

Conservation Easement Funding Available

The Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) has secured \$1.6 million in Agricultural Conservation Easement Program-Agricultural Land Easements (ACEP-ALE or ALE) funding from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) project entitled, *Southern Oregon and Northeastern California (SONEC) Working Wet Meadows Initiative*. The IWJV is requesting letters of interest for conservation easements on working wet meadows in SONEC that will protect private farms and ranches containing flood-irrigated and/or wet meadow hay and pasture lands that provide vital waterfowl habitat. Additional assistance in securing non-federal easement match funding will be available for selected projects. Applicants must submit a letter of interest in this RCPP project by **June 29, 2018**.

Overview

The SONEC region is a continental priority area identified in the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP 2012). Up to 70% of all waterbirds in the Pacific Flyway migrate through SONEC on their way to and from primary wintering areas in California and Mexico. Approximately 80% of all Northern pintail wintering in the Central Valley of California, equaling one-third of the continental population, stage in SONEC. During the spring migration, waterfowl in SONEC rely on flood-irrigated pastures and meadows that are annually hayed and/or grazed for livestock forage production. In SONEC, 70% of dabbling duck use during spring migration (outside of the Lower Klamath Sub-Region) occurs on these working lands, which provide important foraging habitat to help birds build energy reserves and fuel their migration. Although peak waterfowl populations occur during migration, SONEC is also regionally significant to Pacific Flyway breeding ducks and waterbirds. For example, up to 20% of the continental population of cinnamon teal and 18% of all Pacific Flyway mallards may breed in SONEC. Sandhill cranes, shorebirds, and other waterbirds such as white-faced ibis also rely on wet meadows during the breeding period. Approximately 74% of all emergent wetlands occur on private lands in the SONEC region, and most of these occur on working ranches. Consequently, sustaining migratory bird populations in SONEC is inextricably linked to the conservation of working lands. Changes to flood irrigation practices or loss of these working ranchlands pose a significant threat to waterfowl habitat in this region. For these reasons, the IWJV has identified SONEC and privately managed flood-irrigated habitats as a high conservation priority.



Photo by Larry Kruckenberg

Request for Letters of Interest

The objectives of this request are to: **1)** identify privately owned farms and ranches providing wet meadow waterfowl habitat to be protected under a perpetual conservation easement; **2)** rank and select projects that provide habitat values consistent with the SONEC Working Wet Meadows Initiative and RCPP objectives within the scope of available funding; **3)** assist selected projects in obtaining non-federal ALE match funds; and **4)** recommend the selected projects apply for the RCPP-ALE fund pool.

Successful applicants to this request for proposals (RFP) will also need to apply directly to NRCS to receive ALE program funding. Carefully review ALE program requirements and consider the timeline provided below before submitting a letter of interest for this RFP. The IWJV will provide assistance to selected applicants with completing the ALE application, but the development of the ALE Cooperative Agreement, ALE Plan and other easement closing documents will be conducted between NRCS and the easement holding entity.

Agricultural Land Easements-Grasslands of Special Significance Requirements

NRCS will administer conservation easement funding through ALE. The *SONEC Working Wet Meadows Initiative* RCPP establishes a unique ALE funding pool that is specifically directed at conservation easements on working wet meadows. With the exception of different application and program deadlines, all other ACEP-ALE program rules and policies still apply.

The ALE program requires a third-party easement holding entity (i.e., land trust) to submit the ALE application, hold the easement in perpetuity, and conduct monitoring as specified by NRCS. Potential working lands for this funding pool must qualify for the Grasslands of Special Significance (GSS) waiver. Generally, GSS refers to properties comprised of permanent grasslands of importance to declining wildlife species with little to no invasive or noxious plant species (see GSS definition, Attachment B).



Photo by Josh Vest

The ALE program with the GSS waiver will allow NRCS to provide up to 75% of the total easement cost. The landowner and entity must cover the remaining 25% of the easement cost with non-federal dollars. By NRCS policy, a maximum of 12.5% can be donated by the landowner towards the 25% non-federal match. The IWJV will offer assistance to selected projects with acquiring non-federal match dollars; however, the landowner(s) and easement holding entity will be ultimately responsible for demonstrating match at the time that the ALE application is submitted. The ALE application must be submitted directly to NRCS and must meet ALE eligibility requirements to proceed. Please review the ALE checklist, GSS eligibility, ALE-GSS minimum deed terms and other documents to ensure that the proposed project will meet ALE eligibility at the time that the ALE application is submitted. Additional guidance on ALE eligibility and requirements can be found in the Oregon NRCS and California NRCS ACEP-ALE web page.

Oregon ACEP-ALE webpage:

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/or/programs/easements/acep/?cid=nrcseprd1295223>

California ACEP-ALE webpage:

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/ca/programs/easements/acep/?cid=stelprdb1253508>

Note: Eligibility for ALE is not necessary at the time of the RFP application, but applicants for this RFP must be confident that they will meet ALE eligibility at the time of ALE application (March 31, 2019).

Funding

SONEC RCPP-ALE Total Funds: **\$1,692,800 million**

Funding allocation by state: **California: \$1,200,000** **Oregon: \$492,800**

*Note: Based on project availability and cost, these funds may be transferred between the two states to meet easement project requirements. Carefully consider the total ALE funds requested and the available funds above. NRCS will provide a **maximum** of 75% of the total easement cost for ALE-GSS.*

Application Timeline

Request for Letter of Interest Timeline

Application Announcement	Application Deadline	Project Selected (Ranking & Selection by SONEC RCPP Partners)
May 31, 2018	June 29, 2018	July 27, 2018

RCPP-ALE Timeline

RCPP-ALE Application Announcement	RCPP-ALE Application Deadline	Application ranking, eligibility, field reviews (hazardous material checklist, landowner disclosure, and landowner interview). Eligible projects submitted to NRCS national second level review.	Second Level Review Complete. ALE Cooperative Agreement ready for entity signature (July or August 2019).	Entity provides fully executable Conservation Easement Deed, Baseline Report, ALE Plan, Title Commitment and Appraisal (90 days pre-closing deadline).	Easement Closing Deadline
February 1, 2019	March 31, 2019	April 30, 2019	September 2019	December 31, 2019	March 31, 2020

Eligibility Considerations

Land:

- Offered acres must contain wet meadows and/or flood-irrigated lands that are grazed and/or hayed as part of a working ranch.
- Offered acres must be located in Harney, Lake or Klamath counties in Oregon, or Modoc, Lassen, Shasta or Siskiyou counties in California and within or directly adjacent to a basin or wetland complex in the SONEC Wetland Project Area (see Attachment A). A Shapefile and KMZ file of the SONEC Wetland Project Area is provided.
- Offered acres must provide sufficient physical and legal access, as defined by NRCS ACEP policy.
- Offered acres must be eligible for the GSS waiver at the time the ALE application is submitted to NRCS (see GSS definition, Attachment B). *Note: If unsure whether offered acres meet GSS eligibility, selected applications in this RFP will work with IWJV and NRCS to determine eligibility.*

Applicant:

- The landowner(s) or an entity may submit an RFP application; however, a qualified easement holding entity will be needed to apply for the ALE program.
- ALE funding requested relative to total funding available will be considered during the ranking and selection process.
- Landowners(s) must be compliant with Highly Erodible Land and Wetlands Conservation provisions (see AD-1026 form on NRCS ALE webpage provided on previous page).
- Landowner(s) must meet Adjusted Gross Income provision in the year of ALE program enrollment (see CCC-941 form on NRCS ALE webpage provided on previous page).

Please review the SONEC RCPP ACEP-ALE Screening Worksheet (Attachment C). If the project cannot answer YES to all of the questions, then the application will not be selected.

Please note: *Not being selected for the SONEC RCPP-ALE fund pool does not preclude an applicant from applying through the general ALE fund pool in California or Oregon. Additional opportunities may be available for easement projects that do not qualify for the SONEC RCPP-ALE fund pool but contain habitat values consistent with the SONEC Working Wet Meadow Initiative. If you have any questions about the eligibility of your project or want to know more information, contact Ed Contreras, IWJV SONEC Working Wetlands Conservation Delivery Coordinator (208-631-9212, ed.contreras@iwjv.org).*

To Apply

Please provide:

- 1) A letter of interest with a clear description of the proposed easement project, including:
 - i. Total offered acres and total wetland and/or flood-irrigated pasture/hay acres.
 - ii. Dominant plant species communities and the extent of noxious or invasive plant species cover in the offered acres.
 - iii. Current and proposed land use practices and the landowner's long-term objectives.
 - iv. Any habitat conservation projects previously implemented on the offered acres.
 - v. Protected lands (e.g., existing easements, state wildlife management area, National Wildlife Refuge) within two miles of the offered acres.
 - vi. Explain how habitat resources, land management practices, and location of the property provide habitat value for spring migrating waterfowl and other waterbird use in SONEC.
- 2) The estimated total cost of the easement, easement funding secured to date, and the total ALE funding requested.
- 3) A map of the proposed easement boundary (1:24,000 scale) with local landmarks.
- 4) A Shapefile or a KMZ file of the proposed easement boundary.

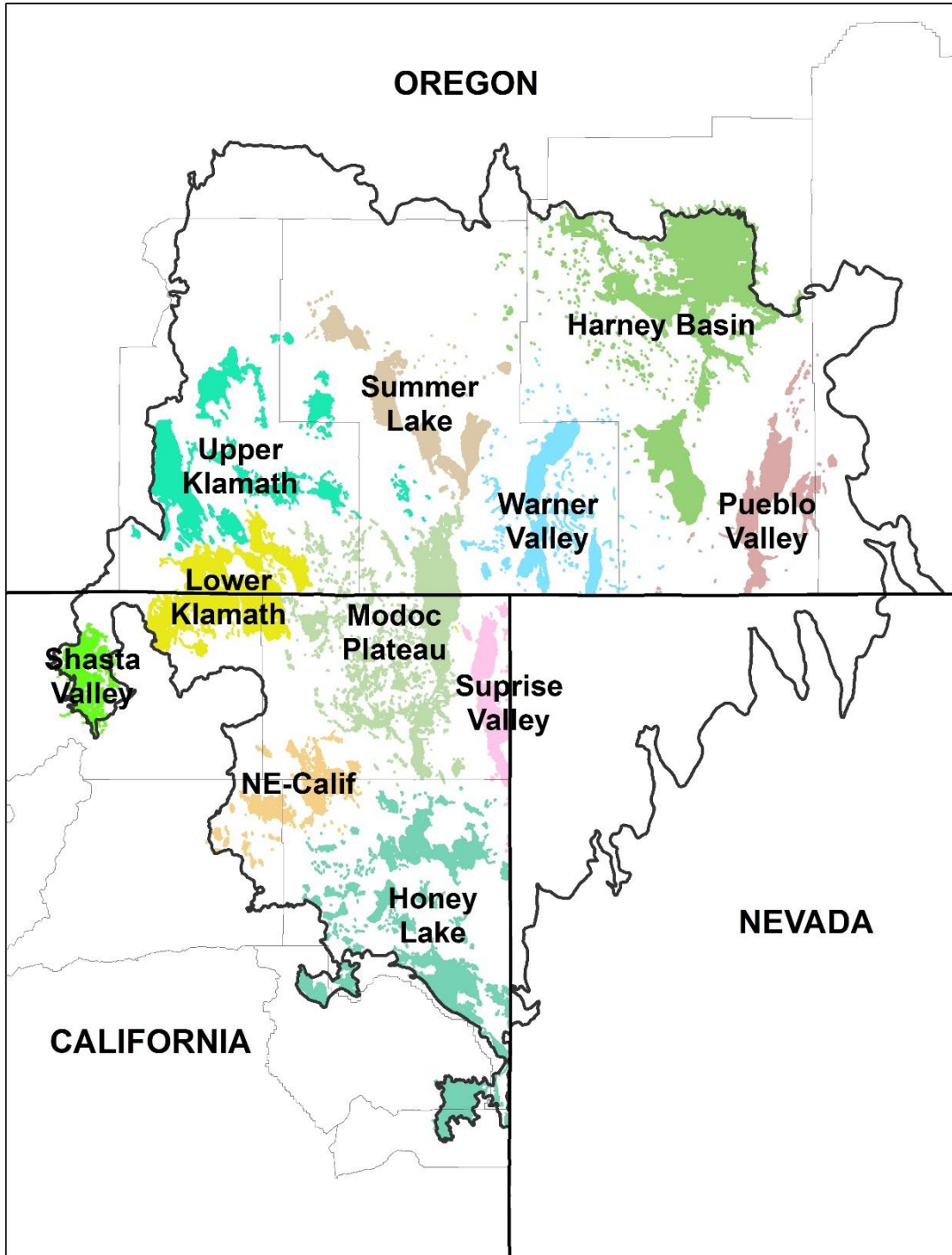
Please email these materials to Ed Contreras, IWJV SONEC Working Wetlands Conservation Delivery Coordinator, ed.contreras@iwjv.org. **Deadline to apply is June 29, 2018.**

Attachment A: SONEC Wetland Project Area Map – Shapefile & KMZ files

Attachment B: Grasslands of Special Significance Definition

Attachment C: SONEC RCPP ACEP-ALE Screening Worksheet

Figure 1. SONEC Wetland Project Area Map. Proposed conservation easement projects must be located within or adjacent to a basin or wetland complex shown in color below. KMZ files and GIS Shapefile of the project area are also provided.



Attachment B: Grasslands of Special Significance Definition

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)-Agricultural Land Easement (ALE): Grasslands of Special Environmental Significance Definition (Language from ACEP Manual)

Protection of Grazing Uses and Related Conservation Values.—Land the enrollment of which would protect grazing uses and related conservation values by restoring and conserving land may be eligible for enrollment in ACEP-ALE. Such land must be one of the following:

Grasslands of special environmental significance, which is defined in 7 CFR Section 1468.3 as grasslands that contain little or no noxious or invasive species, as designated or defined by State or Federal law; are subject to the threat of conversion to non-grassland uses or fragmentation; and the land—

**Is rangeland, pastureland, or shrubland on which the vegetation is dominated by native grasses, grass-like plants, shrubs, or forbs, or is improved, naturalized pastureland and rangeland.

**And the land provides, or could provide, habitat for threatened or endangered species or at-risk species, protects sensitive or declining native prairie or grassland types, or provides protection of highly sensitive natural resources.

Attachment C: SONEC RCPP ACEP-ALE Screening Worksheet

SONEC RCPP ACEP-ALE SCREENING CRITERIA WORKSHEET – FISCAL YEAR 2019
 REGIONAL CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM
 SONEC WORKING WET MEADOWS INITIATIVE

A screening worksheet must be completed for each SONEC RCPP ACEP application.

Instructions: Screening worksheet must be completed for each application being submitted by a land trust for the SONEC RCPP. Applications will be accepted on a continuous basis; however, application periods will be established for purpose of evaluation, ranking, and funding decisions.

Completion of this worksheet and documentation does not constitute agreement to provide ACEP program benefits nor approval of a program contract. **The application must also meet all other state and national ACEP-ALE eligibility requirements to be considered for funding.** The original screening worksheet should be filed with the application case file or ACEP program file. Upon request, a copy of any completed screening worksheet may be provided to the applicant.

Detailed Screening Criteria Worksheet – Complete for each SONEC ACEP-ALE Application

Applicant Name:		County:	
Producer Name:		Field Office:	
Application No:		Date:	
Evaluator Name:			
Questions		Yes/No	
1. Within the offered operation, is the land to be considered for an easement in a SONEC Wetland Project Area? i. *A map is attached for reference. ii. *The entire property does not have to be in the SONEC Wetland Project Area, only the irrigated and/or wetland acres to be considered for an easement.			
2. Within the offered operation, does flood irrigation actively occur on the property for livestock forage production and is the wet meadow habitat hayed and/or grazed annually?			
3. Is the offered operation comprised of perennial pasture, rangeland or grassland containing little or no noxious or invasive species? i. *Offered operation must meet the Grasslands of Special Significance (GSS) determination at the time of application.			
SONEC RCPP ACEP-ALE Eligibility Determination			
Application is Eligible: Yes to all questions 1-3 above.		SONEC RCPP ACEP-ALE Eligible	
Application is Not Eligible: No to any questions 1-3 above.		SONEC RCPP ACEP-ALE Not Eligible	
Data Collected By:		Date Completed:	
Designated Conservationist:		Date Approved:	
Approval:			