Conservation Districts
Grant Program Guidelines

2022-2023

Updated: 8/15/2022

Garfield County

Contents

Background

The Montana State Legislature (MCA 76-15-106) provides funding for the conservation districts of Montana. The Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) distributes funds through the Conservation District Bureau (CDB) based on need to conservation districts for any purpose that they are authorized to perform pursuant to [MCA 76-15-4](). Since 1981, conservation districts have used these funds for conservation and administrative related projects. Some of the funding is allocated to partner organizations that benefit conservation districts, such as the river councils and Montana Salinity Control Association. These organizations have an annual budget but are not eligible to apply for grants and are subject to these guidelines in terms of reporting requirements so DNRC can be accountable to the Montana Legislature as well as the citizens of Montana.

The 66th Legislature provided additional conservation district restricted funding for projects that improve pollinator habitat across Montana.

Overview

All grant funds are provided by the legislature with the goal of empowering conservation districts to conserve the natural resources of Montana through locally-led conservation. Grant funds can be used for building district capacity, developing landowner assistance and/or educational programs, designing restoration projects, and implementing on-the-ground conservation. General guidelines for all grant programs include the following:

1. Conservation districts must submit an annual work plan that includes planned annual conservation activities and an operational budget prior to application. Applications for administrative grants may serve this purpose; however, conservation districts that do not receive administrative grants must submit an annual work plan and budget prior to receiving grant funds.*
2. Funds cannot be used to purchase food in excess of 10% of the total project budget, common items that can be easily borrowed, equipment for contractors, or items not considered essential to conducting a project or meeting project goal.
3. Applications must demonstrate a public conservation benefit(s). Funds will not be provided for projects that are for private benefit only. Applications that address multiple resource benefits will rank higher in the evaluation process.
4. Preferential consideration will be given to applications that include in-kind or cash match from other sources or that are for less than the total project costs.
5. All previous grants received by the conservation district must be in good standing (invoicing up to date and reports filed on time) before any new funds will be released.
6. The Authorized Representative must be an elected official (conservation district Chair, Vice Chair, or other Supervisor as approved by a motion of the board) and must sign the application. District staff may not be the Authorized Representative, but they may be the main point of contact.
7. Incomplete applications, or applications not meeting the expectations described below will not be considered.

8. Applications should be approved by the Board of Supervisors during a public meeting prior to application submittal.

Deadlines and Cycles

Open grant cycles will be announced on the CDB website and through the *Conservation Matters* newsletter and located on Submittable at grants.dnrc.mt.gov In general, it takes 3-4 months for the review, approval, and contracting process for any submitted application. For this reason, applications for projects that will take place in the spring/summer must be submitted in the preceding fall. Contracts are generally one year or less in duration unless a longer period is specifically requested in the application.

Grant	Occurrence	Application Periods	Implementation Begins
CD Administrative & 310 Grants	Annual	March 1 - April 15	Beginning July 1
Education Mini-Grants	Ongoing	Rolling Deadline	No sooner than 3 months following application submission
CD Project Grants	Biannual	• February 1 – March 15 • September 1 – October 15	• August 1 • March 1
Pollinator	Biannual	• February 1 – March 15 • September 1 – October 15	• August 1 • March 1

Eligibility Requirements

All conservation districts in Montana are eligible if they 1) have levied the maximum county mills allowed for the current fiscal year, 2) demonstrate a need for additional funds, and 3) are working towards a conservation activity as identified in an annual workplan, watershed restoration plan, or district strategic plan.

Eligible conservation district may also act as a sponsor for pass-through grants to partner organizations. However, if a conservation district is sponsoring a grant, they must be aware of their responsibilities to ensure all partner organizations and contractors follow all applicable state laws and provide the necessary information for timely invoicing, reporting, and grant close out. A Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), outlining the roles and responsibilities of the partner organization or contractor and requiring that any equipment or software purchased with grants funds must stay in CD ownership will be required. For these reasons, conservation districts must be active partners in projects, rather than simply acting as a pass through for the funding. This requirement is to protect the district from liability.

Application and Submittal Process

All applications will be submitted through the Submittable online grant system. Late or incomplete applications will not be accepted. Early submissions are encouraged. Requesting

a preliminary review of a grant application prior to submission is also encouraged. CDB staff is available to help with project development and the application process.

Authorized Representative

The grant application must be authorized by a representative of the conservation district (conservation district Chair, Vice Chair, or other Supervisor as approved by a motion of the board). Conservation district employees or administrators may not be the authorized representative; however, they may be listed as the main contact for the grant.

Submittable Account

Each CD must create an account with [Submittable](#) to apply for grants. CDs are encouraged to create an account for the district, rather than for an individual employee. This will enable the account to be maintained in the event of staff turnover. All applications will be submitted through the district's established Submittable account. Hard-copy applications will only be accepted will only be accepted under certain circumstances with prior approval from DNRC. If submitting more than one project for funding consideration, applicants are required to complete a separate application and include all required information for each application.

Scope of Work

Applications must include a clear scope of work including a description of the public natural resource benefits, the goals and objectives, specific tasks that will be accomplished, and what deliverables will be provide to DNRC during reporting. The scope of work is the main justification for the funding and clearly demonstrates how the funding will be used and what activities will be accomplished.

Public Resource Benefits

All grant funding must benefit a public natural resource. To receive funding, an application must clearly describe how the funds will be used to benefit a public natural resource(s). This could be direct benefits such as on-the-ground conservation, or indirect benefits such as public education or increasing a district's capacity to fulfill their mission of conserving natural resources. Projects benefiting multiple natural resources will be more competitive.

Goals and Objectives

Goals and objectives describe intended outcomes of the project. They should be specific and measurable so anyone could clearly understand what will be accomplished with the grant funding. Simply stating that capacity will be increased, or that a resource will be improved is not specific enough. Rather, goals and objectives should result in quantifiable outcomes (e.g., miles of streambank that will be restored, number of trees that will be planted, acres that will be seeded, number of students that will be taught, skills that will be gained by an employee, or the number of additional hours an employee will work). Partners can be a great way for determining accurate, measurable outcomes of a project.

Tasks

Tasks describe the specific actions the district will take to accomplish the goals and objectives of the project. For example, a task for a planting project may include developing landowner agreements, purchasing seedlings, coordinating volunteers, and submitting the

final report to DNRC. For an educational project, the tasks might include hosting a planning meeting with local teachers, purchasing materials, presenting the lesson, and grant management. For a capacity building or administrative project, tasks might include attending professional development or trainings, organizing and updating office files, expanding office hours, or purchasing office supplies and equipment.

Deliverables

Deliverables are tangible items that can be used to demonstrate the project was successful. Deliverables should include before and after photos of a restoration project, copies of newspaper ads or newsletters, monitoring reports, workshop attendee surveys and attendance lists, technical reports, training certificates, or snapshots of website updates. Copies or records of the deliverables should be included in grant reporting.

Timeline

The project timeline must include specific benchmarks indicating when each task will be accomplished including reporting deadlines. The following are common examples: construction will take place July-August 2023, workshop planning meetings will be scheduled in April with the workshop hosted on May 15, website updates will be completed by October 31, supplies will be purchased in March. A timeline such as, "the project will begin immediately and be completed within a year," will not be accepted.

Budget

The budget is an estimated accounting of how all funds will be spent and must be detailed. Grant funding cannot be provided as a "blank check" where funding is requested for a generalized purpose. For example, requesting $500 for educational supplies is not specific enough. The budget must describe what specifically will be purchased and the cost. If the budget includes salaries (either as match or as a grant expense), include the estimated hours and hourly rate. If equipment or supplies are being purchased, list each item and the associated cost. For travel expenses, estimate the miles and the rate or the number of nights in a hotel and associated costs. Mileage and per diem are reimbursed at the state rate. Lodging is reimbursed at the GSA rate.

Application Expectations and Rankings

Receipt of grant funds is not guaranteed and is subject to available funding. Only those projects that demonstrate a public resource benefit and include clearly stated objectives, deliverables, timelines, and budget will be considered. All applications, regardless of the grant program will be reviewed based on the following ranking criteria:

Ranking Criteria	Scoring Range
Overall, is the application high-quality, clear and concise, and well thought out?	0-10

• 10 = Proposed project has few grammatical or mathematical errors, all sections are complete, and the proposal is clear to the reviewer. • 5 = Proposed project is complete but has some errors and is missing some needed details. • 0 = Proposed project has missing sections, is poorly written, and does not include enough detail for the reviewer.	
Does the proposed project improve district capacity to better fulfill their mission to conserve soil and water resources? • 10 = Proposed project will clearly improve the district's capacity • 5 = Proposed project may improve the district's capacity or will somewhat improve the district's capacity. • 0 = Proposed project is unlikely to improve district's capacity.	0-10
Has the applicant/CD demonstrated their ability to lead the project to a successful outcome? • 10 = The project team has the collective experience, education, and capacity to lead the project to a successful outcome. • 5 = The project team has some experience leading projects. • 0 = The project team has no experience leading projects, lacks the capacity, or currently has other grants that are not in good standing.	0-10
Are the public resource benefits clearly described? • 10 = Proposed project clearly indicated how public natural resources would benefit from the successful project. • 5 = Proposed project indicates some public benefit but does not adequately describe how the grant funds will help accomplish the benefit. • 0 = Proposed project does not describe how public resources will benefit.	0-10
Does the application include clearly stated goals and objectives? • 10 = Proposed project includes specific and measurable goals and objectives, and it is clear what the outcomes of the project will be. • 5 = Goals and objectives are vague, and it is somewhat unclear what will be accomplished with grant funds.	0-10

• 0 = Proposed project does not include goals or objectives; it is unclear what the outcome of the project will be.	
Does the application include clearly stated tasks that describe what actions will be taken to accomplish the goals and objectives and associated tasks? • 10 = Proposed project includes clearly stated tasks that detail what actions will be taken to accomplish the goals and objectives. • 5 = Proposed project includes tasks, but they are not detailed, or it is unclear how they will accomplish the goals and objectives. • 0 = Proposed project does not describe what actions will be taken to accomplish the goals and objectives.	0-10
Does the proposed project list specific deliverables as evidence of how grant funding will be used to successfully complete the project? • 10 = Proposed project lists specific, tangible deliverables that will adequately showcase the accomplished goals and objectives. • 5 = Proposed project includes some deliverables, but the deliverables are not appropriate to prove the project was successfully completed. • 0 = Proposed project does not indicate what deliverables will be provided to DNRC.	0-10
Does the timeline include milestones describing when each task will be accomplished? • 10 = Proposed project clearly describes what will be accomplish and when. • 5 = Proposed project includes a timeline, but it is unclear or too vague to understand what will be accomplished at what time. • 0 = Proposed project does not include an appropriate timeline.	0-10
Is the budget reasonable, clear, and includes only allowable expenses? • 10 = Budget clearly describes how grant funding will be used, what the anticipated expenses will be, and provides sufficient detail to ensure all expenses are allowable. • 5 = Budget provides some detail, but it is unclear what specific rates are or how the grant funds will be spent.	0-10

• 0 = A budget is not provided or is a "blank check" request with no detail provided on how the grant funds will be used.	
Does the project have broad community support as showcased through letters of support, project partners, or matching funds from other sources? • 10 = Proposed project includes letters of support, confirmed project partners, or matching funds from other sources. • 5 = Proposed project includes some description of community support but does not include letters of support, does not have project partners, and does not include matching funds from outside sources. • 0 = It is unclear if the project would be supported by the community.	0-10
Total Possible Points	100

Application Assistance

CDB staff are available to CDs for assistance with the application process. While CDB staff cannot write the application, they can help develop project ideas and review preliminary proposals prior to application submittal. They are also available to help with questions regarding match, budget development, and allowable expenses. This assistance is offered so CDs can confidently submit high-quality applications. CDs interested in application assistance are encouraged to communicate with the CD specialist for their area well in advance of the grant application deadline.

Match Requirements/Expectations

Match is not required for any of the grants; however, applications that include match will be more competitive, rank higher, and are more likely to receive funding. Match can include in-kind services or cash match.

In-Kind Services

In-kind match is match that is calculated as the value of time volunteering for the project or the provision of free services for the project. This can include in-kind match from CD Supervisors or employees, landowners, partner organizations, and community volunteers. It can be calculated at an hourly rate using the Value of Volunteer Labor Worksheet, or as a total estimate of the value of provided professional services. A record of the in-kind match should be included with the final report. This record could be a simple spreadsheet documenting who volunteered on what dates and the number of hours, or it could be

documentation from a contractor/consultant estimating the value of the free professional services provided.

In-kind match can also be provided from other grant sources. For example, if applying for multiple grants for one project, include in the budget table a description of each funding source and what components of the project are budgeted for each funding source.

Cash Match

Cash match includes any purchases or expenses paid for by the CD or partner organizations directly for the project and not reimbursed by a grant. This might include the purchase of supplies or equipment or payments for services. It does not include the purchase of equipment that will be retained in private ownership. That is, equipment purchased by a contractor or partner that will not be retained by the district does not count as match. Irrigation construction or design projects, including sprinklers and drip systems must have a 50:50 cash match from the landowner(s) or other beneficiary (such as an irrigation district, ditch company, or community garden host).

Ineligible Expenses

Ineligible expenses will not be reimbursed. As grant funds are tax dollars, all expenses must be appropriate to the project. Expenses that benefit an individual or an organization other than a CD will not be considered eligible. This includes, but is not limited to, the items below:

- Activities outside the scope of work
- Costs incurred outside the contract term
- Costs for food in excess of 10% of the overall project budget
- Routine maintenance and operation
- Equipment or gear that will be owned by an entity other than the CD beyond the grant lifetime
- Salaries/wages, travel, or other expenses not directly related to the project
- Funding for infrastructure is not eligible

MEPA

All projects are subject to the Montana Environmental Protection Act (MEPA). Projects that are largely administrative or educational and will have no impact on the physical environment will be issued a No-MEPA decision. For projects that will physically impact the environment, the MEPA checklist is required with application submittal. The MEPA checklist is used to complete the MEPA review process by DNRC and to determine whether an EA is needed. If so, DNRC will complete the EA. Examples of project that will require a MEPA checklist include, but are not limited to, restoration projects, habitat improvement projects, streambank stabilization, soil improvements, fencing, planting, or projects that otherwise physically alter the environment, even if the impact is beneficial.

Grant Review Process

The Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) Conservation Resource Development Division (CARDD) provides fiscal management of the grant

programs. The Conservation Districts Bureau (CDB) staff review applications, rank them qualitatively and quantitatively, and provides funding recommendations to the Conservation Districts Advisory Council (CDAC). DNRC makes final funding decisions based on recommendations. All projects will be reviewed and ranked according to the guidelines described in this document.

CDAC

The Conservation District Advisory Council (CDAC) will review and rank applications for the CD Project Grants and the Pollinator Grants over $10,000. The CDAC will review the applications during a public hearing during which applicants may present their project and address the CDAC's questions. Following the hearing, the CDAC will rank all proposed projects including recommended funding and justifications, as well as any constraints or stipulations. CDAC recommendations and rankings will then be provided to DNRC for final decision making.

Awarding and Contracting

The grant agreement will not be effective until fully executed (signed by both the Authorized Representative and DNRC). Any expenses incurred before the contract is fully executed will not be reimbursed. Districts are advised that it generally takes several months for contracts to be written, approved, and executed. Therefore, planning is critical when seeking grant funding.
DNRC has transitioned to DocuSign to execute all grant agreements.

Reporting and Reimbursement

All grant programs, except the CD Administration/310 Grants, are reimbursable programs. Costs may not be incurred outside of the contract term and signatures. DNRC will reimburse project costs upon receipt and approval of a vendor invoice, supporting documentation, proof of payment and project status report. Ten percent of the total project funds may be held back until receipt of a complete final report. Reports must include an accounting of all project costs, including those funded by the district and other matching funds/grants. The district will receive the final payment based on the total of actual costs submitted, not to exceed the total contracted amount, upon delivery of a final report and a final invoice.
Progress reports are required with each reimbursement request or on a quarterly basis, whichever occurs sooner. Progress reports must include project activities during the reporting period, costs incurred, funds remaining, anticipated activities during the next reporting period, and expected changes in scope, schedule, or budget. Reported project costs must include those funded by the district and matching funds.
DNRC will release final payment based on the total of actual costs submitted, not to exceed the total contracted amount, upon delivery of a final report, final invoice, and other deliverables as outlined in the grant agreement. The conservation district will submit the expenses using the DNRC vendor invoice and final report. The final invoice must accurately account for all grant expenses for contractors and grantee expenses for time and materials, including hourly rates and work hours, contract award amount, total grant amount expended,

grant amount received, and remaining grant balance, if any. Remaining funds will be reverted to DNRC's conservation district account.

Additional guidance on status and final reports can be found in the grant contract.

Procurement and Permitting Requirements

Grantees agree to comply with all relevant procurement and contracting requirements related to work performed under DNRC grant agreements. Record of all procurement and solicitation processes should be submitted with grant reporting. In some cases, DNRC retains the right to approve subcontracts.

Grantees are responsible for conducting all necessary environmental assessments and obtaining all necessary local, state, and federal permits. Landowner permission must be secured for projects on private land before contracting.

For specific questions about procurement and solicitation, please contact your CD Specialist or review the resources on the CDB website.

Contract Terms and Conditions

Amendments to a grant must be approved and documented as part of the grant contract by CDB. Requests for contract extensions must be provided in writing to DNRC 45 days prior to the end of contract term and must include a justification or description of why the extension is necessary. Additional terms and conditions can be found in the grant contract.

Project Close Out

Final disbursement of funds is contingent upon DNRC receipt and approval of a final report that meets the requirements specified in the grant contact. Final reports must be submitted to DNRC within 90 days of the Agreement termination date. Final reports must include a signed Certificate of Compliance (included in this attachment) to DNRC upon project completion. Projects that included construction must also submit a signed Engineer's Statement of Completion. DNRC may also request as-built drawings for construction projects, if applicable to the project.

Grant Types and Program Details

Conservation District Administrative Grants

The purpose of this grant program is to provide funding for conservation districts that do not have sufficient funding to cover basic operation costs, such as administrative salaries, insurance, office supplies, communications, and insurance. Receipt of funds is not guaranteed. To receive funds, a CD must demonstrate a funding need beyond their maximum mill levy by clearly describing why the CD cannot operate with the present funding and what the impact of not receiving funding would be. This can include a description of staff shortages, upcoming major activities, or basic operational costs that exceed the mill levy. To determine need, all sources of income, assets, and expenses will be considered. Conservation Districts with the most limited resources and implementing priority projects as identified in a workplan will be given priority for funding. In addition to the general guidelines provided previously in

the overview section, the following guidelines apply specifically to the Conservation District Administrative Grants:

1. Estimate the anticipated expenses and income for the current year.
2. Complete the application in Submittable making sure to clearly describe why funding is needed and what the funding will be used for.
3. Complete the budget spreadsheet and upload with Submittable application.
4. The budget spreadsheet can then be used as the required annual budget for other CDB grant applications.
5. Applications that include strategic planning documents from the CD verifying the planned activities and need for additional funding will receive higher consideration.

Conservation District Project and Capacity Grants

The Conservation District Project Grants are for any project under the authority of Conservation Districts pursuant to MCA, Title 76, Chapter 15, Part 4. Funds may be used for any project a conservation district is authorized to carry out, including, but not limited to capacity building, planning, education, feasibility studies, demonstration projects, farm experiments, equipment purchases, or construction projects. In addition to the general guidelines provided previously in the overview section, the following guidelines apply specifically to the Conservation District Project and Capacity Grants:

1. Projects must be identified as a priority in the district's strategic plan or annual workplan, a copy of which must be provided with the application.
2. The minimum application amount is $2,000, and applications may not exceed $20,000. Conservation Districts may request funds above this limit, but 50:50 cash match is required for the entire amount.
3. The administrative fee is based on the percentage of the total project expenses and cannot exceed 10 percent.
4. All applications must include a monitoring plan, a public outreach and education plan, and a partners plan identifying participating partners and their tasks.
5. For education events, funds can only be used to pay for expenses that exceed revenues (registration fees, sponsorships, donations, etc.). A detailed spreadsheet that itemizes expenditures and revenues must be submitted with the final report.
6. Applications that include the purchase of equipment must include a maintenance plan that includes rental fees, repair and maintenance costs, deposits (if applicable), and long-term leases (if applicable). Reasonable rental fees must be charged to cover maintenance and replacement costs.
7. Irrigation construction or design projects, including sprinklers and drip systems must have a 50:50 cash match from the landowner(s) or other beneficiaries (such as an irrigation district, ditch company, or community garden host).
8. Per DNRC policy, noxious weed projects must demonstrate that funding was first sought through the through the Noxious Weed Trust Fund at the Montana Department of Agriculture and be coordinated with the local weed district. https://agr.mt.gov/NoxiousWeedTrustFund

9. Per DNRC policy, aquatic invasive species project funding must be sought through the DNRC Aquatic Invasive Species Program. https://invasivespecies.mt.gov/montana-invasive-species/Aquatic-Invasive-Species-Grant-Program

Education Mini-Grants

The Education Mini grant program assists conservation districts with conservation and natural resource educational projects that are on a smaller scale and may not be included in the annual workplan, allowing focus on a specific audience and/or topic. Activities for both youth and adults are eligible. Schools and other organizations may apply, but their application must be sponsored and approved by their local conservation district.

Example projects include organizing and attending workshops, school field trips, adult or youth programs, promoting educational opportunities, developing resources for the community, and working with a school or group to promote natural resource education. Funds may be used for CD employee salary related to the project, travel expenses, advertising, resource materials, scholarships towards camps, speaker fees, or transportation costs for field trips. A description of ineligible expenses can be found in the overview section of these guidelines. In addition to the general guidelines provided previously in the overview section, the following guidelines apply specifically to the education mini-grant program:

1. The minimum application request is $500, and requests may not exceed $2,000.
2. An outreach strategy must be included in the application.

Pollinator Grants

Pollinator grants are available to conservation districts for any projects that will improve pollinator habitat within Montana. Example projects include community and demonstration gardens, area-wide pollinator initiatives, education events, and planting pollinator plots. In addition to the general guidelines provided previously in the overview section, the following guidelines apply specifically to the Pollinator Grants:

1. Grants may be awarded up to $15,000 with a minimum application request for $500.
2. All applications must include a monitoring plan, a public outreach and education plan, and a project partners plan identifying participating partners and the tasks performed.
3. Schools and other organizations may apply for a Pollinator Grant, but the project must be approved and sponsored by the conservation district. All payments will be made from the DNRC to the local conservation district. The school or organization will be reimbursed by the sponsoring conservation district.