

A scenic view of a paved walkway along a lake. The walkway is made of reddish-brown bricks and runs along the right side of a grassy area. On the left, there are several large, leafy green trees. In the background, a calm lake is visible with a few people sitting on benches. The sky is clear and blue.

Move Forward Together Vermont: Vermont's Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan

Appendix B: Vermont's Open Project Selection Process (OPSP)

Use of Annual Apportionment

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) program is funded through revenue from offshore oil and gas drilling. LWCF monies are apportioned to the states by the Secretary of the Department of Interior each fiscal year in accordance with the apportionment formula contained in the LWCF Act. This formula includes a factor for equal distribution of a portion of the fund among the states, as well as factors for distribution on the basis of population and need.

In Vermont, the LWCF program is administered by the Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation (FPR) and the State Liaison Officer (SLO) is the Director of Lands Administration and Recreation.

In recent years, Vermont's available apportionment has increased to approximately \$2.3 million annually. In each grant round, half of available funding will be earmarked for community projects open to eligible municipalities and tribal governments and half will go to projects on state lands. Any unobligated funds from the community applicant pool may be shifted to FPR projects in order to make every effort to fully allocate each year's apportionment and avoid leaving a balance of unobligated funds. Should active project expenditures be less than the annual obligated amount, the unexpended balance will revert to a "special reappportionment account" (SRA), which the Department must request from the NPS to be reappportioned back to Vermont. In order to receive SRA, 100% of the current apportionment must be committed to viable projects and the amount of SRA requested from NPS must be able to be allocated to viable but yet unfunded projects.

Amendments to Add Funds to Existing Projects

Annual apportionments and SRA funds not allocated each fiscal year may be applied to cost overruns on active projects. FPR may honor requests to amend active projects to increase the cost of a state or locally sponsored project, including the federal share, without further assessment through the Open Project Selection Process (OPSP), if the project sponsor can clearly articulate in writing the justification for such an amendment and if the increased costs are associated with project components approved in the original project scope. Cost increase requests will be evaluated by FPR staff on a case-by-case basis. Funds may be added with SLO and NPS approval only if such requests will not adversely impact available funding for other active or potential state or local priority projects.

Recurring Funding Cycles

FPR will host a biennial LWCF grant round for eligible municipal and tribal entities. Every other fall, the public grant solicitation process will begin with public notification of the opportunity and update to the Vermont LWCF webpage with all necessary information. In the fall, pre-applications will be solicited which provide enough detail for program staff to assess whether the potential projects meet LWCF eligibility and evaluation criteria and provide application development support. The full applications will be due in the winter. Projects will then be reviewed by a review committee. Pre-award site visits with applicants will be scheduled during the application process and/or after selection but before submission to NPS; the exact timing during a seasonally appropriate window will be defined before each community grant cycle and posted publicly.

Projects on state-owned lands will be collected and reviewed annually through an internal process that collects, prioritizes, and identifies all acquisition and recreation development projects on state lands during the winter in preparation for the next field season. A committee of ANR staff will assess submitted projects, match submitted projects to the various state and federal funding sources available for that year, and make a final recommendation for funding selection. For projects identified for LWCF funds, pre-award site visits will be completed during the preparation of NPS documentation.

Public Notification

All information regarding the community grant round, including FPR's overall objectives for use of funds under the LWCF grants program, guidance on how to apply for LWCF assistance, the selection criteria, and a link to Vermont's SCORP will be posted on FPR's website: <https://fpr.vermont.gov/land-and-water-conservation-fund>.

The public will be notified about community grant round opportunities through direct contact with potential project sponsors or indirectly through state and local organizations. An announcement will be emailed to FPR's outdoor recreation grants mailing list. FPR will also issue relevant press releases and encourage partner organizations to share information on funding opportunities. FPR may also reach out directly to communities with significant minority or other underserved populations.

Program Assistance

Every effort will be made to provide support to applicants seeking LWCF assistance. In addition to written materials and support documents posted on FPR's website, FPR will host periodic webinars and/or open office hours sessions during the pre-application and full application phases to discuss program requirements, application tips, keys to success, and stewardship obligations; recordings of these virtual trainings will be posted on FPR's website. FPR staff will also field questions via email and provide critique and feedback on projects not recommended for funding to support future submissions. Grant staff also host periodic in-person training for potential applicants.

Community Project Selection Process

Screening

Project applications for LWCF assistance will be reviewed by FPR staff to ensure they meet minimum eligibility requirements and completeness. Applications that fail the initial screening will not be forwarded to the SLO, ASLOs, or LWCF review committee for further review. Eligible project applications must include the following:

- ◇ Both the applicant and project must meet the eligibility requirements of the most current NPS LWCF Manual.
- ◇ Applications must be complete and submitted prior to the application deadline.
- ◇ The project must be permissible and the recreation benefit must outweigh any potential negative environmental impacts.
- ◇ Adequate control and tenure of lands must be established, including the project site as well as lands within the LWCF project boundary area. Control and tenure may be demonstrated by:
 - » fee simple ownership of all project lands without encumbrances;
 - » a lease from the Federal government with a remaining term of 25 years or more;
 - » applicants may also have partial ownership (e.g., conservation easement) provided the ownership arrangement mandates and maintains appropriate outdoor recreation access in perpetuity
- ◇ Deed restrictions stipulating the terms and legal requirements of the LWCF program are required of all LWCF projects.

Review and Selection

For the full application review, a review committee will be formed with key State of Vermont staff and select municipal parks and recreation leaders. Committee will be recruited to represent diverse experiences in recreation and reflect the racial diversity found in Vermont. The committee will review all eligible applications received through the public grant solicitation round and score them based on the Project Selection Criteria, as outlined below. After independent scoring, the committee will meet to review the scoring results and consider additional qualitative components, including but not limited to:

- ◇ Geographic distribution of selected projects
- ◇ Distribution of recreation types across selected projects
- ◇ Access for underserved communities identified through state and federal processes
- ◇ Previous history regarding project sponsor compliance with LWCF programs and requirements
- ◇ Reported progress of any other active LWCF, RTP, or other grant projects from the applicants

After scoring and discussion, the review committee will confirm the final ranking of projects, and identify a recommended list of projects until all available funds are spent. This final funding recommendation will then be presented to the Commissioner for approval.

Project Selection Criteria

OPSP review criteria were developed based on the prominent Vision, Common Objectives and Priority Actions of the current SCORP. Public input for the SCORP included extensive public surveys and analyses, targeted focus group feedback, and input from a Technical Advisory Committee selected to represent the many outdoor recreation interests of various public sectors across the state.

LWCF Community Projects Selection Criteria:

- ◇ Project Planning, Readiness, and Feasibility (40 Points)
 - » Are the timeline, budget expectations, and permitting needs realistic, clear, appropriate to the scope of work, and suggest a high opportunity for successful completion with the permitted time and grant award amounts?
 - » Is the project “shovel ready” or is the acquisition “purchase ready”? Does the work plan include a sufficient level of detail to indicate an in-depth planning process?
 - » For Development projects: has the applicant completed all required Section 106 and NEPA compliance? Has the applicant secured all relevant permits or have a clear plan to secure all required permits?
 - » For Acquisition projects: does the applicant have an UASFLA Appraisal completed within the past year and a purchase agreement?
 - » Does the budget demonstrate efficient use of funds? Are project cost estimates thorough, detailed, reasonable and well supported by recent estimates? Does the applicant have the majority of match funding already committed or a clear and realistic plan to secure the funds?
 - » Does the applicant have the capacity to complete project? Do they have a history of successful past grant management for comparable projects?
- ◇ Connection to state, regional, and local planning efforts (40 Points)
 - » How well does the project align with the vision of SCORP, to foster healthy and vibrant communities through outdoor recreation?
 - » Does the project address priorities in other local, regional, or state plans?
 - » Does this project have documented community support? Was the public engaged in project selection and development?
 - » Does this project invest in stewarding and upgrading existing recreational resources, or does this project develop recreational opportunities and conserve open spaces that strategically fill gaps in experiences and distribution across the state?
- ◇ Stewardship (30 Points)
 - » How well does the design incorporate climate resilient strategies?
 - » Are the plans for stewardship and maintenance comprehensive, reasonable, and well-articulated? Does the project have long-term commitments from skilled organizations to support maintenance and stewardship?
 - » How does this project cultivate and promote a stewardship ethic among Vermonters and visitors?
- ◇ Wellness (30 Points)
 - » How well does this project create and enhance in-community outdoor recreation opportunities that directly connect to where people live, learn, and work?
 - » Does this project create safe, welcoming, and environmentally sustainable entry spaces into the outdoors?
 - » How well does this project expand or improve recreation opportunities to underserved populations including minority populations, the elderly, individuals with disabilities, and other underserved populations?
 - » How does this project cultivate and promote a stewardship ethic among Vermonters and visitors?

State Selection Process

Approximately one-half of Vermont's available LWCF and RTP apportionments will be reserved for state lands priority acquisition, development or combination projects. Project information will be gathered from state land managers and entered into a database for review.

Projects recommended for LWCF funding on state lands are subject to criteria determined by an advisory committee and communicated to all state land managers in advance of the annual call for projects. The criteria generally include how well projects:

- ◇ Address critical needs related to life, health, or safety of state staff and/or public users,
- ◇ Take corrective actions that address a negative environmental condition or a condition that will soon cascade in scope,
- ◇ Improve, expand, and enhance existing assets,
- ◇ Fulfill state-defined needs and goals for new assets, and
- ◇ Advance the priorities outlined in the SCORP.

A committee of ANR staff will assess submitted projects, match projects to the applicable state and federal funding sources available for that year, and make a final recommendation for funding selection. Prospective LWCF projects will then be further reviewed by FPR staff and recommended for funding to the Commissioner.

MOVE FORWARD TOGETHER VERMONT:
VERMONT'S STATEWIDE COMPREHENSIVE OUTDOOR RECREATION PLAN

APPENDIX B: VERMONT'S OPEN PROJECT SELECTION PROCESS (OPSP)