



Frequently Asked Questions about the Leopold Conservation Award application process

The Leopold Conservation Award honors ranchers, farmers and forestland owners who go above and beyond in their management of soil health, water quality and wildlife habitat on working land. If conservation is part of how you manage your operation and you have a story that could inspire others, we encourage you to apply.

Am I eligible to apply for the award?

The Leopold Conservation Award recognizes conservation success on working land. Farmers, ranchers, and forestland owners of any size are eligible to apply. There is no required type of operation, management approach, or acreage. Many prior recipients have been individuals or families, though this is not a requirement. There are no required or prohibited farming, ranching, forestry, or conservation practices.

Land that is primarily recreational or a conservation program that is substantially supported by outside fundraising, an endowment, or significant volunteer labor is not a good fit for the program. A good filter would be to ask yourself, if the land were in private ownership, would your funding model still work? If you are unsure whether your operation is eligible, please contact us at Lirving@sandcountyfoundation.org.

Do I need to own the land I manage?

Applicants should have a meaningful role in the conservation decisions and practices taking place on the property described in the application, whether they own it, lease it, or access the

land in another way. If you do not own the land referenced in the application, you should be able to demonstrate a multi-year history of management.

What types of operations are eligible?

A wide range of working lands are eligible, including farms, ranches, dairies, orchards, forest lands, and other agricultural operations. Strong stewardship can take many forms. Applicants should be able to show that the conservation work and the agricultural operation do not need to be supported by substantial outside revenue. Many individuals and families have off-farm income and this does not disqualify anyone, however the property itself should generate at least some income for the owner.

Is there a minimum acreage required to apply?

No. There is no minimum or maximum acreage requirement. The award recognizes the quality of stewardship and conservation leadership, not the size of the operation.

Can I apply myself, or do I need to be nominated?

Either is welcome. You may nominate yourself or be nominated by someone else. A nominator can sometimes help identify accomplishments, leadership, and conservation impacts that are easy to overlook when describing your own work.

What does the selection committee look for in an application?

Applications are evaluated in five areas: Conservation Ethic, Resilience, Leadership and Communication, Innovation and Adaptability, and Ecological Community. A strong application is specific and tells the story of your operation. Concrete examples that help judges understand what you did, why you made those decisions, and what resulted are often more meaningful than broad statements about conservation. The application asks you to address each of the five judging criteria, with a limit of 1,000 words for each response. Formatting your application clearly into the criteria sections is often helpful for the judges.

What does “Conservation Ethic” mean?

We are looking for landowners who have a strong, personal self-interest in exercising good stewardship, either from deep ethical conviction or because they derive a majority of their income from the land resources they manage. Conservation Ethic is showing us that the management decisions you are making benefit the long term health of the land. Show us how

you voluntarily exceed the minimum obligations to enhance and conserve natural resources on your land.

What does “Resilience” mean?

We are looking for landowners that maintain healthy land and ensure that their operation remains sustainable and successful into the future. Resilience is both environmental and economic. Economic resilience showcases how your conservation practices can (and should) have a positive economic benefit such as higher yields, less inputs, lower labor costs, etc. Environmental resilience shows us that your management decisions lead to more resilience to extreme weather events, changing markets, or new environmental challenges.

What does “Leadership and Communication” mean?

We are looking for landowners who are very involved in the community in which they live. Leadership and communication can take many forms. It may include sharing successful practices with neighbors, mentoring other producers, involvement in agricultural or community organizations, hosting tours, working with conservation partners, participating in outreach, or helping others consider new conservation opportunities. Formal titles are not required.

What does “Innovation and Adaptability” mean?

We are looking for landowners who are willing to try new things, learn from their success or failure, and adapt as a consequence. Innovation and adaptability helps us understand how your management has helped you overcome business or conservation obstacles and how your management has changed with new opportunities and challenges.

What does “Ecological Community” mean?

We are looking for how your land has benefited from current management, either due to active conservation improvements to the land or land use resulting in the conservation of existing resources. Ecological Community is your opportunity to detail how you are working with the environment rather than against it. Information about water quantity and quality, soil health metrics, wildlife numbers and diversity, and other tangible benefits are all appropriate here.

Should I focus only on recent conservation work?

No. Help judges understand how your stewardship has developed over time. Long standing practices, new approaches, lessons learned from unsuccessful projects, and changes in management can all be part of your conservation story.

Can I submit photos or maps with my application?

Yes. Photos and maps can help judges better understand your land, your operation, and your conservation work. You may include up to three pages of photos or maps. The complete application, including all supporting materials, may not exceed 15 pages.

Should I include measurable conservation results?

Yes, when they are available. Data can be helpful, but it is not required for every practice. You may also describe observed changes in soil health, water resources, forage, vegetation, wildlife habitat, erosion, productivity, or other conditions. If you do not have data, describe the changes you have observed and how you know your management is making a difference. Photos, records, observations, and information from conservation partners can all help demonstrate results.

How many letters of recommendation can I submit?

Submit three letters of recommendation. At least one should be from a conservation organization. Choose references who know your operation and can speak specifically to your stewardship, conservation leadership, and impact. If more than 3 letters are submitted, only the first 3 received will be considered.

Can I use AI tools to help complete my application?

You may use AI sparingly, but we want to hear your voice. AI can help organize ideas or polish writing, but your application should sound like you and reflect the specific practices, decisions, challenges, and conservation outcomes that are unique to your operation.

Can I reapply if I did not receive the award last year?

Absolutely. There is only one award given in each state or program each year, and we know there are many outstanding farmers, ranchers, and landowners doing great conservation work. Because only one award is given in each state or program each year, not being selected should not be seen as a criticism of your work. Each year's decision depends on the full group of applicants, so reapplying does not guarantee that you will eventually receive the award.

We encourage you to apply again and share how your stewardship, conservation work, and leadership have continued to grow. We strive to provide applicants with feedback that can help strengthen future applications.

What happens after I submit my application?

Applications are evaluated by an independent panel of agricultural and conservation leaders from that state or region. You will hear from us with the outcomes of that decision in 6-8 weeks after the closing date for your state.

Who should I contact if I have questions about the application?

We are happy to answer questions and help you understand the application process. To contact us with more questions, please visit [the application page for your state](#). There you will find an email address specific to your state or region (e.g. CaliforniaLCA@sandcountyfoundation.org , MinnesotaLCA@sandcountyfoundation.org.) Please use that address to reach out and we will get back to you as soon as we can.