

A person wearing camouflage clothing and a brown hat is kneeling in a river, holding a large salmon. The person is looking down at the fish. The background shows a rocky riverbank and water.

**MULTISTATE CONSERVATION
GRANT PROGRAM**

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES



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Definitions and Acronyms

Definitions

- **Applicant:** An eligible entity submitting a proposal for MSCGP funding.
- **Award:** A grant agreement between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the recipient organization outlining the terms of funding.
- **Eligible Entity:** Organizations authorized under the MSCGP to receive funding, including state fish and wildlife agencies and qualifying partners.
- **Grant:** A legal instrument used to transfer funds from the federal government to an eligible recipient to carry out a public purpose.
- **Project:** A proposed set of activities with specific objectives, outcomes, and timelines, as described in a submitted application.
- **Recipient:** The organization or agency that receives MSCGP funding and is responsible for compliance and reporting.

Acronyms

Term	Definition
AFWA	Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
CI	Office of Conservation Investment
DJ Act	Dingell-Johnson Sport Fish Restoration Act
MSCGP	Multistate Conservation Grant Program
NGC	National Grants Committee
NOFO	Notice of Funding Opportunity
PR Act	Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act
R3	Recruitment, Retention and Reactivation
T-MSCGP	Traditional Multistate Conservation Grant Program
R3-MSCGP	R3 -focused Multistate Conservation Grant Program
USFWS	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
WSFR	Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration

Section 1: Program Background and Legal Framework

1.1 Policy: Overview and Purpose

The Multistate Conservation Grant Program (MSCGP) is a competitive federal grant initiative that funds projects with national or regional impact. The source of the funds are federal Pittman-Robertson and Dingel-Johnson funds. The program aims to address challenges that cross state boundaries and cannot be effectively managed by individual states.

Purpose: To fund high-priority projects that advance:

- Fish and wildlife conservation
- Habitat improvement
- Hunting, trapping, and target shooting recruitment
- Public engagement efforts

1.2 Policy: Governance Structure

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS):

- Issues NOFO (Notice of Funding Opportunities)
- Reviews recommended projects
- Makes final award decision
- Administers awards via GrantSolutions.gov
- Ensures compliance with federal laws and regulations

The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA):

- Coordinates the identification and development of MSCGP Strategic Priorities
- Collects, reviews, scores, and ranks proposals
- Recommends proposed projects to USFWS

1.3 Procedure: Funding Pathways

Traditional MSCGP (T-MSCGP)

Annual Funding Cap: \$6,000,000

- **Eligible Projects:**
 - Research, restoration, and conservation of sport fish and wildlife and their habitats
 - Hunter safety and aquatic education
 - Hunting, trapping, target shooting, fishing and boating R3 Initiatives

Recruitment, Retention, Reactivation MSCGP (R3-MSCGP)

Annual Funding Cap: \$5,000,000

- **Eligible Projects:**
 - Hunting, trapping, and target shooting Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation (R3) initiatives
 - Research, marketing, communication, and outreach to support national R3 strategies

1.4 Policy: Legal Authority

The MSCGP is authorized under the following federal statutes:

➤ **Dingell-Johnson Sport Fish Restoration Act**

- **Citation:** 16 U.S.C. 777 et seq.
- **Purpose:** Supports fishery restoration, angler and boater R3, and aquatic education
- **Funding sources:** Excise taxes on fishing equipment, motorboat fuel, and import duties.

VISION

The Multistate Conservation Grant Program envisions a future where sustainable fish and wildlife populations, healthy habitats, and enduring traditions of fishing, hunting, and shooting sports thrive together. By enabling innovation, collaboration, and leadership, we ignite lasting conservation impact across state jurisdictions and foster growing participation in hunting, trapping, fishing, and shooting sports.

- **Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act**
 - **Citation:** 16 U.S.C. 669 et seq.
 - **Purpose:** Support wildlife conservation, habitat restoration, hunter education, and hunting and target shooting R3 initiatives
 - **Funding Sources:** Excise taxes on firearms, ammunition, and archery equipment.
- **Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Programs Improvement Act of 2000**
 - **Citation:** Public Law. 106-408
 - **Purpose:** Amended the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Acts to establish the Multistate Conservation Grant Program.
- **Modernizing the Pittman-Robertson Fund for Tomorrow's Needs Act**
 - **Citation:** Public Law 116-94
 - **Purpose:** Amended the Wildlife Restoration Act to include:
 - Authorization of \$5,000,000 for grants that promote a national hunting and shooting sports R3 program

1.5 Policy: Federal Regulations, Policies, and Advisories

The MSCGP is subject to the following regulatory requirements:

- **2 CFR 200 – Uniform Guidance**
 - **Key areas:**
 - Cost principles, including allowable costs
 - Procurement standards and financial controls
 - Subrecipient monitoring and management
 - Reporting requirements
 - Single audit thresholds
- **USFWS Federal Financial Assistance Policies and Advisories**
 - **Key areas:**
 - [USFWS Financial Assistance - Eligibility & Program-Specific Requirements Policy](#)
 - Federal Financial Assistance Program Eligibility
 - ✓ [Eligibility Standards for Sport Fish Restoration](#)
 - ✓ [Eligibility for Wildlife Restoration](#)
 - 26 Advisories for R3 eligible activities

1.6 Procedures: Funding Opportunity and Application Process

- **Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO)**
 - **Issued by:** USFWS
 - **Purpose:** Outlines funding availability, eligibility, priorities, application instructions, review process, and deadlines
 - **Key Elements:**
 - Program Description
 - Funding Priorities
 - Application and Review Process
 - Regulatory References
- **AFWA MSCGP Guidelines**
 - **Purpose:** Interpret the legal and regulatory framework for the applicants and provide detailed instructions and templates
 - **Content Includes:**
 - Application instructions
 - Application templates
 - Strategic Priorities
 - Evaluation criteria

1.7 Stakeholders' Roles in MSCGP Lifecycle



Section 2: Grant Management Lifecycle and Annual Schedule

Policy Statement: The Multistate Conservation Grant Program (MSCGP) operates on a structured, annual lifecycle that supports transparency, strategic alignment, and compliance with federal regulations. This section outlines the program's procedural framework and schedules, defining grantee responsibilities and key milestones from strategic priority setting through award closeout.

2.1 Policy: Annual Grant Cycle Overview

Purpose: To ensure consistent and timely execution of the MSCGP process, from priority development to final award decisions.

Procedure:

- The MSCGP follows a repeatable annual cycle.
- The cycle is co-managed by AFWA and USFWS.
- It begins with updating strategic priorities and ends with post-award grant management.
- All procedures comply with federal regulations and reflect stakeholder input.

2.2 Annual Timeline & Milestones

Month	Activity
November - December	Collect state and regional strategic priorities through outreach, regional meetings, and conferences. Initiate stakeholder engagement and begin drafting annual priorities.
Early January	Distribute the draft strategic priorities document, including suggested edits, to stakeholders for review.
February	Gather and analyze stakeholder feedback on the draft priorities. Host an open meeting for review and discussion. Facilitate a National Grants Committee (NGC) call to finalize feedback.

March	Finalize and approve Strategic Priorities.
April	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) publishes the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO). MSCGP proposal solicitation opens. The AFWA Portal is launched for the current cycle. Applicant training sessions are held.
May	TRT (Technical Review Team) recruitment and training
June	Deadline for application submission via the AFWA Portal. AFWA and CI conduct initial eligibility reviews. Regions are requested to include discussions on strategic priorities in their second biannual meetings.
July	TRT conducts a technical review of eligible proposals and drafts a preliminary priority list of high-ranking proposals.
August	CI conducts a detailed review of the preliminary list. The NGC reviews and discusses the list during a virtual meeting.
September	USFWS publishes a Directed Announcement in GrantSolutions. Invitations are sent for full application submission. Applicants incorporate feedback from TRT/CI/NGC into their proposals and submit revised proposals in GrantSolutions. The NGC approves the draft priority list and submits it to state directors. The final list is approved by the majority of state directors at the AFWA Annual Meeting.
October 1	AFWA submits the final Priority List of Projects to the USFWS for approval.
November – December	USFWS/CI conducts final reviews, and the Service Director makes decisions on awarding grants

2.3 Pre-NOFO Engagement & Priority Development Process

Beginning in October, AFWA solicits state and regional fish and wildlife agency priorities to begin development of strategic priorities for the following year.

Pre-NOFO engagement involves structured outreach to state agencies, regional associations, and partners to collaboratively develop annual strategic priorities. AFWA hosts webinars, gathers written input, and works with its committees to narrow priorities and articulate desired conservation outcomes.

2.4 Application Submission Stages (AFWA Portal → GrantSolutions)

The application process follows a two-stage model:

- **AFWA Portal Submission:** Applicants submit proposals and budget narratives.
- **GrantSolutions Submission:** If invited, applicants submit the full federal application (SF-424 forms, NICRA, required statements, etc.) for review and award.

2.5 Award Management, Reporting, and Closeout

Once awarded, recipients are responsible for:

- Executing the project as approved.
- Submitting annual interim (if applicable) and final reports.
- Managing budget and compliance requirements.
- Participating in post-grant evaluations and closeout activities in accordance with 2 CFR 200 and DOI requirements.

Section 3: MSCGP Communication and Outreach

Policy Statement: The MSCGP is committed to maintaining transparent, timely, and inclusive communication with all stakeholders to promote understanding of the program, encourage high-quality participation, and support the advancement of national and regional conservation priorities. This communication is achieved through targeted messaging, regular updates, and outreach strategies.

3.1 Core Messaging Development

Policy: The MSCGP will develop and maintain clear, messages to support each major phase of the grant cycle.

Procedures:

- Define key messages for major phases (e.g., NOFO release, application process, deadlines, and award announcements).
- Tailor language for key audiences: applicants, reviewers, partners, and the public.
- Use plain language and standardized program terminology in all communications.

3.2 AFWA MSCGP Website Management

Policy: The AFWA MSCGP website will serve as the central public access point for all official program-related information and resources.

Procedures:

- Update the website on a quarterly basis, or more frequently as needed.
- Post current NOFO, deadlines, application templates, FAQs, and guidance documents.
- Upload recordings of applicant webinars and training sessions.
- Highlight funded projects and success stories.
- Ensure all external links, including those to the AFWA Portal and GrantSolutions, remain functional and up to date.

3.3 Communication via AFWA Committees and Regional Associations

Policy: AFWA committees and Regional Associations will be used to distribute program information and solicit input from key stakeholder groups.

Procedures:

- Disseminate updates and calls to action through committee chairs and vice chairs during relevant program phases (e.g., priority setting, solicitation).
- Provide brief program updates during committee meetings.
- Collect feedback on trends and multistate conservation needs.
- Encourage committee members to disseminate MSCGP communications within their professional networks.
- Use the Regional Associations to augment and support AFWA Committee communications and input gathering.

3.4 Directors' Line, Newsletters, and Press Releases

Policy: The MSCGP will communicate key milestones through official AFWA communications channels and strategic media engagement.

Procedures:

- Publish updates in the AFWA Directors' Line and member newsletters during major milestones.
- Distribute short, accessible press releases with quotes, statistics, and program highlights.
- Target press releases to conservation media outlets, partner organizations, and federal/state agencies.

3.5 Social Media Engagement

Policy: The MSCGP will utilize social media to increase visibility, promote engagement, and share key updates.

Procedures:

- Post at least biweekly during active grant phases (e.g., NOFO open period, training registration).
- Use AFWA-managed channels: Twitter/X, LinkedIn, and Facebook.
- Share key deadlines, program tips, impact stories, and funding opportunities.
- Incorporate visuals, short videos, and links to relevant resources.

3.6 Outreach at Regional and National Meetings

Policy: The MSCGP will use regional and national events to raise awareness and share program updates.

Procedures:

- Present MSCGP updates during AFWA and regional meetings, and national conservation conferences.
- Distribute flyers, posters, and outreach materials featuring success stories and program impact.
- Host breakout sessions or informal drop-in discussions to engage attendees.

3.7 Webinars and Technical Assistance Sessions

Policy: The MSCGP will provide educational webinars and optional technical assistance sessions to support applicants.

Procedures:

- Host annual webinars outlining strategic priorities, eligibility criteria, and application requirements.
 - Offer office hours or scheduled virtual Q&A sessions to clarify specific steps in the application process.
-

Section 4: Strategic Priorities Process

Policy Statement: Strategic priorities are the foundational driver for project selection and funding under the Multistate Conservation Grant Program (MSCGP). They ensure alignment with national conservation objectives, the legislative intent of excise-tax revenues, and evolving multistate needs in fish and wildlife conservation and hunting, trapping, target shooting, fishing and boating operations & management and R3 initiatives.

Strategic priorities are reviewed and updated annually through a collaborative process involving state agencies, regional associations, AFWA committees, and key partners.

4.1 Phase 1: Stakeholder Engagement and Input

Objective: To ensure the Strategic Priorities are informed by broad, diverse input and reflect the real-time conservation needs of MSCGP stakeholders.

Procedures:

- **Timeline:** Initiate outreach in September.
- **Outreach Method:**
 - A formal communication from the National Grants Committee (NGC) Chair or designee invites early input on proposed revisions or additions.
 - Include submission instructions and a clear deadline.
- **Target Audience:**
 - **State Agencies:** Directors, Federal Aid Coordinators.
 - **Regional Associations:** NEAFWA, SEAFWA, MAFWA, WAFWA.
 - **Partners:** NGOs, federal agencies, industry representatives, and universities.
- **Input Mechanism:**

- Create a structured online input form, including the previous year's priorities for context.
- Encourage discussion of priorities in relevant AFWA committee meetings prior to the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference.
- **Committees Engaged**
 - Science and Research
 - Engagement and Education
 - Hunting and Shooting Sports
 - Climate Adaptation
 - Energy
 - Fish and Wildlife Health
 - Invasive Species
 - Angler and Boater
 - Sustainable Use of Wildlife
 - Bird Conservation
 - Executive Committee
 - Regional Committees
- **Deliverable:**
Summarize and compile all input into a stakeholder input report by the end of October.

4.2 Phase 2: State Involvement in Refining Strategic Priorities

Policy: The MSCGP is committed to engaging state fish and wildlife agencies in the annual review and refinement of strategic priorities to ensure that funding supports high-impact, broadly supported conservation needs. Each year, states will be provided with the opportunity to review and provide input on proposed priorities through a standardized survey process.

Procedures:

1. Timeline

- The state review process will begin in **early November** following completion of stakeholder input (see Section 4.1).
- The final set of Strategic Priorities will be submitted to the National Grants Committee for endorsement by the **end of November**.

2. Communication and Outreach

- AFWA staff will distribute the **draft Strategic Priorities** to state agencies via formal email communication.
- Each communication will include:
 - A summary of changes or additions from the previous year.
 - A link to an online survey or input form.
 - Clear instructions for participation and a deadline (minimum 21 calendar days).

3. Target Participants

- State Fish and Wildlife Agencies Directors
- Federal Aid Coordinators

4. Input Collection

- States will submit input via a standardized **online survey**. The survey will request:
 - Ratings of draft priorities based on urgency and relevance.
 - Identification of gaps or duplicative topics.
 - Recommendations for consolidation, clarification, or addition of new priorities.
 - Open-ended feedback to capture regional or agency-specific needs.
- States are encouraged to discuss the draft priorities in internal team meetings or regional forums during the open comment period.

5. Feedback Evaluation

- AFWA staff will analyze state feedback to identify:
 - Common themes and areas of agreement.
 - Emerging or unmet needs.
 - Opportunities to streamline or focus the priority list.

6. Refinement and Structuring of Priorities

- Based on analysis, the Strategic Priorities will be narrowed and refined to ensure clarity and focus.
 - Fewer, well-defined priorities will be selected.
 - Cross-cutting themes (e.g., climate change) will be included only when supported by a strong rationale.
 - Redundancies will be eliminated to avoid applicant confusion.
- Each final priority will follow a **standardized framework**:
 - **Problem Statement**: Clearly defines the issue, opportunity, or gap addressed.
 - **Desired Outcomes**: Identifies the expected conservation, R3, or organizational impact.
 - **Example Projects**: Provides illustrative, non-prescriptive project types eligible under the priority.

7. Priority Classification System

- Each priority will be assigned a relative ranking:
 - **High** – urgent need, broad alignment, and high implementation readiness.
 - **Medium** – significant need with moderate readiness or regional focus.
 - **Low** – emerging issue or lower current urgency but future potential.

8. Deliverable

- AFWA will compile a final Strategic Priorities document that includes:
 - Structured and ranked priorities using the standard framework.
 - Summary of state feedback and rationale for changes.
 - Documented alignment with stakeholder input and strategic goals.
- This document will be presented to the **National Grants Committee** for final review and refinement.

4.3 Review and Finalization

- Following review by the NGC, the finalized Strategic Priorities will be submitted for formal approval:
 - **AFWA Executive Committee Review**: The refined priorities will be presented by the Chair of NGC to the AFWA Executive Committee for endorsement - Early December during the AFWA Executive Committee Meeting in DC.
 - **State Directors' Approval**: The final Strategic Priorities will be submitted for approval by state fish and wildlife agency directors at the **AFWA Business Meeting** during the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference - March
- The approved set of Strategic Priorities will be:
 - Formally published by AFWA
 - Referenced in the upcoming **MSCGP Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO)**
 - Used to guide proposal development, review, and selection during the current grant cycle

Section 5: Application Submission (AFWA Portal → GrantSolutions)

Overview

The Multistate Conservation Grant Program (MSCGP) follows a **two-phase application process**. All submissions must be made through the AFWA MSCGP Portal and, if invited, through GrantSolutions.

5.1 Phase I: Grant Proposals are submitted in the AFWA MSCGP Portal

Deadline: Early to mid-June 2025 (Exact date will be listed in the AFWA Portal)

Required Documents:

- ✓ Project Statement
- ✓ Budget Narrative
- ✓ Budget Table (No federal forms required in Phase I)

- [AFWA MSCGP webpage](#) lists proposal instructions and portal access.
- [MSCGP Grants Database](#) is a great resource for the awarded projects to:

- Avoid duplicating efforts
- Build on previous research and deliverables

5.2 Phase II: Full Grant Application Package is submitted in GrantSolutions (If Invited)

Estimated Timeline: Early to mid-September 2025 (Deadlines are provided in the Directed Announcement email sent to selected applicants)

If your proposal is selected, the applicants are invited to submit the following:

Grant Application Package Documents (GrantSolutions submission):

- ✓ **SF-424** – Application for Federal Assistance
- ✓ **SF-424A** – Budget Information (Non-Construction)
- ✓ **Project Abstract Summary** – Must include:
 - Project purpose
 - Activities to be performed
 - Expected deliverables/outcomes
 - Intended beneficiaries
 - Subrecipient activities (if applicable)
- **Budget Narrative and Budget Table**
- **NICRA** – Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement (if applicable and requesting indirect costs)

Organization's Required Statements (on letterhead, in one PDF file):

- Certification Statement for Nongovernmental Organizations
- Single Audit Reporting Statement
- Indirect Cost Statement
- Pre-Award Costs Statement
- Overlap/Duplication of Effort Statement
- Conflict of Interest and Unresolved Matters Disclosure
- **SF-LLL – Disclosure of Lobbying Activities**
(Required if requesting >\$100,000 in federal funds and lobbying applies)

5.3 General Notes on Funding Structure

- MSCGP grants are traditionally awarded for one year.
- If projects span multiple years, applicants may either apply for funding one year at a time or request multiyear funding.
- If applying for one year at a time, applicants are required to:
 - Indicate intent for future funding in your proposal.
 - Report on Year 1 progress for subsequent funding requests.
- If applying for multiyear funding requests must include:
 - Year-by-year objectives, budget tables, and narratives.
 - Multiyear awards, if granted, will be approved for all years, but funds will be obligated one year at a time.
 - Multiyear funding is limited and subject to high justification standards.

5.4 Documentation Provided to Applicants

Applicants will receive:

- Detailed Strategic Priorities, including problem statements and expected outcomes.
 - Evaluation rubric and scoring weight guidance.
 - Guidance documents and templates for budgets and narratives.
 - Eligibility checklists and pre-screening guidance.
 - Calendar of training events and webinar events
-

Section 6: Initial Review Gate-Application Screening

6.1 Pre-Screening Purpose and Overview

Policy: The **Pre-Screening Gate** is a mandatory quality assurance measure ensuring that submitted grant applications meet minimum eligibility, completeness, and Strategic Priority alignment criteria before advancing to technical review. This process maintains the integrity of the **Multistate Conservation Grant Program (MSCGP)** and optimizes reviewer efficiency by preventing the evaluation of non-compliant applications.

Procedure:

- **Designated Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA) staff**, in coordination with **Office of Conservation Investments (CI) staff**, will administer the Pre-Screening Gate.
- Pre-screening decisions will be **documented and retained** for audit purposes.

6.2 Pre-Screening Criteria

Policy: All applications must meet **completeness, submission, and eligibility standards** before advancing to technical review.

Procedure:

Completeness and Required Components:

- Applications must include:
 - ✓ **Project Statement** (Need, Purpose, Objectives, Approach, Timeline, Evaluation).
 - ✓ **Budget Table and Budget Narrative.**
 - ✓ **Letters of Engagement** (if required).
- Incomplete applications will be deemed **ineligible.**

Compliance with Submission Guidelines:

- ✓ **All required forms and components.**
- ✓ **Complete and clearly articulated responses** in each section.
- ✓ **Proper formatting, page limits, and file types.**
- ✓ **Submission through AFWA Portal for Phase I.**

Compliance with Eligibility Criteria:

- **Strategic Priorities:**
 - ✓ Proposals must explicitly align with **MSCGP Strategic Priorities.**
 - ✓ Strategic alignment must be evident in the **Project Abstract** and **Project Statement.**
- **Eligible Applicants:**
 - ✓ **State fish and wildlife agencies, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, Regional Associations of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, conservation-focused nongovernmental entities, higher education institutions, conservation-focused nonprofits, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service** may apply.
- **Benefit Scope:**
 - ✓ Projects must demonstrate the benefit to **a majority of States, a majority (over 50%) of states in a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Region, or a majority (over 50%) of states in a regional fish and wildlife association.**
- **Eligible Species and Activities:**
 - ✓ Projects must involve **wild birds, wild mammals, or sport fish.**
 - ✓ Eligible activities
 - T-MSCGP:
 - Research, restoration, and conservation of sport fish and wildlife and their habitats
 - Hunter safety and aquatic education
 - Hunting, trapping, target shooting , fishing and boating R3 Initiatives
 - R-MSCGP:
 - Hunting and target shooting Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation (R3) initiatives
 - Marketing, communication, and outreach to support national R3 strategies

Applications that **fail to meet eligibility requirements** will not proceed to the **Technical Review Teams.** A **written record of non-compliant applications** will be maintained for transparency and audit purposes.

6.3 Duplicate and Redundant Project Identification

Policy: To prevent duplication and ensure funding efficiency, applications must be screened against previous MSCGP-funded projects.

Procedure:

- Applicants must, where applicable:
 - ✓ **Demonstrate how their proposal advances past efforts.**
 - ✓ **Identify relevant MSCGP-funded projects** being extended or complemented.
 - ✓ **Distinguish their proposal** from similar or previously funded initiatives.
- AFWA will advise the Technical Review Team on potentially duplicative projects. If the Technical Review Team determines that a project is duplicative, it may decide to remove it from consideration.

6.4 Documentation and Transparency

Policy: The MSCGP maintains transparency and consistency in grant application reviews by recording all eligibility, pre-screening, and scoring decisions.

Procedure:

- Reviewer scores and comments are **logged through SurveyMonkey Apply** or a similar secure system.
- **Applicants may request summary feedback** following final award announcements.
- AFWA will **retain complete records** for each application cycle, including:
 - ✓ Reviewer rosters
 - ✓ Conflict of interest forms
 - ✓ Scoring justifications
 - ✓ Decision documentation for **internal audits and federal compliance.**

Section 7: Conflict of Interest Policy and Disclosure

Purpose: This section establishes conflict of interest eligibility requirements and procedural safeguards for individuals serving in the application review and ranking process under the MSCGP. The policy aims to protect the integrity and transparency of the program by avoiding actual and perceived conflicts of interest among applicants, reviewers and those involved in awarding grants.

7.1 Policy Statement

AFWA recognizes that avoiding conflicts of interest is fundamental to the administration of competitive grant programs. This includes not only actual conflicts—particularly financial conflicts—but also perceived and organizational conflicts, which can undermine the public's trust in the fairness of the grant process. As such, AFWA is committed to implementing a review structure that is impartial, free from bias, and consistent with best practices observed in other federal and state-level grant programs. It outlines the fiduciary measures to ensure grant program integrity.

7.2 Types of Conflict of Interest

- 1. Personal Conflicts of Interest** - Personal conflicts involve the potential for individual financial benefit and are strictly regulated under federal grant rules. These include, but are not limited to:
 - A reviewer or their immediate family member standing to gain from the approval of a specific grant.
 - A reviewer being named in a proposal as a contractor, subrecipient, or key personnel.
- 2. Organizational Conflicts of Interest** - Organizational conflicts occur when the reviewer's organization stands to benefit—directly or indirectly—from the outcome of the grant selection process. This includes:
 - Reviewers affiliated with entities submitting proposals in the current grant cycle.
 - Individuals from organizations likely to receive awarded funds, regardless of their direct involvement in the application.
- 3. Perceived Conflicts of Interest** - Even in the absence of a direct financial interest, circumstances that could reasonably be viewed as compromising objectivity must be addressed. This includes situations where:

- The appearance of favoritism could arise due to personal or professional associations.
- A reviewer's organization may be in competition with other applicants for the same funding.

7.3 Eligibility Restrictions for Technical Review Teams

To maintain impartiality and fairness in the review process, AFWA shall enforce the following:

- **State Agency Representatives** Under the **Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson Acts**, state fish and wildlife agencies are legally designated **cooperators** and **managers** of conservation programs. Because of this:
 - **They are allowed to participate as reviewers** for Multistate Conservation Grant Program (MSCGP) proposals, even if their state stands to benefit from a proposal.
 - They **must disclose any direct conflicts** (e.g., if they are listed on a proposal or their staff are key personnel) and **recuse** themselves from scoring or discussing those proposals.
 - This is justified by their **statutory role** as co-managers and decision-makers under the Acts
- **Non-State Representatives** are only eligible to participate as reviewers if:
 - Their organization is not submitting or listed on a proposal.
 - They are not contractors/subrecipients or are not listed as key personnel.
 - They did not contribute to the development of the proposal.
 - There is no other personal or professional interest.
 - Exceptions - In rare and clearly justified cases, an exception may be granted in consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), provided that the individual does not participate in the scoring, ranking, or discussion of any proposals with which they have a conflict of interest.
- **Annual Disclosure:** All reviewers must sign a COI disclosure annually and will not score proposals for which a conflict exists.

7.4 Conflict Disclosure and Recusal

State representatives (participating in review teams) and NGC members must disclose any actual, potential, or perceived conflicts of interest before reviewing any application. If a conflict is identified:

- The conflict must be documented in the COI tracking system maintained by AFWA.
- Those with conflict must not participate in the review of the affected proposal.

Non-state representatives having conflicts are prohibited from participating in the review process.

AFWA uses a centralized tracking system to log disclosures and recusals to ensure transparency and program integrity.

7.5 COI Certification Form Requirements

All Technical Review Team members and National Grants Committee members participating in proposal review must annually sign a Conflict of Interest Certification Form.

The certification must state:

- The individual has **reviewed and understands** the MSCGP Conflict of Interest Policy.
- They **do not knowingly have any conflicts** with submitted proposals.
- They will **promptly disclose** any conflict that arises during the review process.

Signed forms are collected prior to the review cycle and securely retained by AFWA.

7.6 Conflict Management During Scoring

To ensure impartiality during scoring and ranking processes:

- Individuals with known conflicts are **prevented from accessing or scoring** affected applications within the proposal management system (e.g., SurveyMonkey Apply).
- The system **flags high-risk relationships** for AFWA staff to investigate and confirm.
- AFWA monitors **score distributions** for anomalies that may suggest bias or irregularities.

7.6 Transparency and Documentation Practices

AFWA maintains detailed records of:

- All signed COI certification forms.
- All recusal decisions and associated documentation.
- Meeting notes reflecting recusals and discussion limits.
- Reviewer assignments and scoring participation logs.

These records are stored securely for a minimum of three years and may be reviewed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or federal auditors upon request.

Section 8: Technical Review Team Management

Policy Objective: To ensure transparency, consistency, fairness, and integrity in the MSCGP proposal evaluation process by establishing structured procedures for selecting Technical Review Teams (TRTs), implementing standardized scoring methods, and an efficient review process.

8.1 Key Policy Elements

- **Balanced decision making:** Ensure equal representation from state fish and wildlife agencies, federal agencies, NGOs, Industry, and other partners.
- **Bias mitigation:** Identify and review the outlier scores for each proposal, requiring written justification or discussions to address potential bias.
- **Conflict of Interest (COI):** Reviewers must recuse themselves from reviewing any proposals with which they have an affiliation or conflict.
- **Standardized Evaluation:** Utilize uniform training, scoring rubrics, and evaluation procedures to enhance consistency and reduce subjectivity.
- **Scoring Transparency:** Share unaltered results, including rubric-based scores and analysis, with applicants to promote accountability.

8.2 TRT Composition and Structure

1. Technical Review Team Assignment

- TRTs will be assigned based on Strategic Priorities (Priorities 1-3)
- Proposals under AFWA (Priority 4) will be reviewed by 4-6 AFWA Executive Committee Members
- Technical Review Team Chair: An NGC member will serve as the Chair for each team

2. Balanced Representation

Each TRT will consist of a pool of 15-20 reviewers with a balanced representation of the following primary stakeholder groups:

- **State Fish and Wildlife Agencies:** Ensure feasibility and alignment with state-level priorities.
- **Federal Agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Public Institutes of Higher Education:** Offer scientific, research and outreach perspective.
- **Industry Representatives:** Represent the financial contributors of PR/DJ and offer industry perspective on priorities.
- **AFWA Regional Associations:** Provide regional perspective on alignment with priorities.

3. Additional Considerations

- Ensure geographic distribution to avoid regional bias

- Include a broad range of expertise (fish and wildlife health, habitat management, human dimension, research, R3, policy, etc.)

This equitable distribution ensures that project evaluation reflects a broad range of expertise, including subject matter experts, funding priorities, and implementation experience.

8.3 Conflict of Interest (COI) Policies

Also see [Section 7: Conflict of Interest Policy and Disclosure](#)

- **State Agency Representatives** may participate as reviewers, even if the state is a project beneficiary, consistent with their role under the Act.
- **Non-State Representatives** are only eligible to participate as reviewers if:
 - Their organization is not submitting or listed on a proposal.
 - They are not contractors/subrecipients or are not listed as key personnel.
 - They did not contribute to the development of the proposal.
 - There is no other personal or professional conflict .
- **Annual Disclosure:** All reviewers must sign a COI disclosure annually and will not score proposals for which a conflict exists.

8.4 Reviewers Selection and Eligibility

1. Selection Criteria

- AFWA will publish expected reviewer qualifications annually
- Selection will prioritize geographic representation, expertise, and organizational affiliation
- Dominance by any single agency or region is not permitted

2. Nomination process

- **State Representatives:** Nominated by their respective agencies
- **Partners:** Nominated through their respective organizations based on expertise.
- **Regional Association Representatives:** Nominated by NEAFWA, SEAFWA, MAFWA, and WAFWA

3. Pre-screening Requirements:

- Conflict of Interest Review
- Subject Matter Expertise Validation
- Geographic Balance

8.5 Onboarding and Screening Process

All selected reviewers must complete a standardized onboarding process that includes:

- Review of current Strategic Priorities and evaluation criteria.
- Familiarization with the 4-tier scoring rubric and weighted category system.
- Completion of annual Conflict of Interest disclosure and certification.
- Instruction on the use of scoring tools and written justifications.

AFWA may administer a qualifications survey to align reviewers with proposals based on expertise and experience.

8.6 Reviewer Responsibilities and Time Commitment

Reviewers are expected to:

- Independently score all assigned proposals prior to team discussions.
- Participate in calibration sessions and team meetings.
- Provide clear, well-documented justification/feedback for applicants.
- Actively engage in constructive deliberations during team review meetings.
- Recuse themselves from any review where a real or perceived conflict of interest exists.

The estimated time commitment: 15–25 hours per review cycle, depending on the number of proposals and team assignments.

8.7 Reviewer Conduct and Ethical Standards

All reviewers must adhere to the highest standards of ethics, integrity, and professionalism. Specific expectations include:

- **Impartiality** – Scoring must be strictly based on the merit of the proposal and the standardized rubric.
- **Confidentiality** – Proposal materials and review discussions must not be shared outside of the authorized review process.
- **Transparency** – Reviewers must disclose any financial, professional, or personal relationships that may constitute a conflict of interest.
- **Professionalism** – All reviewers must engage respectfully and collaboratively throughout the review process.

Violations of these standards may result in immediate removal from the review panel and disqualification from future participation.

Section 9: Scoring System and Evaluation Criteria

Policy: The MSCGP evaluation process is rooted in transparency, integrity, equity, and alignment with strategic priorities. The objective is to fund the most impactful, feasible, and scalable conservation initiatives that directly align with national and regional priorities.

9.1 Scoring Philosophy and Governance:

- Scoring promotes merit-based, strategic selection of high-impact proposals.
- Reviewers are trained on rubric use and conflict of interest standards.
- Score justifications are required and retained for transparency and audit purposes.
- Balanced decision making is ensured by involving various stakeholders (state agencies, federal agencies, NGOs, Industry, etc.).

9.2 Weighted Scoring Framework

Each proposal is evaluated across six categories, weighted as follows:

Evaluation Category	Weight
Need	10%
Multiple States Benefit and Applicability	15%
Feasibility and Technical Merit	25%
Innovation	15%
Impact on Conservation/R3 Efforts and Longevity	20%
Budget & Cost Efficiency	15%
Total	100%

9.3 Rubric Scoring System

Reviewers score each category using a 4-tier rubric:

- **Exceptional:** Fully meets and exceeds expectations; strong alignment; high impact.
- **Satisfactory:** Generally, meets expectations; moderate impact; some areas may lack details.
- **Needs Improvement:** Partial alignment; unclear or undeveloped components.
- **Weak:** Fails to meet criteria; lacks alignment or sufficient justification.

9.4 Score Justification

The details found in each rubric definition and tiered description provide context for the reviewer's assessment and justification for the selected scores.

9.5 Scoring Systems and Tools

Scoring is conducted through SurveyMonkey Apply, a cloud-based application management system designed to streamline the process of **collecting, reviewing, and managing applications**. AFWA confirms tool access for reviewers and provides login information at the start of each cycle.

Key Features:

- **Customizable Application Forms:** Build dynamic forms tailored to your program requirements.
- **Multi-Stage Workflows:** Manage applications through various phases (e.g., submission, review, approval).
- **Reviewer Management:** Assign reviewers, control access, and automate scoring using rubrics.
- **Scoring and Evaluation Tools:** Built-in tools for rubric-based scoring, comments, and bias flags.
- **Communication Tools:** Automate applicant notifications, reminders, and updates.
- **Secure Document Storage:** Upload and manage supporting materials like budgets, letters, etc.
- **Reporting and Analytics:** Export application data and track metrics for auditing and transparency.

9.6 Review and Recommendation Workflow

- **Technical Review Team Deliberation:**
 - AFWA convenes reviewers to discuss scoring results.
 - Reviewers discuss flagged proposals (e.g., highest/lowest scores, borderline cases).
 - AFWA documents final notes and consensus decisions.
- **State Agency Final Review:**
 - State reviewers convene separately to finalize funding recommendations based on scores, alignment, and strategic impact.
 - The documented scoring trends, discrepancies, and consensus decisions are reviewed and discussed. If state reviewers disagree with the document, the discrepancies will be captured and filed for review with specific reasoning provided by the state.
 - AFWA retains all feedback to inform best practices and training moving forward.
- **Submission to National Grants Committee:**
 - AFWA compiles and submits the Draft Priority List of Projects to the National Grants Committee, incorporating documented review and State Agency input.
- **Federal Review and Award:**
 - The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) performs the final review.
 - USFWS issues official award notifications to selected recipients.

Section 10: Reviewer and Applicant Training Programs

10.1 Training Requirements

All reviewers are required to complete mandatory annual training before receiving application assignments. Training may be delivered through live webinars, recorded sessions, or learning management platforms.

Core Modules:

- Overview of MSCGP structure and legal authority
- Strategic Priorities Overview
- Weighted scoring system and rubric application
- Guidance on interpreting the rubric and evaluating outcomes
- Conflict of Interest Policies
- Scoring platform instructions (e.g., SurveyMonkey Apply)
- Practice scoring exercise using past projects

10.2 Scoring Rubric Orientation

Reviewer training includes detailed instruction on the standardized 4-tier scoring rubric, with emphasis on:

- Definition of "Weak", "Needs Improvement", "Satisfactory," and "Exceptional"
- Consistent use across all weighted evaluation categories
- Calibration exercises and a real-world scoring example
- Clear written feedback for the applicants

Training materials will include annotated proposal examples to demonstrate scoring nuances and provide reference benchmarks.

10.3 SMART Objectives

All reviewers and applicants are trained on the SMART framework project objectives. Reviewers learn how to evaluate SMART objectives; applicants learn how to write them effectively:

- **Specific:** Clearly defined
- **Measurable:** Quantifiable or assessable
- **Achievable:** Feasible given available resources and time
- **Relevant:** Aligned with Strategic Priorities and not duplicative of previous work
- **Time-bound:** Tied to the grant period

10.4 Budget Analysis

Training for both reviewers and applicants includes guidance on:

- Applying federal cost principles under 2 CFR 200
- Understanding reasonableness, cost-effectiveness and allowable costs
- Identifying red flags (e.g., excessive administrative costs, unjustified travel)
- Distinguishing between subaward and contractor
- Understanding the indirect costs, including NICRA and de minimis rates
- Ensuring consistency between the budget table and details required in the associated narrative

10.5 Conflict of Interest Training

Reviewers are trained to:

- Identify personal, professional, or institutional conflicts
- Understand and commit to proper recusal procedures
- Disclose and document potential or perceived conflicts
- Understand the consequences of COI non-compliance

Applicants are educated on disclosing organizational ties to MSCGP decision-makers.

10.6 Applicant Training and Support

AFWA provides annual support for grant applicants, including:

- Orientation on MSCGP Strategic Priorities, eligibility and process
- Step-by-step guidance for applications submission via the AFWA Portal and GrantSolutions
- Access to pre-recorded training, sample materials, and FAQs
- Email and phone support for process or technical questions

Support resources are reviewed and updated annually and posted to the AFWA MSCGP webpage.

10.7 Application Webinars and Office Hours

Applicants will be invited to participate in:

- **Annual webinars** hosted by AFWA and CI introducing the Strategic Priorities, eligibility requirements, timeline, and submission procedures
- **Live office hours** with AFWA staff and experienced grant administrators to answer applicant-specific questions

- **Topic-specific “deep dive” sessions** (e.g., budgeting, logic models, evaluation frameworks) depending on availability and demand

Webinars may be recorded for later access.

10.8 Budget Guidance and Sample Templates

To ensure compliant and accurate budget submissions, AFWA provides:

- NOFO aligned budget narrative and table templates
- Sample completed budgets
- List of allowable vs. unallowable costs
- NICRA and de minimis indirect cost guidance
- Budget checklist

Applicants are expected to use these tools during the proposal submission.

10.9 Research and Toolkit vs. Implementation Guidance

AFWA training for both reviewers and applicants will address concerns that toolkits and research products are often underutilized or remain conceptual without effective implementation (e.g., through adoption and use by multiple states and partners). The training will prioritize developing and evaluating proposals that move beyond conceptual development to actionable, on-the-ground outcomes.

Training Objectives:

- Educate applicants on how to design implementation-ready projects, not just conceptual tools or studies
- Encourage inclusion of activities such as pilot testing, training, technical assistance, and resource-sharing that promote practical adoption
- Train reviewers to distinguish between theoretical deliverables and those with strong implementation strategies
- Emphasize evaluation of dissemination plans, post-development support structures, and expected measurable uptake

Applicants will be guided to clearly describe how their proposed tools or products will be delivered, supported, and monitored in real-world settings. Reviewers will be trained to assess the practicality, adoption potential, and long-term value of submitted toolkits or guidance materials, ensuring alignment with MSCGP’s emphasis on conservation impact and usability.

Section 11: Award and Post-Award Grant Management

Policy: Award and post-award management of MSCGP grants ensures projects are implemented efficiently, achieve intended outcomes, and maintain compliance with applicable federal and program-specific requirements. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Office of Conservation Investment (CI), in coordination with the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA), provides oversight and technical support to grantees throughout the award lifecycle.

11.1 Award Letters

Policy: Grantees shall receive a formal Award Letter issued through GrantSolutions following final approval by the USFWS. The Award Letter includes:

- Approved Award amount and period of performance
- Approved Budget
- Award terms and conditions
- Reference to applicable federal regulations
 - 2 CFR 200 (Uniform Guidance)
 - 43 CFR Part 18 (New Restrictions on Lobbying)
 - 2 CFR Part 180 (OMB Guidelines to Agencies on Debarment and Suspension)
 - Relevant Executive Orders

- Requirements for reporting
- Key points of contact for AFWA and USFWS
- Final Approved Proposal

11.2 Reporting Requirements and Templates

Policy: Grantees must submit complete and timely performance and financial reports via GrantSolutions. Reports are reviewed by USFWS to monitor compliance and project progress.

Procedure:

Required Reports Include:

- Interim Financial Report – submitted annually
- Interim Performance Report - submitted annually
- Final Federal Financial Report (SF 425) - due within 120 calendar days of the performance period end date
- Final Performance Report – due within 120 calendar days of the performance period end date

Additional Reporting Requirements:

- Reporting Due Date Extensions must be requested through GrantSolutions (“Message”), which the Service Project Officer identified in the Notice of Award will review and approve.
- Significant Development Reports required per 2 CFR §200.329(e). for any events that have a significant impact on the supported activity. Grantees must notify the Service in writing and include:
 - Description of the issue
 - Corrective action(s) taken or planned
 - Any support or guidance requested from the Service
- AFWA provides an optional **Performance Report Template** to encourage consistency and ensure required reporting elements are fulfilled.

11.3 Deliverables and Acknowledgement

Grantees must submit all final deliverables (e.g., reports, tools, data sets, communication materials) to AFWA and USFWS. All publicly distributed products must include:

- Acknowledgment statement of Multistate Conservation Grant funding jointly administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and MSCGP
- The Service, Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration, and AFWA logos
- Grant’s federal identification number

Materials must comply with Section 508 accessibility standards when posted online.

11.4 Evaluation and Monitoring Expectations

AFWA and USFWS reserve the right to monitor progress through:

- Regular report reviews
- Site visits or virtual check-ins
- Review of interim milestones
- Verification of expenditures and compliance with the scope of work

Evaluation may also include post-project surveys and impact assessments. Non-compliance may result in suspension, modification, or termination of the Award.

11.5 Post-Grant State Feedback and Usefulness Assessment

Policy: AFWA will solicit feedback from state agencies and partners to evaluate the utility and long-term value of completed projects.

Procedure:

After project closeout, AFWA will conduct a Post–grant Usefulness Assessment to solicit input on:

- Practical value and application of project outputs

- Challenges faced in implementation
- Recommended for improvements or broader application

Feedback may be used to guide future strategic priorities and funding decisions. Anonymous summaries may be shared with the grantee and included in annual program reviews.

11.6 Closeout Procedures

The Federal Project Officer performs Closeout procedures as described in 2 CFR 200.344, including:

- Confirm that all interim and final performance and financial reports and deliverables were submitted in GrantSolutions by the assigned due date
- Reviewing and formally accepting all final deliverables in GrantSolutions
- De-obligating any unspent funds as reported on the SF-425 Federal Financial Report
- Issue a Closeout Amendment and final Notice of Award to the recipient in GrantSolutions

11.7 MSCGP Database

AFWA maintains a database of all previously funded MSCGP projects. This database includes:

- MSCGP short description and funding sources
- News from the Grantees
- Priority List of Projects awarded every year
- Grant searching by keyword, organization, year, or priority area
- Each Grant page includes:
 - Priority Area
 - Project description
 - Implementing Organization, \$ Amount Spent, Performance Period,
 - Results
 - Any project documents if applicable (toolkits, plans, research, etc.)

This tool is intended to inform proposal development, avoid duplication, and promote scalable and impactful projects.

Section 12: Documentation, Records, and Audit Standards

Policy: Accurate documentation, secure recordkeeping, and audit readiness are critical components of the Multistate Conservation Grant Program (MSCGP). All program records must be maintained in accordance with federal regulations.

12.1 Records Retention Policy

In accordance with 2 CFR 200.334, all grant-related records must be retained for a minimum of three years from the date of final report acceptance and closeout. This includes:

- Grant Application materials
- Reviewer scoring data and evaluation documentation
- COI disclosures and Certification Forms
- Award letters
- Financial reports, including budgets, SF 425, and budget narratives
- Correspondence related to performance, monitoring, or deliverables

Extended retention: If any litigation, audit, or claim involving the records is initiated before the expiration of the three-year period, records must be retained **until all issues are fully resolved**.

12.2 Scoring Records and Justification Storage

Policy: All evaluation and scoring documentation must be securely stored and linked to final funding decisions to support transparency and defensibility.

Procedure:

- Reviewer scores and written justifications are collected within the designated evaluation system (e.g., SurveyMonkey Apply).
- Records are exported and archived by AFWA program staff and maintained in a secure digital environment.
- All scoring data are linked to final recommendations and funding decisions to establish a clear rationale for award selections.
- Reviewer anonymity will be preserved where required.

These records will be used for audit purposes and to inform continuous improvement in the proposal evaluation process.

12.3 Audit-Readiness and Compliance Practices

Policy: AFWA and USFWS must maintain internal controls and documentation standards that meet federal audit requirements and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance.

Procedure: The following practices are implemented:

- Routine internal file audits to verify completeness and compliance
- Use of standardized electronic folder structures and naming conventions
- Project file checklists to ensure documentation is collected for each stage of the grant lifecycle
- Annual audit-readiness training for relevant AFWA and USFWS staff

Documentation practices must align with:

- Federal grant **audit** requirements
- **OMB Circular A-133** or superseding guidance
- **DOI Office of Inspector General (OIG)** audit procedures

12.4 Data Privacy and Access Controls

Policy: AFWA must ensure the confidentiality, integrity, and security of MSCGP data in compliance with federal data privacy and information security requirements.

Procedure: Access to sensitive or confidential records is restricted to:

- **Authorized AFWA staff**
- **Authorized USFWS personnel**
- **National Grants Committee members, on a need-to-know basis**
- **Federal auditors or inspectors** with appropriate clearance

All digital platforms used for application submission, scoring, and document storage must:

- Comply with federal **information security protocols**
- Employ **multi-factor authentication (MFA)**
- Use **encryption at rest and in transit**

System administrators will routinely review user access privileges and conduct audits to prevent unauthorized access or data misuse.