



2026 REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

Farmer-Led Fund *for Watershed Protection*

A grant program for farmer-led watershed groups in Wisconsin

Grant duration: Up to 24 months

Grant budget: \$100,000 maximum, paid on a reimbursable basis

Q&A webinar: November 25, 2025, 3-4pm ([register here](#))

Deadline: January 30, 2026

Award decisions: February 18, 2026

Sand County Foundation anticipates awarding up to \$600,000 total in 2026, depending on the number and quality of proposals. Multiple groups can join under a single proposal subject to the maximum budget of \$100,000 per proposal.

OVERVIEW:

Sand County Foundation (SCF) is offering a second annual funding opportunity for farmer-led groups in Wisconsin. The goal of the Farmer-Led Fund (FLF) is to protect water quality by improving soil health and maintaining continuous living cover through local farmer networks. SCF invites proposals from farmer-led groups with 501(c)(3) status, or their fiscal sponsors.

This program is operated independently of the Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grant (PLWPG) program from the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture Trade and Consumer Protection, but it intends to accelerate the progress of farmer-led groups that share the same objectives of the PLWPG program. Our goal is to help bring farmer-led watershed initiatives to scale, including but not limited to PLWPG-funded groups.

Funding for the Farmer-Led Fund comes from a Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) award to SCF from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The Farmer-Led Fund utilizes the Alternative Funding Arrangement option of RCPP, which allows substantial flexibility in how financial incentives are structured.

Farmer-led groups receiving a Farmer-Led Fund grant can offer cash incentives to farmers per acre of practice applied, or by outcome achieved (e.g., pounds of phosphorus or tons of sediment reduction). They may also offer short-term land rental payments to convert cultivated acres to prescribed grazing, harvestable buffers, or perennial crops. Alternatively, groups can pay contractors in lieu of farmers to deliver services such as soil sampling or seeding of cover crops or prairie strips. In all cases, participating farmers must meet USDA program eligibility requirements, and all practices must follow NRCS conservation practice standards.

Farmer-Led Fund grant recipients—not the NRCS—are responsible for delivering nearly all aspects of their projects. The grant recipient and partners must recruit farmers, provide appropriate technical assistance, distribute financial assistance, verify practice installation, and communicate necessary information with SCF. SCF will provide program guidance, an online tool ([CIBO](#)) for tracking enrollment and outcomes, and reimbursement of costs after practices are applied. SCF staff within a reasonable distance of farmer-led groups (see map below) may be available to offer on-the-ground technical assistance as well.

Proposed budgets must allocate at least 75% of funds to the direct installation of conservation practices (i.e. Financial Assistance, or “FA”). Up to 25% of funds may be dedicated to staffing or other direct costs for project management, promotion, practice design, and verification of outcomes (i.e. Technical Assistance, or “TA”). No indirect costs are allowed.

ELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES:

Options for using Financial Assistance (FA) funds include:

- *Pay for practice*—Payments to farmers and/or landowners per acre or other unit of conservation practice implemented
- *Pay for outcomes*—Payments based on pound of phosphorus or ton of sediment eliminated from runoff; must be measured or modeled
- *Pay for service*—Payment to a service provider or vendor to custom apply a practice for farmers, in lieu of direct payments to farmers

- *Land rental*—Payments to offset up to three years of foregone income in converting row crop acres to perennial practices; can be combined with practice installation incentives
- *Other incentive structures*—alternative funding approaches proposed by farmer-led groups, subject to RCPP program requirements

NOTE: no farm entity may receive more than \$10,000 in Financial Assistance during the proposed grant period. This limit applies for any or all FA delivery options above, combined.

Options for using Technical Assistance (TA) funds include:

- *Project coordination and management*—Must directly support project delivery
- *Project promotion and farmer recruitment*—Must explicitly promote the project
- *Conservation practice design and installation*—Must be completed by qualified individuals (NRCS Job Approval Authority, Technical Service Provider status, OR sufficient experience/knowledge of NRCS practice standards and specifications)
- *Conservation practice verification*—Must comply with NRCS practice standards
- *Outcome estimation or measurement*—Must be completed using models or monitoring

Projects should emphasize improving soil health and maintaining continuous living cover. Structural practices may be considered if the applicant can secure necessary technical expertise. To be competitive, proposals should focus on just one practice or a few conservation practices and apply them efficiently for a maximum number of farmers and acres.

HOW TO APPLY:

Submit these documents to office@sandcountyfoundation.org:

- 1) A copy of your most recent application to the DATCP Producer-Led program application (whether or not it was funded). If your group has never applied to PLWPG before, you must fill out an example application using the [FY2026 PLWPG form](#).
- 2) A complete Farmer-Led Fund proposal form ([click here for PDF form](#)):
- 3) ONE letter of support co-signed by at least three farmers representing the farmer-led group. Names can be typed (not signed) but must include a phone number for at least one farmer; SCF staff may contact the farmer to confirm support for the proposal.

REVIEW CRITERIA:

SCF will review and rank proposals with consideration of the following criteria:

Capacity (30%): Experience of personnel delivering TA (knowledge NRCS practice standards preferred), leadership of farmers, and prior successful implementation of projects

Scope/Impact (20%): Number of farms and acres likely to participate, and potential for farmers to continue practices after project funding expires

Cost Effectiveness (20%): Proposed FA cost per unit compared against current [NRCS payment schedule rates](#) for each conservation practice (i.e. covering more acres per dollar)

Accessibility (20%): Ability for farmers to participate with minimal hassle and delay, and potential to reach farmers who have not previously benefitted from conservation incentives

Matching (10%): Cash or in-kind contributions from non-USDA sources leveraged by the group; must be explicitly described in proposal form

SCF may choose to elevate ranking of specific proposals in order to fund at least one of each of the following types of projects in the 2026 granting period:

- A “Pay for Outcome” FA incentive utilizing SnapPlus to quantify Phosphorus Index reductions using a baseline period of at least three years, calculated over the entire farm. Target of approximately 1500 acres over multiple farms.
- Grazing enhancements meeting NRCS Prescribed Grazing 528 standard (pasture intensive scenario). Target of at least 500 combined acres over multiple farms.
- Native perennial strips or buffers meeting Wisconsin NRCS Agronomy Technical Note “Planning and Applying Prairie Strips”. Target of approximately 100 acres of prairie strips treating 1,000 acres of row crops over multiple farms.
- A “pay for service” FA incentive applying a single practice at lower cost. Target of not more than 50% per-unit cost compared to current NRCS payment schedule.

SELECTION:

All proposals will be ranked by SCF staff after the January 30, 2026 application deadline. Applicants may be asked to provide additional details as necessary. Farmers named in a support letter may be contacted by SCF to affirm their commitment their proposal. SCF will notify all applicants of award decisions no later than February 18, 2026.

GRANT ADMINISTRATION:

All payments will be made by SCF to the grantee: the farmer-led group or its fiscal agent; NOT to individual farmers or contractors. Grantees must administer payments to individual farmers and/or contractors.

This is a reimbursable grant. SCF must request and receive payment from NRCS before passing funds to grantees. Anticipate 60-90 days between installing practices and receiving payment from SCF.

Grantees will need to communicate with SCF to ensure planned activities meet RCPP program requirements and will therefore be eligible for payment by NRCS to SCF (and in turn, from SCF to the grantee).

Grantees must use the [CIBO](#) software platform for farmer enrollment and practice verification. SCF will provide grantees with free and secure access to CIBO, and orientation.

BEFORE any practices are installed, grantees must enter field boundaries and practice information as well as Environmental Evaluation (NRCS CPA-52) forms for all farms in CIBO. NRCS must confirm farm eligibility and approve CPA-52 forms prior to applying practices.

To receive Technical Assistance funds, grantees will submit payment requests to SCF on a quarterly basis (periods ending March 31st, June 30th, Sept 30th, and Dec 31st), using a template provided by SCF.

To receive Financial Assistance funds, grantees must verify installation of conservation practices and payment rates in CIBO. SCF will compile this information for NRCS to review as frequently as practical. NRCS will spot check up to 10% of farms to confirm practice implementation according to NRCS practice standards. See the flowchart below for details.

Annual reports will be due to SCF by the end of February each year. Grantees with current PLWPG grants will have the option to provide a copy of their recent PLWPG annual report, plus additional details requested by SCF.

SCF may request additional field-based information to allow us to quantify outcomes such as reduced nutrient and sediment losses, changes in net greenhouse gas emission, or increased habitat/biodiversity.

PROJECT PUBLICITY:

Grantees are expected to acknowledge SCF and the NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program in project outreach specific to the practices supported by the Farmer-Led Fund.

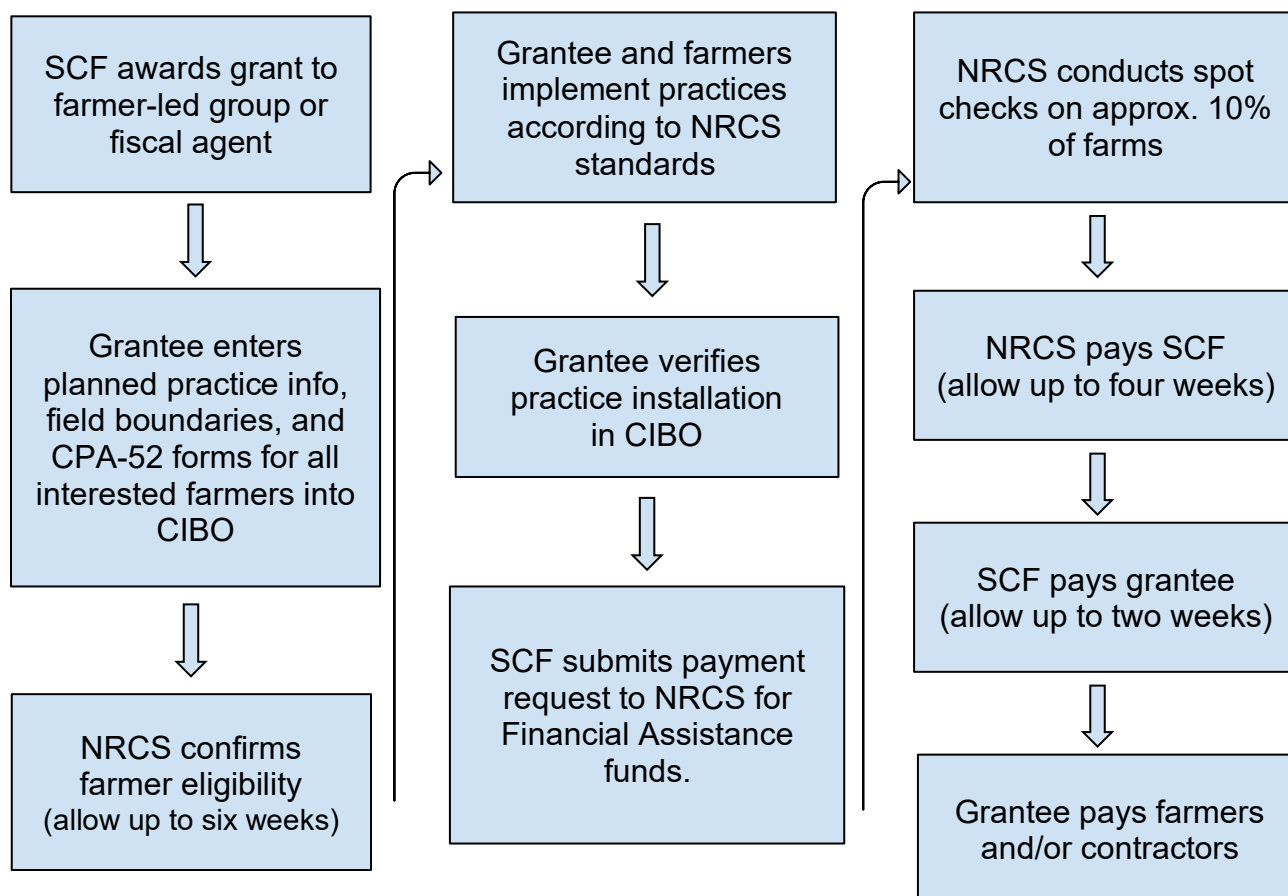
FEDERAL FUNDING COMPLIANCE

Farmer-Led Fund grantees will hold a sub-award with Sand County Foundation under a USDA Regional Conservation Partnership Program award between SCF and the NRCS. Grantees are subject to requirements of the federal award. SCF will clearly communicate these details with grantees. Indirect costs are not allowable for reimbursement under this award.

DATA SHARING

Grantees will be required to share the following information for all participating farms: Farm entity names, address, farm numbers and applicable tract numbers (consistent with FSA records), geospatial extent of practices, practice design details, and photos of practices as applied. Information will be input into CIBO and accessible by SCF and NRCS following strict protocols for data privacy. Grantees are responsible for communicating data sharing expectations with all farmers who will potentially be supported through the Farmer-Led Fund.

PROCESS FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE PAYMENTS:



Frequently Asked Questions:

Do we need to be funded by the DATCP Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grant (PLWPG) program to qualify for Farmer-Led Fund (FLF) funding?

No. But experience gained from prior efforts, including those funded by a PLWPG, may help your proposal be more competitive. FLF funds are independent of the PLWPG, but the program intends to complement and scale up efforts of groups that have qualified or could potentially qualify for the PLWPG program (i.e. water quality focused and truly farmer-led).

Do all participants need to be in the same watershed?

Not necessarily, but all should address a common water resource concern within a similar geographic area, and ideally a common drainage area for a lake or stream. PLWPG-funded groups can propose to include farms outside of their existing PLWPG-funded boundary.

Can multiple farmer groups team up to submit a single funding proposal?

Yes. We encourage groups in a similar geographic region and/or with similar farming systems and proposed conservation practices to combine efforts under a single proposal. Multi-group proposals are still limited to \$100,000, and the single lead entity submitting the proposal will be responsible for all reporting and payment requests to SCF.

Is there a minimum grant amount you will fund?

No, but keep in mind this program intends to scale up conservation practice adoption. We encourage groups to pursue projects that are larger than what the PLWPG program can fund. At the same time, proposals must present a sound justification (including likelihood for demand by farmers) for the amount requested.

Can we apply for more than two years of funding?

Not at this time. But we intend to repeat this call for proposals through 2028 or beyond. Projects that have successfully applied at least 75% of FA funds in a prior Farmer-Led Fund grant can apply to continue and expand their programs in subsequent years.

What are eligible expenses?

Proposals must prioritize FA costs to physically implement practices, and may include necessary TA to assure proper implementation. Outreach and project management expenses are allowed but must complement a strong capacity to put practices on the ground. Total TA costs cannot exceed 25% of the total requested budget. All costs listed as “ineligible” on page 3 of the [PLWPG FY2026 request for proposals](#) are also ineligible for the FLF program. Also ineligible are: field research, demonstrations, monitoring, travel beyond the project area, training, food or beverages, and indirect costs.

Must we use the same payment rates that NRCS publishes each year for EQIP or CSP?

No. Groups can propose entirely new payment rates or methods, or new practice scenarios. And remember you can even pay contractors or custom applicators directly instead of paying farmers. However each applied practice must follow an NRCS practice standard. If you have a practice that does not quite fit NRCS standards or you are unsure, please contact SCF prior to applying.

Must we provide matching funds?

This is not required and there is no fixed target, but leveraging additional funding will improve your proposal’s competitiveness. Partner contributions must be non-USDA, but can be from other federal sources such as the EPA or USFWS. State sources such as PLWPG and SWRM are valid. Contributions may include any combination of cash or in-kind. Grantees must maintain documentation (including actual staff salary/fringe costs) to justify contribution value claims. Please be detailed in explaining your matching funds in your proposal.

Can we use this grant along with DATCP PLWPG and TNC Challenge Grant funds?

Yes, and we encourage complementary funding, so long as the specific TA and FA costs billed to SCF are not also billed to any other program.

Can we combine FA incentives with other sources (i.e. “stack” funds) for the same practice on the same acres?

These funds cannot be stacked with other NRCS programs including EQIP, CSP, CRP, USDA Advancing Markets for Producers programs, or other federal funds for the same practice on the

same acres. In some cases, stacking with non-federally sourced or pay-for-outcome programs may be allowable.

Can FA funds be used to support farmers for continuing a practice they are already doing?

Per NRCS policy, FA funding must address a “resource concern”, meaning funds must result in a higher level of conservation than previously achieved to improve water quality, soil quality, and/or wildlife habitat. Using cover crops as an example: if a field that applied only rye after harvest in the prior year now applies a diverse seed mix, and/or interseeds before harvest, and/or terminates after spring planting, then that field can qualify for FLF funding for up to three years.

Will local NRCS staff help us deliver our proposed project?

No. By design, RCPP’s “Alternative Funding Arrangement” outsources all work to the lead partner (SCF) and sub-awardees (i.e., you). NRCS will assist only to verify producer eligibility, review payment requests from SCF, and spot-check practice installations. This RCPP project does not fund the NRCS to provide technical assistance. Applicants must propose how they and/or partners will deliver TA services. In certain regions of Wisconsin, SCF staff may be available to help deliver the program; please contact us to explore this option.

Can grant funds be used to pay for any conservation practice?

Our focus is primarily in-field or edge-of-field practices that improve soil health and/or provide continuous living cover. Structural practices may be considered if partners can provide required design and inspection expertise. If you are not sure if a practice or variation of a practices fits with this program, please contact SCF prior to applying.

Still have questions?

Please join our informational webinar on November 25th at 3pm ([register here](#)) and/or contact:
Craig Ficenec, Senior Director-Agricultural Conservation
608-395-8402
cficenec@sandcountyfoundation.org

Funding for this program is provided by and award from the USDA-NRCS [Regional Conservation Partnership Program](#). USDA is a equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

Sand County Foundation Technical Support Staff

