



California Department of Food and Agriculture
Office of Environmental Farming and Innovation
1220 N Street
Sacramento, CA 95814

January 6, 2020

Re: Healthy Soils Program Draft RFP Comments

Dear OEFI Staff:

On behalf of the California Climate and Agriculture Network, we submit the following comments on the Healthy Soils Program Draft Request for Proposals (RFP).

First, we wish to express our gratitude for the proactive steps OEFI took this fall to gather input from a variety of stakeholders and then summarize that input in a presentation to the Science Advisory Panel. OEFI's responsiveness to that input is greatly appreciated and clearly reflected in many of the major changes proposed in this RFP.

To that end, we strongly support the following proposed changes in the draft RFP:

1. **Instituting a rolling application submission period of up to 4 months (or until funds expended).**
2. **Increasing the maximum grant award from \$75,000 to \$100,000.**
3. **Allowing previously implemented practices to be implemented on a new, different field within the same (previously funded) Assessor Parcel Number (APN).** To avoid confusion, sub-bullet #1 on page 4 should strike "or APN" and instead read: "A previously implemented practice cannot be funded to be implemented again on the same field."
4. **Including Whole Orchard Recycling (WOR) as an eligible practice.**
5. **Instating a 25% set-aside of the total available funds for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers.** We strongly support prioritizing SDFRs and projects benefitting Priority Populations. Such prioritization aligns with the intentions of AB 1348 (the Farmer Equity Act) and other legislation (SB 535, AB 1550, SB 5) authorizing the expenditure of GGRF and bond dollars for climate programs. **However**, because SDFRs by themselves make up between 20-25% of all farmers in California (2017 Ag Census Data), a single 25% set-aside for *both* SDFRs and projects benefitting AB 1550 Priority Populations (categories that often do *not* overlap) will *not* ensure that SDFRs will receive a proportional share of funds. We recommend narrowing the set-aside to just SDFRs and prioritizing projects benefitting Priority Populations in a different way (e.g. a standard number of extra points in scoring).

6. **Reducing the essay-type questions in the application.**
7. **Developing a map-based integrated application input tool to reduce the number of attachments and external websites required in the application.**
8. **Collaborating with USDA-NRCS and CARB to integrate Standard Payment Rates into Comet-Planner.** Note: page 15 of the draft RFP still contains a reference to an Excel file budget worksheet, which should be removed.
9. **Providing notifications and feedback to applicants within 6 weeks.**
10. **Evaluating USDA-NRCS EQIP payment rates for 2020 in efforts to better align HSP with EQIP.**
11. **Providing sample text in the work plan template.**

The above changes will greatly improve farmers' and ranchers' experience with the program and respond to many of the concerns and recommendations we have heard over the years in surveys and interviews of stakeholders implementing this program on the ground.

Still, there are a few remaining changes we seek based on stakeholder feedback.

1. **Streamline the application and review process for making Priority Populations eligibility determinations,** which still make up 7 out of 17 pages of the application. We provide a detailed proposal and justification in the attached documents below.
2. **Establish a minimum annual payment for small farms (e.g. \$1,500 per year).** Establishing a minimum annual payment of \$1,500 – similar to what NRCS's Conservation Stewardship Program began offering as a minimum annual payment in 2016 – would make the program more financially viable for very small farms.
3. **Allow one-time compost applications on rangeland.** The requirement for ranchers to apply compost 3 years in a row on rangeland is cost-prohibitive and not in line with the studies conducted on rangeland compost
4. **Reduce the demonstration project farmer/rancher attendance requirement,** which is unrealistic for some regions. CDFR can survey 2017 demonstration projects to inform a new, more flexible requirement and identify ways to better support demonstration projects.
5. **Clarify the purpose and role of soil testing in the HSP program,** recognizing that incentive projects are not controlled experiments and that farmers and ranchers doing the sampling are often not trained on scientifically rigorous sampling methods

Again, we thank OEFI staff for the proposed changes above and opportunity to comment. We look forward to spreading the word about the many positive changes in this round of the program among our network of farmers, ranchers, and TA providers.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brian Shobe". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "B".

Brian Shobe
Associate Policy Director

Proposed Streamlined Priority Populations Eligibility Determination Process for the Healthy Soils Program

Background

Farmers, ranchers, and the technical assistance providers (TAPs) who work with them have often expressed frustration with the length and complexity of the Healthy Soils Program (HSP) application, especially the section related to Priority Populations.

In the previous round, nearly half the application – 28 questions and prompts, which made up 7 out of the application’s 16 pages when printed out, *not* including supporting documentation – consisted of questions to determine if an applicant’s project provides benefits to Priority Populations. This section daunted and confused many applicants and TAPs, to the point that many who knew they were located in Priority Populations areas told us they just gave up on answering them. This has resulted in an undercount of projects that are providing meaningful benefits to Priority Populations. Some of the questions also required farmers, ranchers, or TAPs to write about and provide scientific rationale on issues (e.g. air quality) far outside of their expertise.

The process of reviewing and verifying responses and supporting documentation for these questions is also time-consuming for CDFA staff and reviewers, requiring them to read lengthy documents and make subjective interpretations of their content. This seems antithetical to the Priority Populations Evaluation Criteria’s intent to “*enable administering agencies to readily make an objective ‘yes’ or ‘no’ decision about whether a particular project provides a benefit to a priority population.*”

Below, we propose a streamlined application and review process for making Priority Populations eligibility determinations. Our goal in proposing this is to:

1. reduce the burden on time-constrained applicants, CDFA staff, and reviewers;
2. remove barriers to non-English speaking and limited resource farmers and ranchers;
3. achieve a more objective and accurate count of projects providing meaningful benefits to Priority Populations

While this proposal is presented as a whole, it is important to note that each suggestion to streamline a Step in the process can be evaluated and adopted independently. Any improvements to streamline the process would be welcomed by farmers, ranchers, and reviewers. To that end, we are flexible in our approach to this challenge and eager to work with ARB and CDFA to find appropriate solutions.

The following process follows the steps outlined in the California Climate Investments 2018 “[Evaluation Criteria for Providing Benefits to Priority Populations](#)”¹ for the Healthy Soils

¹ Available at: https://ww3.arb.ca.gov/cc/capandtrade/auctionproceeds/ccidoc/criteriatable/criteria-table-healthysoils.pdf?_ga=2.219304784.813990947.1574095422-330010414.1502383553

Program. For each step, we describe the instructions as they might appear on the application, then instructions for reviewers, and finally an explanation for the changes we proposed.

Step 1 (Identify Priority Population)

Instructions on Application:

Using the proposed project's location and the [Priority Populations Map²](#), check all boxes that apply for the proposed project. Note: The majority of the project must be located within a disadvantaged or low-income community census tract.

- Is the project located within the boundaries of a disadvantaged community census tract?
- Is the project located within the boundaries of a low-income community census tract?
- Is the project located outside of a disadvantaged community, but within ½-mile of a disadvantaged community and within a low-income community census tract?

If you did **not** check any boxes in Step 1, **stop here – the proposed project does not meet priority populations requirements**. If you checked at least one box, continue to Step 2.

Instructions for Reviewer:

If the applicant checked any of the boxes, verify their response is correct using the project's location and the [Priority Populations Map³](#).

Explanation for Changes:

We removed Criterion D – “Is the project located within the boundaries of a low-income household?” – because Healthy Soils projects cannot physically be located within a household.

Step 2 (Address a Need)

Instructions on Application:

No information is required for this step. CDFA has determined that all Healthy Soils practices meet at least one of the common needs for priority populations in CARB's Funding Guidelines Table 5 of 2018 Funding Guidelines for Agencies that Administer California Climate Investments (<https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/resources/documents/cci-funding-guidelinesadministering-agencies>).

Instructions for Reviewer:

Refer to the table below and check all boxes that the proposed project's practices address.

- PH 1: Reduce health harms (e.g., asthma) suffered disproportionately by priority populations due to air pollutants.

² Available at: <https://ww3.arb.ca.gov/cc/capandtrade/auctionproceeds/communityinvestments.htm>

³ Available at: <https://ww3.arb.ca.gov/cc/capandtrade/auctionproceeds/communityinvestments.htm>

- Env 1: Reduce exposure to local environmental contaminants, such as toxic air contaminants, criteria air pollutants, and drinking water contaminants (e.g., provide a buffer between bike/walk paths and transportation corridors).
- Env 4: Greening communities through restoring local ecosystems and planting of native species, improving aesthetics of the landscape, and/or increasing public access for recreation.

HSP Practice	Step 2 – Table 5 Need(s) Addressed
Cropland Management Practices	
Cover Crop	PH 1, Env 1, Env 4
Conservation Crop Rotation	Env 1, Env 4
Mulching	PH 1, Env 1, Env 4
Nutrient Management	Env 1, Env 4
Residue and Tillage Management – No-Till	PH 1, Env 1, Env 4
Residue and Tillage Management – Reduced Till	PH 1, Env 4
Compost Application	Env 1, Env 4
Herbaceous Cover Establishment on Cropland Practices	
Conservation Cover	PH 1, Env 1, Env 4
Contour Buffer Strips	Env 1, Env 4
Field Border	PH 1, Env 1, Env 4
Filter Strip	Env 1, Env 4
Forage and Biomass Planting	Env 1, Env 4
Grassed Waterway	Env 1, Env 4
Herbaceous Wind Barrier	PH 1, Env 4
Riparian Herbaceous Cover	Env 1, Env 4
Vegetative Barriers	Env 1, Env 4
Woody Cover Establishment on Cropland Practices	
Alley Cropping	PH 1, Env 1, Env 4
Hedgerow Planting	PH 1, Env 1, Env 4
Multi-story Cropping	Env 4
Riparian Forest Buffer	Env 1, Env 4
Tree/Shrub Establishment	Env 1, Env 4
Windbreak/Shelterbelt Establishment	PH 1, Env 1, Env 4
Grazing Lands Practices	
Compost Application	Env 1, Env 4
Prescribed Grazing	Env 1, Env 4
Range Planting	Env 1, Env 4
Silvopasture	Env 4

Explanation for Changes:

Step 2 states that “agencies can use a variety of approaches” to “identify a need that the project will address.” The two “Recommended Approaches” A and B require direct engagement of surrounding communities, which is impractical and infeasible for farmers and ranchers. Of the two “Alternative Approaches,” D is the simplest for CDFA to readily and objectively answer “yes” or “no.” Alternative Approach D requires CDFA to confirm that the project addresses at least one listed need in the list of common needs in CARB’s Funding Guidelines Table 5 (below).

Based on a review of the benefits listed in the NRCS practice standards in the [California Field Office Technical Guide](#)⁴, which are developed based on extensive scientific literature review, all currently eligible HSP practices address at least one of the “Common Needs of Priority Populations” in Table 5. For reporting purposes, we compiled which practices address which needs in the table above, which enables reviewers to swiftly and objectively assess and report the needs the project will address based on well-documented scientific evidence. This would relieve farmers, ranchers, and TAPs from needing to write about issues that are outside their area of expertise, write subjectively about the benefits they believe their project will have, and/or compile and summarize scientific evidence that has already been well-established. This also would relieve reviewers from having to subjectively evaluate each applicant’s case and later summarize the benefits for reporting purposes.

⁴ Available at: <https://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/#/>

Table 5. Examples of Common Needs of Priority Populations

Public Health
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reduce health harms (e.g., asthma) suffered disproportionately by priority populations due to air pollutants. 2. Reduce health harms (e.g., obesity) suffered disproportionately by priority populations due to the built environment (e.g., provide active transportation, parks, playgrounds). 3. Increase community safety. 4. Reduce heat-related illnesses and increase thermal comfort (e.g., weatherization and solar energy can provide more efficient and affordable air-conditioning; urban forestry can reduce heat-island effect). 5. Increase access to parks, greenways, open space, and other community assets.
Economic
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Create quality jobs and increase family income (e.g., targeted hiring for living-wage jobs that provide access to health insurance and retirement benefits with long-term job retention, using project labor agreements with targeted hire commitments, community benefit agreements, community workforce agreements, partnerships with community-based workforce development and job training entities, State-certified community conservation corps). 2. Increase job readiness and career opportunities (e.g., workforce development programs, on-the-job training, industry-recognized certifications). 3. Revitalize local economies (e.g., increased use of local businesses) and support California-based small businesses. 4. Reduce housing costs (e.g., affordable housing). 5. Reduce transportation costs (e.g., free or reduced cost transit passes) and improve access to public transportation (e.g., new services in under-served communities). 6. Reduce energy costs for residents (e.g., weatherization, solar). 7. Improve transit service levels and reliability on systems/routes that have high use by disadvantaged and/or low-income community residents or low-income riders. 8. Bring jobs and housing closer together (e.g., affordable housing in transit-oriented development and in healthy, high-opportunity neighborhoods). 9. Preserve community stability and maintain housing affordability for low-income households (e.g., prioritize projects in jurisdictions with anti-displacement policies). 10. Provide educational and community capacity building opportunities through community engagement and leadership.
Environmental
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reduce exposure to local environmental contaminants, such as toxic air contaminants, criteria air pollutants, and drinking water contaminants (e.g., provide a buffer between bike/walk paths and transportation corridors). 2. Prioritize zero-emission vehicle projects for areas with high diesel air pollution, especially around schools or other sensitive populations with near-roadway exposure. 3. Reduce exposure to pesticides in communities near agricultural operations. 4. Greening communities through restoring local ecosystems and planting of native species, improving aesthetics of the landscape, and/or increasing public access for recreation.

Step 3 (Provide a Benefit):

Instructions for Application:

Projects must satisfy at least one of the of the following three criteria to receive Priority Populations status. CDFA will evaluate whether your project satisfies Criterion A based on your proposed practices and their projected air quality impacts in the budget worksheet and/or the existing scientific literature on the practices’ air quality impacts.

For Criteria B and C, check applicable box(es) and provide justification and/or documentation (e.g. farmers' market certificate, donation receipts, a letter of support from schools or non-profits) to support the claims below.

Criterion A: Project significantly reduces exposure to dust and airborne particles to residents, relative to pre-project levels. **Note: CDFA will determine; no additional information needed.**

- Criterion B: Project increases food access to priority populations through regular farmers markets, donations to food banks or distribution centers serving residents of disadvantaged or low-income communities, or low-income households.
- Criterion C: Project provides regular and ongoing educational opportunities through partnerships with schools or non-profit organizations located in disadvantaged or low-income communities and site access to residents of these communities.

Instructions for Reviewer:

Criterion A – Option #1: Review the budget worksheet to determine if the project will have an estimated net reduction in NO_x, NH₃, and PM 2.5 emissions.⁵ If **yes**, the proposed project **meets** Criterion A.

Criterion A – Option #2: Does the project include any of the following practices⁶?

- Cover Crop
- Mulching
- No-Till
- Reduced-Till
- Conservation Cover
- Field Border
- Herbaceous Wind Barrier
- Alley Cropping
- Hedgerow Planting
- Windbreak/Shelterbelt

⁵ The budget worksheet estimates the NO_x and NH₃ impacts of the following practices: cover crop, reduced fertilizer application, reduced- or no-till, and compost application. The budget worksheet also estimates the PM 2.5 impacts of reduced- or no-till. However, the worksheet does *not* account for the air quality benefits of many other practices, including mulching, windbreaks, and hedgerows, all of which reduce wind erosion and dust.

⁶ Based on benefits listed in NRCS practice standards in the [California Field Office Technical Guide](#), these practices meet benefit criteria A in Step 3: “significantly reduce exposure to dust and airborne particles to residents, relative to pre-project levels.” We estimate the *vast* majority of HSP projects include at least one of these practices, but could do an analysis of previous awards to determine the exact percentage.

If **yes**, and the proposed project does ***not include compost application***⁷, the proposed project **meets** Criterion A.

Criterion B and C: Did the applicant check boxes B and/or C? If yes, review their supporting documents to verify their project will provide the benefits they claim.

Explanation for the Changes:

Criterion A again requires farmers, ranchers, and TAPs to write about air quality impacts of their proposed practices and reviewers to then subjectively evaluate their case. We propose two ways CDFA could more readily and objectively assess the project. The first is to use the estimated NO_x, NH₃, and PM 2.5 emissions in the budget worksheet. The second is to simply check if the project includes one of ten practices the NRCS practice standards indicate have an air quality benefit. These options are not mutually exclusive.

Criteria B and C are the same. We simply suggest providing examples of the kinds of documents (e.g. farmers' market certificate, donation receipts, a letter of support from schools or non-profits) that could be used to support the claims.

Why We Propose Removing the Job Training and Workforce Development Questions

The previous HSP application included questions from the Jobs Training & Workforce Development "[Evaluation Criteria for Providing Benefits to Priority Populations](#)."⁸

HSP projects are *very unlikely* to meet the criteria outlined in Step 3 of that document because:

- A grant of \$75,000 – most of which pays for materials (e.g. compost, seed, transplants, mulch), equipment (e.g. no-till drills, compost spreaders, chippers), and services (e.g. compost or mulch delivery, contracts for conservation plantings), and is often spread out over 3 years – cannot reasonably be expected to “provide high-quality (e.g. local living wages, *health insurance, paid leave*) jobs to priority populations.” (Criterion A, emphasis added)
- We are not aware of any farms or ranches that provide “job training to priority populations that is part of a program with *an established placement record*” (Criterion B, emphasis added) or “job training to priority populations that includes capacity building *that leads to industry-recognized credentials* (e.g., certifications, certificates, degrees, licenses, other documentation of competency and qualifications).” (Criterion C, emphasis added)

⁷ According to CDFA OEFI staff, compost may increase dust, so could negate the impact of the above practices which have demonstrated air quality benefits.

⁸ Available at: https://ww3.arb.ca.gov/cc/capandtrade/auctionproceeds/ccidoc/criteriatable/criteria-table-jobs.pdf?_ga=2.238927817.813990947.1574095422-330010414.1502383553

Thus, **we recommend removing these questions** from CDFA Priority Populations from the application. This change alone would reduce the Priority Populations section of the application by 2 ½ pages.

CARB's Healthy Soils Program [Reporting Template](#)⁹ does require CDFA to calculate "Modeled Jobs" using the "Jobs Co-benefit Modeling Tool." However, the inputs required for the Modeling Tool can be derived directly from the proposed project's budget. I.e. no additional information is required from the applicant. The Reporting Template also has a "Jobs tab," but indicates that filling out the tab is *only* required for "projects with a total project cost of greater than \$1 million awarded after August, 2018 or any project claiming priority population benefits based on jobs benefits. The jobs tab is for information on actual jobs supported by the project funds in the current reporting period" (emphasis added). Given that *no* HSP project has a project cost greater than \$1 million and individual HSP projects are *very unlikely* to create actual jobs, it is unlikely CDFA needs to fill out this tab.

⁹ Available at:

https://www.arb.ca.gov/cc/capandtrade/auctionproceeds/ccidoc/reportingtemplate/landcseq_healthysoils.xlsx?_ga=2.171294697.813990947.1574095422-330010414.1502383553

Proposed Streamlined Application Questions for Priority Populations

Priority Populations

Priority populations include residents of: (1) census tracts identified as disadvantaged by California Environmental Protection Agency per SB 535; (2) census tracts identified as low-income per AB 1550; or (3) a low-income household per AB 1550. See Section VII.B of CCI Funding Guidelines

(<https://www.arb.ca.gov/cc/capandtrade/auctionproceeds/draftrevisedfundingguidelines.pdf>) for more information on the definitions of priority populations.

To qualify as providing “direct, meaningful, and assured benefits to priority populations,” a project must complete 3 steps. To streamline this process for applicants, CDFA will complete Step 2 for your project and evaluate your project for Criterion A in Step 3.

Step 1 – Identify the Priority Population(s)

Using the proposed project’s location and the [Priority Populations Map¹⁰](#), check all boxes that apply for the proposed project. Note: The majority of the project must be located within a disadvantaged or low-income community census tract.

- Is the project located within the boundaries of a disadvantaged community census tract?
- Is the project located within the boundaries of a low-income community census tract?
- Is the project located outside of a disadvantaged community, but within ½-mile of a disadvantaged community and within a low-income community census tract?

If you did **not** check any boxes in Step 1, **stop here – the proposed project does not meet Priority Populations requirements**. If you checked at least one box, continue to Step 2.

Step 2 – Address an important need for community or household.

No information is required for this step. CDFA has determined that all Healthy Soils practices meet at least one of the common needs for priority populations in CARB’s Funding Guidelines Table 5 of 2018 Funding Guidelines for Agencies that Administer California Climate Investments (<https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/resources/documents/cci-funding-guidelinesadministering-agencies>).

Continue to Step 3.

Step 3 – Provide a Benefit.

¹⁰ Available at: <https://ww3.arb.ca.gov/cc/capandtrade/auctionproceeds/communityinvestments.htm>

Projects must satisfy at least one of the of the following three criteria to receive Priority Populations status. CDFA will evaluate whether your project satisfies Criterion A based on your proposed practices and their projected air quality impacts in the budget worksheet and/or the existing scientific literature on the practices' air quality impacts.

For Criteria B and C, check applicable box(es) and provide justification and/or documentation (e.g. farmers' market certificate, donation receipts, a letter of support from schools or non-profits) to support the claims below.

Criterion A: Project significantly reduces exposure to dust and airborne particles to residents, relative to pre-project levels. **Note:** CDFA will determine, no additional information needed.

- Criterion B: Project increases food access to priority populations through regular farmers markets, donations to food banks or distribution centers serving residents of disadvantaged or low-income communities, or low-income households.
- Criterion C: Project provides regular and ongoing educational opportunities through partnerships with schools or non-profit organizations located in disadvantaged or low-income communities and site access to residents of these communities.

Additional documents:

Click here to upload supporting documentation if you checked Criterion B and/or C in Step 3 above.

Upload 1

Upload 2

Upload 3