

OPEN PROJECT SELECTION PROCESS for LWCF: 2023-2027

The State of Alaska, Department of Natural Resources, Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation (DPOR) implements an Open Project Selection Process which meets or exceeds requirements and goals outlined in the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) Manual.

Goals: In accord with LWCF provisions, Alaska's Open Project Selection Process (OPSP) meets the following:

1. Provides for public knowledge of and participation in the formulation and application of the project selection process utilized by the State of Alaska in allocating LWCF assistance.
2. Ensures all potential state and local applicants are aware of the availability of and process for obtaining LWCF assistance and provide opportunities for eligible agencies to submit project applications and have them considered on an equitable basis.
3. Provides a measurable link, through published selection criteria, to the specific outdoor recreation needs and priorities identified in SCORP policies and implementation programs.
4. Assures the distribution of LWCF assistance is accomplished in a non-discriminatory manner, especially regarding minority populations, elderly, disabled, and other underserved populations, and ensure a fair and equitable evaluation of all applications for LWCF assistance.

Public Knowledge, Participation, Awareness, and Opportunity: DPOR meets goals 1 & 2 above in several ways. To create the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) and this OPSP, Alaska's DPOR solicited input through surveys, public meetings, advisory groups, and online forums. That information helped formulate evaluation criteria which is published and used by applicants when creating project proposals. It is also used by DPOR's staff and advisory board when evaluating and ranking applications. In addition, during the application period, DPOR staff offer potential applicants ongoing opportunities to ask questions and seek technical assistance via electronic or in-person communications.

Measurable Links and an Equitable Evaluation: The *Evaluation Score Sheet*, providing measurable links to SCORP criteria, is published on DPOR's webpage along with the LWCF application package. Other documents in that package include *Frequently Asked Questions*, links to the SCORP, standard forms and helpful examples for completing an application package.

Proposals are evaluated, scored, and ranked based on eight major factors, three of which directly reflect needs and priorities identified in the SCORP. Conformance with SCORP is weighted heavily by the evaluation committee. The maximum number of points awarded a project through the evaluation process is 100; up to 30 points are awarded to projects addressing SCORP priorities.

DPOR and ORTAB ensure equitable and fair distribution of LWCF assistance to underserved communities in several ways. We encourage small, rural, or underserved communities to apply for assistance by lowering the minimum LWCF request; otherwise, it is often difficult for smaller communities to compete or meet the 50-50 LWCF match requirements. DPOR's evaluation also considers diversity of users a project may serve. Up to 10 points is allotted if the project would serve, for example, low income, minority, elderly, and special needs populations. While not a specific category on the *Evaluation Score Sheet*, DPOR and ORTAB seek balance and geographic diversity in selecting projects affecting people all across Alaska.

A. Priority Rating System for LWCF Assistance

Outdoor recreation priorities are based on public input and responses to extensive surveys conducted by Alaska State Parks during formulation of the SCORP. Information gathered in public surveys, land manager surveys, and tribal surveys show statewide survey results as well as breakouts through 6 regions of Alaska. (Detailed results of each survey are available in Appendix A3, A4, and A5 of the SCORP, and synopsized in a separate attachment to this OPSP.)

As expected, different regions expressed differing priorities, and applicants may use the needs survey to augment the case for their project being important to their region. For example, water systems for RV hookups and electricity rank highest in the Arctic, at nearly double the rate of overall statewide and other regional averages.

Besides meeting an identified priority need, DPOR's rating system also

- evaluates the extent to which the project will serve diverse, underserved populations
- measures local and public support for the project

- assesses shovel-ready status and a viable future management/maintenance plan
- determines committed funding partnerships or champions
- reviews the project's proximity to and accessibility to the public
- evaluates clarity of scope in meeting SCORP goals

In keeping with DPOR's SCORP, a proposed project must also meet one of these major goals:

1. Support the Alaska Outdoor Recreation Way of Life
2. Empower and Enable Alaskans to Lead Active, Healthy Lives
3. Balance Outdoor Recreation Growth and Stewardship

B. Project Selection Process

Typically, the State of Alaska divides each year's LWCF apportionment in two: half of the apportionment to be available for State-sponsored projects; half by locally sponsored projects. State projects do not compete against local projects, nor are they restricted to maximum limitations on requested funding. State and local projects are considered and ranked separately by the Outdoor Recreation and Trails Advisory Board (ORTAB). If time or other factors allow, these rankings may take place at separate ORTAB meetings. Finally, the State reserves the right to utilize the majority of (or an entire apportionment) under certain circumstances (such as to prevent lapsing funds), if or when deemed necessary.

C. Amendments to Add Funds to Existing Projects

DPOR recognizes that construction projects such as those undertaken with LWCF assistance often face increasing costs for labor, materials, or other unforeseen factors. Many, many months lapse between the time an applicant's budget is created, vetted by DPOR and ORTAB, submitted to NPS and the applicant ultimately receives a grant award. To assist successful grantees with increased costs, DPOR chooses to add funds to existing projects via amendments, rather than forcing projects to undergo another OPSP competition.

Guidelines for DPOR's amendment process would include the following:

1. Grantee submits an amended budget and narrative detailing how much additional funding is necessary, to which budget categories it applies, and how additional match would be met.
2. Grantee submits a narrative explaining the need for the additional funding, when the need is expected, whether/how long the project itself may need to be extended, and what would happen if additional funding is not forthcoming.
3. Grantee describes how the additional money (or lack thereof) would affect the grant scope of work. (Would the project fail to meet its scope of work? Would it expand the scope? Would it result in a non-viable public outdoor recreation project? Would the project still meet SCORP priorities?)
4. DPOR staff and State Liaison Officer (SLO) would consider the request, coordinate with grantee for further information as necessary, and decide whether to forward to NPS a request to increase the grant via amendment.

D. Recurring Funding Cycle: Schedule for the Open Project Selection Process

The following is a target timeline Alaska uses when federal funding is anticipated for the program. Variables such as NPS "Open Application Windows," ORTAB meeting dates, staffing levels and obtaining final application documentation from sponsors may alter this timeline.

August – October: DPOR issues public announcements of anticipated federal LWCF assistance and accepts preliminary applications. Grant round is open for about 90 days.

November – December: Preliminary applications are reviewed by DPOR staff for eligibility and completeness. DPOR staff prepares applications for dissemination to ORTAB.

January - February: DPOR conducts a public meeting of the ORTAB to review and rank preliminary applications. The State Liaison Officer (Director of Alaska State Parks) approves the final ranking.

February – April: DPOR staff coordinate with sponsors of the highest-ranking applications to complete a full application package to submit to the NPS Program Officer for review and final approval.

May – July: Upon NPS approval, DPOR staff upload full application packages into Grants.gov during the next available "Open Application Window."

E. Applicant Notification

DPOR notifies the public and potential applicants of available funding by posting a public notice on the State website, the DPOR webpage, and by word-of-mouth through State and local organizations. Announcements also occur during meetings with outdoor trails groups or other entities, and outreach to municipal and tribal officials, etc. Relevant information such as the *Evaluation Score Sheet*, *Frequently Asked Questions*, standard forms and helpful examples are published on DPOR's webpage along with the LWCF application package. Links to the SCORP and other essential documents are available online or can be requested in other formats.

F. Program Assistance

DPOR staff offer potential project sponsors technical assistance through various means. Applicants may ask questions and seek assistance on proposal preparation, information on non-federal matching share, or other matters via electronic or in-person communications. Tele-meetings employing visual aids may be scheduled as well, enhancing either one-on-one or general, open group forums.

G. Underserved Populations

DPOR encourages applications from communities with significant minority and other underserved populations. One way to do that is by lowering the minimum LWCF request. Otherwise, it is often difficult for those communities to compete or meet the 50-50 LWCF match requirements. DPOR's evaluation criteria also considers the diversity of users a project sponsor proposes to serve. Up to 10 points is allotted if the project would serve, for example, low income, minority, elderly, and special needs populations.