

Community Forest and Open Space Conservation Program Panel Scoring Guidance (Updated August 2024)

Score each application based on the information provided in the application materials. The scores shall be based on the four criteria described below. If there are additional notes or justifications for your score specific to the project, please include that feedback on each criterion, or the project as a whole, in your score sheet/notes. Our intent is to share general and specific feedback with applicants to develop interest and the size and quality of the future applicant pool.

Additional consideration will be given to projects that provide direct benefits to disadvantaged communities. The National Review Panel will be provided information on community demographics such as socioeconomic status. The panel will also consider climate resiliency for each proposed project. Tools used during project evaluation may include the Council on Environmental Quality's Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool, or The Nature Conservancy's Resilient Land Mapping Tool.

Additional resources, including the application guidance, can be found at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/private-land/community-forest/program>. Comments regarding the process should be directed to Margaret Haines at 202-384-7192.

- 1) Community Benefits:** Use a score of 0-20 to rate community benefits, where 20 is reserved for projects that have all the attributes (economic, environmental, educational, recreational) and provide exceptional benefits that are specific to the lands to be acquired, planned for in each attribute, *and supported by data, evidence and/or local knowledge*. It may be easier to think of the scale as 0-5 for each of the suggested benefit attributes of a community forest including, but not limited to:
 - a) Economic benefits including but not limited to:
 - i) Timber
 - ii) Non-timber forest products resulting from sustainable forest management
 - iii) Other economic benefits such as recreation, tourism, cultural resources, public health, and other activities that accrue benefits to the community.
 - b) Environmental benefits including but not limited to:
 - i) Clean air and water
 - ii) Stormwater management
 - iii) Wildlife habitat including for threatened and endangered species
 - iv) Protection of culturally important resources
 - c) Forest-based learning including but not limited to:
 - i) K-12 conservation education programs
 - ii) Vocational forestry/environmental science education programs
 - iii) Replicable model of effective forest stewardship for private landowners
 - iv) Traditional Ecological Knowledge
 - v) Connection to other environmental, cultural, or historical education programs or experiential learning opportunities
 - d) Recreational benefits through public access including but not limited to:
 - i) Hiking
 - ii) Fishing
 - iii) Hunting
 - iv) Enhanced recreational opportunities through connection to other publicly accessible conserved lands

- 2) Community Engagement:** Use a scale of 0-10 to rate the community engagement currently being undertaken and planned for the life of the community forest. A score of 10 is reserved for projects that show meaningful and inclusive community engagement including underrepresented groups through the planning and long-term management of the project. The description should be supported by data and/or specific examples.
- a) Consider who from the community is being engaged, and how inclusive the applicant's engagement process is. This may include engagement with public agencies, such as federal, state, and local governments, tribes, environmental, recreation, and outdoors-based organizations, other community groups or organizations, the general public, and others.
 - b) Consider how the community is being engaged. What strategies were used by the applicant to engage the community and ensure broad participation? E.g. public meetings, informational booths, public surveys. Do these strategies allow for meaningful input from the community?
 - c) Consider the level of community input in various stages of the project. Reference the [Spectrum of Public Participation](#) where the most participatory community is "Empowered," meaning the public is directly involved in the final decision, followed by collaboration, involvement, and consultation, as lesser forms of engagement. The least participatory status is "informed," which means providing the public with information about the project so that they understand what was decided. Engagement may occur at different stages include planning the project, management of the project, and/or determining access and use of the forest.
- 3) Strategic Contribution and Connection:** Use a score of 0-5 to rate the community forest's strategic contribution and connection to broader landscape initiative(s), which may include:
- a) Being an integral part of a comprehensive management plan at the locality, state, Tribal or regional level
 - b) Identifying connections to landscape conservation initiatives as well as environmental justice initiatives such as creating access to green/open space where there is none, providing critical green infrastructure or contributing to local food production.
- 4) Threat:** On a scale of 0-5, rate the threat or likelihood that the project land would be subdivided or converted to non-forest use, where five is exceptionally threatened and 0 is no immediate threat. Pressure of conversion to non-forest use may be driven by residential or industrial development, agricultural expansion, installation of wind or solar technology, or other uses that substantially remove or fragment forest cover. Attributes to consider when evaluating threat include adjacent land use characteristics, landowner circumstances, lack of temporary or permanent protections, and attributes of the property that may facilitate development. A project should **not** be penalized due to a private landowner's stated intent or desire for their property to be conserved, or past actions to advance good stewardship on the property.