



## ***CENTRAL APPALACHIA HABITAT STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM*** **2024 REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS**

Full Proposal Due Date: **Thursday, July 18, 2024 by 11:59 AM EDT**

Applicant Webinar: **Monday, June 3, 2024, 11:00 PM-12:30 PM EDT** [Register Here](#)

### **I. OVERVIEW**

The Central Appalachia Habitat Stewardship Program will award grants to voluntarily restore and sustain healthy forests, rivers and streams that provide habitat for diverse native bird and aquatic species populations. Approximately \$3.5 million is available this year. Major funding is provided by the Richard King Mellon Foundation, USDA's Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This year, additional funding is provided by Altria Group and Cleveland-Cliffs.

The overall goal of the program is to improve the quality and connectivity of forest and freshwater habitat to increase the distribution and abundance of birds, fish and other wildlife, as evidenced by a suite of species that collectively are indicators of forest and freshwater habitat condition. The program aims to:

- Improve the voluntarily management of public and private forestlands to create blocks with a mosaic of mixed-aged forests that support a diversity of bird and wildlife species, especially targeting golden-winged warbler, wood thrush, and cerulean warbler; and
- Improve stream health by voluntarily removing passage barriers, restoring riparian buffers, and improving water quality and hydrology to bolster populations of brook trout, eastern hellbender and freshwater mussels.

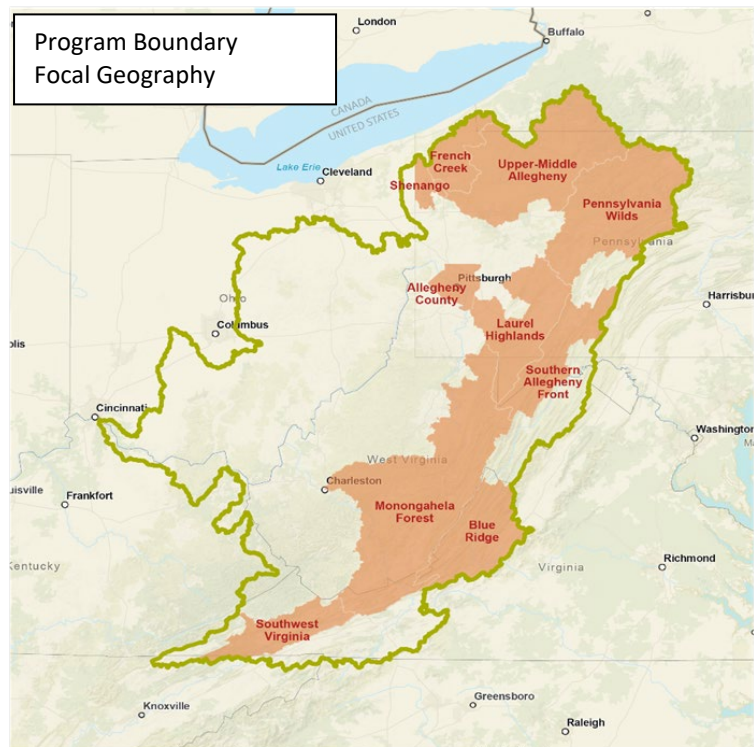
Applicants are encouraged to deploy a range of strategies to engage public and private landowners in active stewardship through technical and financial assistance, demonstrations, education and outreach, and other innovative approaches.

### **II. GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS**

The Central Appalachia Habitat Stewardship Program will award grants within the program boundary on the map at right, which includes portions of Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Priority will be given to projects within the focal geographies shown in orange on the map below. For more detailed information about priority habitats and partner priorities, visit NFWF's [Central Appalachia Business Plan GIS Portal](#).

Note: Some funding is geographically targeted. This year funding from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will target Working Lands for Wildlife priority areas (see GIS Portal), funding from Cleveland-Cliffs is available for projects in the Laurel Highlands and southern region of the Monongahela Forest focal geography and southwestern Pennsylvania, and funding from Altria Group is available for forest habitat projects in the Monongahela Forest and Blue Ridge/Upper James focal geographies.



### III. PROGRAM PRIORITIES

All proposals should strive to implement strategies and contribute to goals detailed in NFWF's [Central Appalachia Business Plan](#) (March 2019. Revised August 2023). Priority strategies for funding in 2024 are detailed below.

Approximately \$1.5 million in program funding will be set aside for projects that direct staff resources to help agricultural producers design and implement conservation practices benefitting select Working Lands for Wildlife target species, especially golden-winged warbler, eastern hellbender and northern bobwhite quail. Projects should increase Farm Bill program participation and conservation practice implementation among agricultural producers, especially farmers and ranchers in the Historically Underserved and Special Emphasis categories.

In addition, projects that incorporate outreach to communities, foster community engagement, and pursue collaborative management leading to measurable conservation benefits are encouraged. When possible, projects should be developed through community input and co-design processes and should consider traditional knowledge where relevant. Additionally, projects should engage community-level partners (e.g., municipalities, NGOs, community organizations, community leaders) to help design, implement, and maintain projects to secure maximum benefits for communities, maintenance, and sustainability post-grant award.

#### A. Restore and Manage Forest Blocks in Focal Geographies

NFWF will invest in the management of dynamic forest restoration blocks to enhance age and structural diversity that demonstrates improved forest conditions for golden-winged warbler,

wood thrush, and cerulean warbler. Note that NFWF seeks to achieve its forest health goals without sacrificing or cutting late successional or old growth forest. **Priority focal geographies:** continued implementation of forest management activities in established dynamic forest restoration blocks in the *Upper-Middle Allegheny, Laurel Highlands, Monongahela Forest* and *Southwest Virginia*, as well as establishment of new dynamic forest blocks. In addition, projects that occur on private lands in close proximity to established blocks within the NRCS Working Lands for Wildlife priority areas are strongly encouraged (refer to [NFWF's Central Appalachia Business Plan GIS Portal](#)).

- **Assessment/Planning:** Provide forest management decision support tools that encourage landscape-level planning to manage for an appropriate mix of age and structural diversity that also is adaptable to meeting the needs and interests of public and private landowners at the parcel and forest block scale. Forest management plans for private lands should be written by foresters qualified to write plans for NRCS producers. Priority: *Monongahela Forest* focal geography, and for private lands in close proximity to established blocks.
- **Dynamic Forest Block Restoration:** Implement forest management projects that use a range of practices and prescriptions that contribute to creating a diversity of age and structure across contiguous forest blocks of at least 5,000 acres. Projects that engage landowners with a range of property sizes and interests are strongly encouraged. Priority: established Dynamic Forest Restoration Blocks.
- **Restoration Response Monitoring:** Deploy scalable, cost-effective monitoring tools and strategies to measure species population response to habitat restoration. Applicants are strongly encouraged to contact NFWF staff to coordinate monitoring with existing partners on sampling, data collection techniques, and analysis to avoid redundancy and increase effectiveness.

## **B. Forest and Grassland Management for Wildlife, Carbon, and Water**

NFWF will invest in strategies to accelerate adoption of forest management that maximizes forest health and wildlife benefits while improving carbon storage, water quality and other ecosystem services. Projects that improve private landowner outreach, build capacity to deliver forestry services, and address barriers to afforestation, reforestation and forest management are encouraged. **Focal geographies:** These strategies may be implemented in any focal geography, as well as the larger Central Appalachia program boundary.

- **Outreach:** Execute innovative outreach strategies to engage target audiences (e.g., private woodland owners, municipalities, consulting foresters, loggers) in adopting forest management practices that enhance habitat conditions, with a focus on private forestlands that are adjacent to or in close proximity to established dynamic forest restoration blocks<sup>i</sup> and/or in close proximity to other state or federal forestlands. Proposals should clearly describe how relationships with willing landowners will be managed, and by whom, in

order to ensure landowners receive ongoing support for project planning, financing, and transition to on-the-ground implementation. Projects are encouraged to implement strategies that engage underserved and socially disadvantaged landowners.

**Technical Assistance:** Increase the capacity to deliver professional forestry services to private landowners, including qualified consulting foresters (esp. NRCS-certified Technical Service Providers) available to write forest management plans that include enhancing wildlife habitat condition, with a focus on plans that meet NRCS standards for cost-share. Proposals should use innovative strategies to address challenges such as recruitment and retention.

Projects are strongly encouraged to target private landowners and contribute to the goals of NRCS's Working Land for Wildlife initiatives including the [Golden-winged Warbler initiative](#) and the [Northern Bobwhite initiative](#). For projects focused on improving habitat for golden-winged warbler and northern bobwhite, please ensure the projects are in alignment with NRCS goals and priorities by conferring with the NRCS State Conservationist and their staff in the state in which your project is located. A list of NRCS contacts can be found [here](#).

- **Grassland Restoration:** Restore grassland habitat on public and private lands to support grassland dependent species such as northern bobwhite, eastern meadowlark, eastern box turtle, and pollinators. Projects that plan grassland habitat in the landscape context are encouraged.
- **Mine Land Restoration:** Restore forest and native grassland habitat on previously-mined forests. Projects on state, tribal and/or private non-industrial forests are especially encouraged. Applicants also are encouraged to partner/collaborate with state forestry and wildlife agencies. Projects are encouraged that
  - use the [Forestry Reclamation Approach](#),
  - restore habitat in a landscape context that is complementary to other ongoing restoration (e.g., dynamic forest restoration blocks, restoration in priority watersheds for brook trout, hellbender, or freshwater mussels), and
  - are located in counties with persistent poverty and/or that engage underserved and socially disadvantaged landowners also are strongly encouraged.

Proposals also are encouraged that will create a comprehensive, regionwide, online and publicly-available inventory of legacy surface mine sites that were reclaimed prior to adoption of the Forest Reclamation Approach. This site would serve restoration professionals in targeting outreach to landowners who may be interested in technical and/or financial assistance to restore mine sites.

## C. Restore Aquatic Ecosystems

NFWF will invest in improving stream health by removing passage barriers, restoring riparian buffers, and improving water quality and hydrology to bolster populations of brook trout in

priority watersheds and patches, eastern hellbender and freshwater mussels. **Priority focal geographies:** *Upper-Middle Allegheny, Laurel Highlands, Monongahela Forest and Southwestern Virginia*. Additionally, *French Creek, Shenango and Allegheny County* are geographic priorities for mussel-focused restoration. Refer to “Aquatic Habitat Priorities” in [NFWF’s Central Appalachia Business Plan GIS Portal](#))

Projects restoring hellbender habitat are strongly encouraged to target private lands and contribute to the goals of NRCS’s [Working Lands for Wildlife - Eastern Hellbender initiative](#). For projects focused on improving habitat for eastern hellbender, please ensure the projects are in alignment with NRCS goals and priorities by conferring with the NRCS State Conservationist and their staff in the state in which your project is located. A list of NRCS contacts can be found [here](#).

- **Brook Trout Patch Assessments:** Assess threats and limiting factors in priority brook trout population patches to identify restoration opportunities. Patch assessments should include, but are not limited to, identifying passage barriers, water quality hot spots, riparian buffer gaps, unrestricted livestock access, and presence of non-native trout and invasive species. Refer to NFWF’s [Aquatic Habitat Priorities](#) for a map of priority watersheds and population patches.
- **Restore Aquatic Connectivity:** Prioritize and remove barriers to aquatic organism passage (AOP) to bolster resilient populations of brook trout, hellbender and mussel host species. Projects may include replacing under-sized or perched culverts and removing derelict or under-utilized dams. Project funds can support on-the-ground restoration, engineering design, permit fees, and stream barrier surveys to determine priorities for future connectivity restoration. Projects that scale up prioritization, planning and design to better position the region to take full advantage of new Federal infrastructure funding are strongly encouraged. Projects also are encouraged, where possible, to demonstrate the flood risk reduction co-benefits of AOP projects. The Aquatic Barrier Prioritization Tool <http://maps.freshwaternetwork.org/northeast/> is a useful resource in planning projects.
- **Restore Riparian Forests:** Buffers should be sized and placed to maximize benefits to eastern brook trout, hellbender, mussels and other wildlife. Projects should include site preparation and long-term maintenance strategies for new buffers, addressing issues such as deer browse, invasive species and competitive vegetation management, and mortality.
- **Improve Conservation on Agricultural Lands:** Provide technical and financial assistance to address resource concerns (e.g., nutrient and sediment loading, unrestricted livestock access, etc.) on farms located in priority watersheds (refer NFWF’s [Aquatic Habitat Priorities](#)). Projects should implement conservation practices that meet or exceed the performance of related federal and state-approved methods and specifications, unless flexibility is necessary to demonstrate an innovative approach or technology. Outreach should target farms that have conservation, manure management, and/or nutrient

management plans in place, as appropriate. Where these plans are not in place, projects should prioritize developing plans prior to implementing conservation practices.

- **Reduce Erosion and Sedimentation from Dirt and Gravel Roads:** Implement dirt and gravel road best management practices, in partnership with county conservation districts, municipalities, and state agencies. Projects should focus on road-stream crossings that will reduce sediment delivery to streams with priority brook trout population patches or priority watersheds for eastern hellbender and freshwater mussels.
- **Hellbender Habitat Assessments, Restoration and Population Response Monitoring:** Prioritize watersheds for hellbender conservation, assess threats and limiting factors to hellbender success, and implement restoration strategies (e.g., AOP, riparian buffers) to sustain and expand hellbender populations. Projects are encouraged to monitor hellbender population response to interventions (esp., eDNA).

In Virginia, projects are encouraged that build local capacity to design and engineer hellbender habitat restoration projects on privately-owned forests and farmland in the boundary of NRCS's [Working Lands for Wildlife - Eastern Hellbender initiative](#). Proposals should seek to accelerate implementation of projects being funded through NRCS cost-share programs by addressing the bottleneck in project design and engineering. Applicants should coordinate development of proposals with NRCS to ensure they address existing and anticipated needs.

- **Develop or Enhance State-wide or Localized Freshwater Mussel Conservation Strategies:** Create the necessary framework for the long-term conservation of freshwater mussels throughout the Central Appalachia Region. Activities may include but are not limited to: strategic planning and partnership development, surveys to expand current baseline distribution datasets for common and threatened and endangered species, identify priority watersheds for restoration or reintroductions, and outreach and education.
- **Reestablish Freshwater Mussel Occupancy:** Reintroduce freshwater mussel species to targeted watersheds, especially those that have had significant dam removals, flow regime changes, or water quality improvements that would increase potential for reproductive success. Projects are encouraged to monitor freshwater mussel population response to interventions, including eDNA.

#### IV. PROJECT METRICS

To better gauge progress on individual grants and to ensure greater consistency of project data provided by multiple grants, the *Central Appalachia Habitat Stewardship Fund* has a list of metrics in Easygrants for applicants to choose from for future reporting. We ask that applicants select only the most relevant metrics from this list for their project. (Preferred

metrics are shown in the table in APPENDIX A.) If you think an applicable metric has not been provided, please contact [oleksandr.faryga@nfwf.org](mailto:oleksandr.faryga@nfwf.org) to discuss acceptable alternatives.

## V. ELIGIBILITY

### Eligible and Ineligible Entities

- Eligible applicants include non-profit 501(c) organizations, state government agencies, local governments, municipal governments, Tribal Governments and Organizations, and educational institutions.
- Ineligible applicants include U.S. Federal government agencies, businesses, unincorporated individuals, and international organizations.

### Ineligible Uses of Grant Funds

- Applicants are encouraged to rent equipment where possible and cost-effective or use matching funds to make those purchases. NFWF acknowledges, however, that some projects may only be completed using NFWF funds to procure equipment. If this applies to your project, please contact the program staff listed in this RFP to discuss options.
- Federal funds and matching contributions may not be used to procure or obtain equipment, services, or systems (including entering into or renewing a contract) that use telecommunications equipment or services produced by Huawei Technologies Company or ZTE Corporation (or any subsidiary or affiliate of such entities) as a substantial or essential component, or as critical technology of any system. Refer to Public Law 115-232, section we have 889 for additional information.
- NFWF funds and matching contributions may not be used to support political advocacy, fundraising, lobbying, litigation, terrorist activities or Foreign Corrupt Practices Act violations.
- NFWF funds may not be used to support ongoing efforts to comply with legal requirements, including permit conditions, mitigation and settlement agreements. However, grant funds may be used to support projects that enhance or improve upon existing baseline compliance efforts.

## VI. FUNDING AVAILABILITY, MATCH AND PERIOD OF PERFORMANCE

**Availability:** The Central Appalachia Habitat Stewardship Program will award approximately \$3.5 million in grants this year. Grant requests must range from \$75,000 to \$500,000. Requests above or below that range will not be considered for funding.

**Non-Federal Match:** A match valued at 50 percent of the total project cost (a 1:1 ratio of grant request to match) is preferred but not required.

**Federal leverage:** Applicants are encouraged to describe federal partner contributions in the match section of their application. These contributions will not count toward any non-federal match described above, but will help in understanding the amount of resources and partners contributing to the overall project and will be considered as part evaluating the broader support for the project.

**Grant Period:** Projects should plan to start six months after the award date and be completed within four years. Notification of awards is expected to be mid-November.

## VII. EVALUATION CRITERIA

All proposals will be screened for relevance, accuracy, completeness, and compliance with NFWF and funding source policies. Proposals will then be evaluated by a team of technical experts based on the extent to which they meet the criteria listed below.

- **Program Goals and Priorities** – Project contributes to the Program’s overall habitat and species conservation goals, and has specific, quantifiable performance metrics to evaluate project success. Project addresses one or more of the program priorities.
- **Technical Merit** –
  - Project is technically sound and feasible, and the proposal sets forth a clear, logical and achievable work plan and timeline.
  - Project engages appropriate technical experts throughout project planning, design and implementation to ensure activities are technically sound and feasible.
  - Project includes a plan for monitoring progress during and after the proposed project period to track project success and adaptively address new challenges and opportunities as they arise.
  - Project will be maintained to ensure benefits are achieved and sustained over time. This should include how future funding will be secured to implement necessary long-term monitoring and maintenance activities. This ensures long-term sustainability and success of the project, integration into local programs and policies, and community acceptance of proposed restoration actions.
- **Budget/Cost-Effectiveness** –
  - Costs are allowable, reasonable and budgeted in accordance with NFWF’s [Budget Instructions](#) cost categories. Federally funded projects must be in compliance with [2 CRF 200](#) as applicable. ***A complete budget should include budget narratives to provide justifications for costs.***
  - Amount requested is proportional to expected outcomes.
  - Project includes a cost-effective budget that balances performance risk and efficient use of funds. Cost-effectiveness analysis identifies the most efficient way to meet



project objectives. Cost-effectiveness evaluation includes, but is not limited to, an assessment of effective direct/indirect costs across all categories in the proposed budget according to the type, size and duration of project and project objectives. Project budgets will be compared to similar projects to ensure proposed costs across all budget categories are reasonable for the activities being performed and the outcomes proposed.

- **Partnership and Community Impact** – The project is supported by a robust partnership with necessary expertise. The applicant partners with, elevates, and engages collaboratively with or directly represents diverse local community members, leaders, community-based organizations, and other relevant stakeholders to develop and implement the project. These include projects where non-traditional partners or communities are engaged—or are applicants themselves—thereby benefitting underserved communities and broadening the sustained impact from the project. Efforts to develop capacity in non-traditional partners are encouraged.

## VIII. OTHER IMPORTANT INFORMATION

**Applicant Demographic Information** – In an effort to better understand diversity in our grantmaking, NFWF is collecting basic demographic information on applicants and their organizations via a *voluntary* survey form (available in Easygrants). This information will not be shared externally or with reviewers and will not be considered when making grant decisions. For more details, please see the tip sheet and the Uploads section of Easygrants.

**NRCS Funding** – In 2024 NFWF has additional, dedicated funding from NRCS to support projects working on private, working lands that provide technical assistance to interested farmers and ranchers to develop management plans, design and implement conservation practices, and participate in Farm Bill programs, especially the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). A particular emphasis should be placed on promoting, designing, and implementing [climate-smart agriculture and forestry \(CSAF\) conservation practices](#) that also deliver improved water quality outcomes, and reducing the Farm Bill practice contracting and implementation backlogs. Successful proposals under this special opportunity will also seek to increase conservation program participation and practice adoption among [Historically Underserved](#) and [Special Emphasis](#) farmers, ranchers, and forestland owners.

**NRCS Historically Underserved Producers and Special Emphasis Program** – The historically underserved farmer and rancher categories include those with limited resources, beginning farmers/ranchers, socially disadvantaged (American Indians or Alaska Natives, Asians, Blacks or African Americans, Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders, and Hispanics) and veterans. More information on the underserved categories can be found [here](#). The special emphasis categories are American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian American, Black, Disability, Women, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Hispanic, and Veterans. More information on the special emphasis categories can be found [here](#).

**Compliance Requirements** – Projects selected may be subject to requirements under the National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act (state and federal), and National Historic Preservation Act. Documentation of compliance with these regulations must be approved prior to initiating activities that disturb or alter habitat or other features of the project site(s). Applicants should budget time and resources to obtain the needed approvals. As may be applicable, successful applicants may be required to comply with additional Federal, state or local requirements and obtain all necessary permits and clearances.

**Environmental Services** – NFWF funds projects in pursuit of its mission to sustain, restore and enhance the nation's fish, wildlife, plants, and habitats for current and future generations. NFWF recognizes that some benefits from projects may be of value with regards to credits on an environmental services market (such as a carbon credit market). NFWF does not participate in, facilitate, or manage an environmental services market nor does NFWF assert any claim on such credits.

**Federal Funding** – The availability of federal funds estimated in this solicitation is contingent upon the federal appropriations process. Funding decisions will be made based on level of funding and timing of when it is received by NFWF.

**Intellectual Property** – Intellectual property created using NFWF awards may be copyrighted or otherwise legally protected by award recipients. NFWF may reserve the right to use, publish, and copy materials created under awards, including posting such material on NFWF's website and featuring it in publications. NFWF may use project metrics and spatial data from awards to estimate societal benefits that result and to report these results to funding partners. These may include but are not limited to: habitat and species response, species connectivity, water quality, water quantity, risk of detrimental events (e.g., wildfire, floods), carbon accounting (e.g., sequestration, avoided emissions), environmental justice, and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

**Matching Contributions** – Matching Contributions consist of cash, contributed goods and services, volunteer hours, and/or property raised and spent for the Project during the Period of Performance. Larger match ratios and matching fund contributions from a diversity of partners are encouraged and will be more competitive during application review.

**Procurement** – If the applicant chooses to specifically identify proposed Contractor(s) for Services, an award by NFWF to the applicant does not constitute NFWF's express written authorization for the applicant to procure such specific services noncompetitively. When procuring goods and services, NFWF recipients must follow documented procurement procedures which reflect applicable laws and regulations.

**Publicity and Acknowledgement of Support** – Award recipients will be required to grant NFWF the right and authority to publicize the project and NFWF's financial support for the grant in press releases, publications and other public communications. Recipients may also be asked by NFWF to provide high-resolution (minimum 300 dpi) photographs depicting the project.

**Receiving Award Funds** – Award payments are primarily reimbursable. Projects may request funds for reimbursement at any time after completing a signed agreement with NFWF. A request of an advance of funds must be due to an imminent need of expenditure and must detail how the funds will be used and provide justification and a timeline for expected disbursement of these funds.

## **IX. TIMELINE**

Dates of activities are subject to change. Please check the program page of the NFWF website for the most current dates and information [Central Appalachia Habitat Stewardship Program](#).

Applicant Webinar	June 3, 2024, 11:00 AM-12:30 PM EDT <a href="#">Register Here</a>
Full Proposal Due Date	Thursday, July 18, 2024 by 11:59 AM EDT
Review Period	Mid-July to Mid-September
Awards Announced	Mid-November

## **X. HOW TO APPLY**

All application materials must be submitted online through National Fish and Wildlife Foundation’s Easygrants system.

1. Go to [easygrants.nfwf.org](https://easygrants.nfwf.org) to register in our Easygrants online system. New users to the system will be prompted to register before starting the application (if you already are a registered user, use your existing login). Enter your applicant information. Please disable the pop-up blocker on your internet browser prior to beginning the application process.
2. Once on your homepage, click the “Apply for Funding” button and select this RFP’s “Funding Opportunity” from the list of options.
3. Follow the instructions in Easygrants to complete your application. Once an application has been started, it may be saved and returned to at a later time for completion and submission.

## **XI. APPLICATION ASSISTANCE**

A *Tip Sheet* is available for quick reference while you are working through your application. This document can be downloaded [here](#).

Additional information to support the application process can be accessed on the NFWF website’s [Applicant Information page](#). Including pages about [required financial documents](#), [budget narrative instructions](#), [Easygrants mapping tool](#), and our [indirect cost policy](#). NFWF offers field-based project and partnership development support through our field liaison, who applicants may also contact to discuss potential projects:

Katie Ombalski, Woods and Waters LLC ([katie@woodswaters.com](mailto:katie@woodswaters.com) or (814) 574-7281

For more information or questions about this RFP, please contact:

Oleksandr Faryga ([Oleksandr.faryga@nfwf.org](mailto:Oleksandr.faryga@nfwf.org)) or (202) 595-2453

For issues or assistance with our online Easygrants system, please contact:

Easygrants Helpdesk

Email: [Easygrants@nfwf.org](mailto:Easygrants@nfwf.org)

Voicemail: 202-595-2497

Hours: 9:00 am to 5:00 pm ET, Monday-Friday.

Include: your name, proposal ID #, e-mail address, phone number, program you are applying to, and a description of the issue.

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<sup>i</sup> Established and developing dynamic forest blocks are areas where prior NFWF grants have supported landscape-level planning to inform management to achieve an appropriate mix of age and structural diversity that meets the needs of landowners and wildlife at the parcel and forest block scale.