LWCF assistance are forwarded to the Midwest Regional Office of National Park Service for approval and obligation of funding.

State and local project proposals are scored and ranked separately according to the 60/40 allocation enabled by Nebraska Revised Statute. Selection criteria and processes are the same for both state and local proposals; however, they involve distinct competitive process for each of the two categories.

## **Amendments for Increased Funding**

Special Reapportionment Account funds and annual apportionments not allocated each fiscal year may be utilized to cover cost overruns on active projects. Amendments to increase federal assistance without further competitive ranking through the OPSP may be approved in an amount not to exceed fifty percent of the original agreement amount only when increased cost are associated with project components approved in the original grant application. Requests for increased funding resulting from a change in

project scope must undergo OPSP competition the following funding cycle to be eligible for additional funding.

## Recurring Funding Cycle

Nebraska's LWCF State Assistance Program is administered on an annual cycle subject to federal apportionment. Application deadline is the first Friday or after the first Friday of Labor Day each fiscal year.

**March** – Notices are distributed in a variety of formats to local political subdivisions about the Commission's intent to apply for fiscal year LWCF funding with application deadline and program background.

**September (Application Deadline)** – Applications must be submitted or received online (<https://ngpcgrants.outdoornebraska.gov>) at by 11:59 p.m. by of business or day designated shortly after the first the Friday posted in previous bullet (Friday or Friday after Labor Day).

**October - November** – Preliminary application review for minimum eligibility and pre-award on-site inspection.

**November/December** – LWCF Selection Committee reviews, scores, and ranks project proposals and forwards to Board of Commissioners.

**January** - Board of Commissioners approve fiscal year projects for recommendation for funding. NGPC informs political subdivisions of selection.

**February - July** – Projects are forwarded to National Park Service for funding approval and obligation of funds after the approval of LWCF by the Commission's Board.

**August - October** – Local Project Agreements will be executed and notices to proceed documents will be issued by staff based on the National Park Service window the project(s) were submitted.

## Applicant Notification

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission seeks to inform all eligible political subdivisions about the availability of federal funding assistance as well as program information related to eligible areas and facilities, Nebraska priorities for funding, processes for submitting applications and explanation about the OPSP. To achieve this objective the Commission issues press release(s), provides information on the agency's website, and works with state agencies, consultants and non-profit organizations to distribute the information related to the LWCF grant program. The League of Municipalities, Nebraska Recreation and Park Association, Nebraska Association of Resources Districts, Nebraska Association of County Officials, Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, and Nebraska Department of Economic

Development promote opportunities on behalf of the LWCF Program. Nebraska Game and Parks Commission makes the Priority Rating System available to all potential applicants.

## Program Assistance

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission provides technical program assistance to all potential applicants, both before and after the deadline for applicant submission. Planning and Programming Division staff answer LWCF Program questions, provide instruction and guidance for applying and obtaining funding, and offer critique and suggestion for future submissions when project(s) are deferred. In addition, Planning and Programming Division staff recommend project sponsor applications be submitted for review prior to the application deadline to allow time for sponsors to make recommended edits before final submission online (<https://ngpcgrants.outdoornebraska.gov>).

## Underserved Populations

Nebraska recognizes projects which meet or exceed standards to improve accessibility to meet the needs of the elderly, low-income, physically challenged persons, or other special population demographics as priority for funding. This is accomplished via the Priority Rating System which provides a tiered points system for projects that go above and beyond minimum standards to address underserved populations. Projects which do not meet minimum standards are deemed not eligible for funding.

## Advisory Boards

Nebraska utilizes three advisory committees to assist the development of the SCORP and associated OPSP. The SCORP advisory committees consisted of the following:

- *Technical Advisory Committee* – consisting of state and federal partners in the field of park and recreation management.
- *Internal Review Committee* – includes internal Nebraska Game and Parks Commission staff. Each representative is selected for specialized knowledge and experience associated with their agency responsibilities.
- *Public Interest Committee* – consists of statewide non-profit organizations, which advocate for some form of outdoor recreation and membership include the general public.

The Board of Commissioner's must complete final approval of all projects for funding at a duly advertised public meeting. The Commission actions are based on staff recommendations, but final decision is solely reliant on the Board of Commissioner's approval.

## Public Participation

The current SCORP and associated OPSP were developed with public input utilizing information from the Nebraska Generalized Outdoor Recreational Survey, which was conducted by University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Department of Sociology, Bureau of Sociological Research (UNL), and data from the Commission and other state agency partners' planning documents. These planning documents include but are not limited to the Nebraska's Comprehensive Trails Plan, Natural Legacy Project, Tourism Plan, Physical

Activity and Nutrition Plan, State Historic Preservation Plan, and the agency's 20-year Recruitment, Development and Retention Plan.

The 2019/2020 Outdoor Recreation Generalized Recreation Survey in Nebraska survey, conducted by UNL is a statistically valid, statewide survey characterizing public interest specifically related to outdoor recreation opportunities. The process provides information on participation in activities, satisfaction with areas and facilities, and identifies limitations to outdoor recreation participation. The continuation of this survey has allowed staff to track changes to outdoor recreation trends and participation on a statewide basis.

Additionally, Planning and Programming Division staff gathers public participation from local and state agency input. The Commission's Information and Education Division also provides extensive opportunities for public input through the agency's NEBRASKALand magazine, outdoor education workshops, regular press releases and radio and television programs.

Public Participation needs for the grant:

- A current signed and dated resolution from the sponsor's governing body to support the proposal for LWCF assistance, which has been presented at a public meeting sponsored by the applicant. (Required)
- Any public participation events or exercises that provide information and input from the community the grant will serve. This includes, but not limited to public surveys, meetings, design charrettes, etc. (Optional)