

FOREST LEGACY PROGRAM

PROJECT SCORING GUIDANCE

(June 4, 2010 - updated)

Introduction:

This document provides guidance to the National Review Panel on how to score individual Forest Legacy Program (FLP) projects, including additional clarification on the core national criteria, project readiness and other evaluation considerations used in this process. The outcome from the National Review Panel will be a ranked and prioritized list of FLP projects for submission to the Office of Management and Budget for consideration in the President's Budget. Its objectives are to:

- Provide a clear and defensible ranking process that can be articulated easily to program participants and partners; and
- Ensure fair, equitable and thorough review of all projects by the National Review Panel.

National Project Selection:

- A multi-tract project should be scored based on how all the tracts fit within the criteria. For example, if only one tract meets the highest point criteria, the project will not likely obtain the highest points.

Region/Area/IITF Role:

- Work with States to produce highly competitive FLP projects;
- Work with States to produce projects that are "Ready";
- Work with States to assure that all pertinent project information is in Forest Legacy Information System (FLIS);
- Learn and understand project details;
- Assure that projects meet Statewide Assessment and Resource Strategy objectives (including stand alone Assessment of Need);
- Confirm that projects have been reviewed and evaluated by the State Forest Stewardship Coordinating Committee;
- Assure that projects comply with June 30, 2003, FLP Implementation Guidelines;
- Work with States to identify which projects can be phased and the funding threshold; and (However, the funding level for recommended project will not automatically be decreased by the National Review Panel if a lower funding threshold is provided.)

Washington Office Role:

- Work with Regions/Area/IITF (R/A/I) to produce highly competitive FLP submissions; and
- Ensure that project selections meet congressional direction and national program goals.

National Review Panel Role:

- Score projects using the national core criteria (Importance, Threatened, and Strategic);
- Apply "Readiness" point and additional consideration; and
- Develop a National List of ranked projects.

National Core Criteria:

Importance – This criterion focuses on the attributes of the property and the environmental, social, and economic public benefits gained from the protection and management of the property and its resources. This criterion reflects the ecological assets and the economic and social values conserved by the project and its level of significance. National significance is typically viewed as activities that support Federal laws (such as Endangered Species Act, Safe Drinking Water Act, and Clean Water Act) or interstate/international resources (such as migratory species, or trail and waterways that cross state or international boundaries).

More points will be given to projects that demonstrate multiple public benefits with national significance. A project need not have all the attributes listed to receive maximum points for this category, but projects with multiple attributes of national significance should receive more points.

- *High importance* (21-30 points) – The project protects multiple public benefits with national significance;
- *Medium* (11-20 points) – The project protects some public benefits with national or state significance; or
- *Low* (0-10 points) – The project protects public benefits with state or local significance.

Attributes to consider: The descriptions listed represent the ideal project for each attribute.

Economic Benefits from Timber and Potential Forest Productivity – This category includes three independent components: (1) Landowner demonstrates sustainable forest management in accordance with a management plan. Additional points should be given to land that is third party certified (such as Sustainable Forestry Initiative, Forest Stewardship Council, and American Tree Farm System). (2) Forestry activities contribute to the resource-based economy for a community or region. (3) The property contains characteristics (such as highly productive soils) to sustain a productive forest. (Strategic Direction Goal 2.3)

Economic Benefits from Non-timber Products – Provides non-timber revenue to the local or regional economy through activities such as hunting leases, ranching, non-timber forest products (maple syrup, pine straw, ginseng collection, etc.), guided tours (fishing, hunting, birdwatching, etc.), and recreation and tourism (lodging, rentals, bikes, boats, outdoor gear, etc.).

Threatened or Endangered Species Habitat – The site has documented threatened or endangered plants and animals or designated habitat. Federally listed species will be given more consideration than state-only listed species. (Strategic Direction Goal 2.3)

Fish, Wildlife, Plants, and Unique Forest Communities - The site contains unique forest communities and/or important fish or wildlife habitat as documented by a formal assessment or wildlife conservation plan or strategy developed by a government or a non-governmental organization. (Strategic Direction Goal 2.3)

Water Supply and Watershed Protection – (1) Property has a direct relationship with protecting the water supply or watershed, such as provides a buffer to public drinking water supply, contains an aquifer recharge area, or protects an ecologically important aquatic or marine area, and/or (2) the property contains important riparian area, wetlands, shorelines, river systems, or sensitive watershed lands.(Strategic Direction Goal 2.1)

Public Access –Protection of the property will maintain or establish access by the public for recreation; however, restrictions on specific use and location of recreational activities may exist. (Strategic Direction Goal 2.3)

Scenic – The site is located within a viewshed of a government designated scenic feature or area (such as trail, river, or highway).

Historic/Cultural/Tribal – The site contains features of historical, cultural, and/or tribal significance, formally documented by a government or a non-governmental organization.

Threatened - This criterion estimates the likelihood for conversion. More points will be given to projects that demonstrate multiple conditions; however, a project need not have all the conditions listed to receive maximum points for this category. During the evaluation of threat, a landowner interested in conserving land should not be penalized.

Third Party Ownership- If property has been acquired by a third party at the request of the State, threatened will be evaluated based on the situation prior to the third party acquisition.

Legal Protection- The degree of legal protections that currently exists on the property (e.g. current zoning or existing easements), whether these protections remove the threat of conversion, and to what extent.

Land and Landowners Circumstances – land and landowner circumstances such as property held in an estate, aging landowner, future property by heirs is uncertain, property is up for sale or has a sale pending, landowner anticipates owning property for a short duration, landowner has received purchase offers, land has an approved subdivision plan, landowner has sold subdivisions of the property, etc.

Adjacent Land Use - adjacent land use characteristics such as existing land status, rate of development growth and conversion, rate of population growth (percent change), rate of change in ownership, etc.

Ability to Develop - physical attributes of the property that will facilitate conversion, such as access, buildable ground, zoning, slope, water/sewer, electricity, etc

- *Likely* (11-20 points) - Multiple conditions exist that make conversion to non-forest uses likely;
- *Possible* (1-10 points) - A few conditions exist that make conversion to non-forest uses possible; or
- *Unlikely* (0 points) - Current conditions exist that make conversion to non-forest uses unlikely.

Strategic - This criterion reflects the project's relevance or relationship to conservation efforts on a broader perspective. When evaluating strategic, three considerations should be made: 1) the scale of a conservation plan, 2) the scale of the project's contribution to that plan, and 3) the placement of the parcel within the plan area. (FLP Strategic Direction 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3)

Attributes to consider:

Conservation Strategy- How the project fits within a larger conservation plan, strategy, or initiative as designated by either a government or non-governmental entity.

Compliment Protected Lands- How the project is strategically linked to enhance already protect lands including past FLP projects, already protected Federal, State, or non-governmental organization lands, or other Federal land protection programs (NRCS, NOAA, etc).

- *High* (21-30 points) - The property significantly advances a landscape-scale or watershed-based conservation strategy through infill and/or key linkages and supports previous conservation investments.
- *Average* (11-20 points) - The property makes a modest contribution to a conservation effort and is near already protected lands.
- *Low* (0-10 points) - The property is not part of a conservation plan, but will lead to locally-focused conservation effort.

Additional Considerations

Prior to developing the Regional project list, each State should be evaluated by the R/A/I regarding its fulfillment of the FLP core program requirements listed below:

1. Baseline reports for all closed conservation easement tracts (FLP Guidelines, page 18);
2. Forest stewardship plan or multi-resource management plan for all closed conservation easement tracts (FLP Guidelines, page 18);
3. Annual monitoring conducted for all closed conservation easements tracts (FLP Guidelines, page 20);
4. Addresses significant conservation easement violations and/or has a conservation easement violation plan (FLP Guidelines, page 20);
5. Implements a record keeping protocol for all FLP tracts (FLP Guidelines, page 37);
6. Developed an action plan to address recommendations in a Quality Assurance Inspection (Quality Assurance Plan for Forest Legacy Program Appraisals. September 2006);
7. The amount of unspent funds a State has in outstanding grants; and
8. Up-to-date on grant reporting requirements.

For the majority of States we expect that all requirements will be met. In the rare case that persistent deficiencies in a State's performance are identified and cannot be remedied, than the State can either not submit projects for consideration or submit projects with the understanding that they will not be reviewed and ranked by the National Review Panel. The projects will still be part of the National list, but will be added to the bottom below the reviewed and ranked projects. We expect that the R/A/I will have been working closely with the State during the year to address all deficiencies.

Prior to the due date, Forest Service WO and R/A/I FLP program staff will discuss deficiencies to ensure consistent treatment of States' projects.

The following items will be considered by the National Review Panel when developing the final list of ranked projects and associated funding levels, and not by the individual panel members when scoring projects.

1. The National Review Panel is not bound by a State's priority ranking of projects. If the National Review Panel ranks projects out of a State's priority order, then the panel will call that State to discuss the situation. However, the panel will not move a lower ranked project up the list to maintain the State's priority ranking.
2. The National Review Panel will **add one-half (0.5) of a point** to the average panel score for projects that have leveraged 50 percent non-Federal match, or greater.
3. The National Review Panel will consider the following information when breaking ties or determining recommended funding levels for projects. (a) the amount of unspent funds each State has in outstanding grants, (b) average time to close projects within the past five years, and (c) average funds leveraged within the past five years.
4. The National Review Panel will consider project readiness, which will be used when breaking ties or determining recommended funding levels for projects. .

Project Readiness is defined as the degree of due diligence completed. To demonstrate project readiness, completed items need to be specified (including completion date) in FLIS and credit will only be given to those items completed (one tally for each completed item, with a maximum tally of 7. Projects with multiple tracts will need to have the majority of their tracts have the completed task before a tally is given):

1. Documented support for the cost estimate, such as completed market analysis or preliminary appraisal.
2. Landowner and State have general agreement on conservation easement or fee acquisition conditions.
3. Cost Share commitment has been obtained from a specified source.
4. A signed option or purchase and sales agreement is held by the State or at the request of the State. **OR** At the request of the State, conservation easement or fee title is held by a third party.
5. Title search is completed.
6. Minerals determination is completed.
7. For conservation easement properties, a stewardship plan or multi-resource management plan is completed.