



*Indiana Land & Water
Conservation Fund
Handbook 1: Program Overview*

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DNR

Indiana Department
of Natural Resources

Handbook 1: Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) Program Overview

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Summary of the LWCF Program Process and Requirements

Introduction

The Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965 established a grant fund to assist state and federal agencies to preserve, develop, and ensure access to outdoor recreation for current and future generations. The U.S. Department of Interior, National Park Service (NPS) administers the grant at the federal level. Indiana stateside grants are administered through the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Division of State Parks, Community Grants and Trails (CG&T) staff. CG&T staff are the point of contact for all local project sponsors as well as the state liaisons to the NPS LWCF program and Compliance Officers.

Figure 1: Grants Flow



Pre-Application Need to Know

Grant Funding Range

Local project sponsors can apply to the DNR for LWCF grants ranging from \$250,000 to \$1 million.

Matching Funds

The LWCF program is a matching fund and reimbursement program. The program will match a minimum of 50% of the total project cost up to \$1 million (matching funds). The project sponsor must have the local match share available at the time of application submission.

In general, other federal funds may not be used as LWCF match.

Donation valuation

Total project cost may include documented donations (e.g., labor, equipment, land, materials, and supplies). The value of the donations may be used as all or part of the sponsor's share of the total project cost.

Limits of the donation valuation

In-kind contributions of real property donations are eligible in a project only to the extent there are additional acquisition and/or development costs to be met by the federal assistance. Land donations as well as additional acquisition and/or development must be fully described and explained in the proposal.

Federal assistance may not result in a profit of unexpended cash to the state or local government. The amount of donation that is matchable is the value of the donation or the amount of cash spent by the sponsor for additional acquisition or development, whichever is less.

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Reimbursement

Reimbursement begins after the State Grant Agreement is issued and a property deed with the LWCF encumbrance language is received by the Grant Coordinator. Reimbursements are processed biannually or, at most, quarterly.

Detailed instructions for reimbursement requests are in *Handbook 6: Financials - Billing Instructions to Project Completion*.

Property Deeds

The intent of the LWCF program is to protect public lands for outdoor recreation for perpetuity (i.e., forever). To ensure future owners know the land has LWCF protected status, all land acquired or developed using LWCF funds is required to encumber the property deed(s) with specific protection language. See *Handbook 4: Land Acquisition* for the specific language.

Additionally, any change in the land use requires land replacement for public outdoor recreation use. *Handbook 7: For Perpetuity: Stewardship & Conversion Requirements* has detailed information.

Eligibility Requirements

To qualify for LWCF funds, applicants must meet the following requirements.

1. A local park and recreation board must be established according to current Indiana law. The local ordinance establishing the board must be enacted or updated in 1981 or later.
2. A current local Park & Recreation Master Plan must be approved and on file with the DNR Planning Section.
3. Matching funds must be available at the time of application.
4. The project sponsor must oversee and administer the project through completion.
5. The project sponsor must be willing to include federal protection language in the property deed stating the land is to remain open for public outdoor recreation use into perpetuity (i.e., forever).
6. The project sponsor must operate and maintain the site for public outdoor recreation after project completion.

When not to apply

There are times when projects are not eligible for LWCF funding. These include, but are not limited to:

1. A property has a current project in progress or has had two projects within the last eight years.
 - a. If a property has one project in progress that has reached substantial completion (determined by CG&T staff), they may apply for a second LWCF grant.
 - b. Properties are limited to two LWCF projects every eight years.
2. If a Park Board/Agency has an outstanding conversion or other compliance issues (with any State Parks administered grant), they are not eligible to apply until the problem is resolved.
3. Indoor facilities are not eligible for LWCF. Exceptions may be made for support facilities.
4. Facility renovations due to neglect, poor maintenance, vandalism, etc. are not eligible.

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What projects are eligible?

1. Acquisition. The core of the LWCF program is natural resource conservation. Purchasing land, especially tracts that will protect current natural resources (woodlands, water bodies, wetlands, habitat for endangered or threatened species, etc.), is highly recommended. Additionally, purchasing land to enhance or establish (native) natural resources is appropriate.
2. Development. The LWCF fund also focuses on providing outdoor recreation opportunities for all citizens. The facilities may be starting a new property or adding to an established property.
3. Renovation. Existing facilities may qualify for renovation if the need to update is based on use; age; or updating to meet health, safety, and accessibility standards or the changing needs of the community.

Eligible projects must be based on the local five-year Park and Recreation Master Plan. The local master plan needs to reference the Indiana Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). Public input and current community need should be the driving force behind the highest percentage of the project. Current community need can include project elements as well as reasons for funding needed.

Meeting the needs of the local community, thereby enhancing Indiana's and the nation's overall outdoor recreation opportunities, is a primary NPS goal for the LWCF program.

Rate and Rank

To follow the latest NPS guidance and LWCF requirements, the IN LWCF stateside program is changing the rate and rank protocol. This approach is intended to give project sponsors more freedom to design and fund facilities that meet community need.

Rate and Rank will be divided between 1) application submission packet program priorities and 2) administrative criteria. Scoring will be completed by a team of DNR staff. The highest scoring projects will be submitted to the DNR director for state approval (prior to submission for federal approval). *Projects that are not selected for award shall be notified after the state-recommended project list has been submitted to the National Parks Service.*

Program Priorities: Key Areas

Program priorities focus on five key areas or general measurables. The following key areas should be taken into consideration during the master-plan-development and grant-application phases. Each of these areas has subsections that will be scored by the LWCF selection team. Evidence of planning for an all-inclusive park and or park system with connection between and among park elements will also be considered.

Accessibility: At minimum, adhering to the [Architectural Barriers Act](#) and [2010 ADA Standards](#) guidelines is required. Planners and designers should consider accessibility, safety, and universal design far beyond structures, walkways, and signage. Designs should address generational differences, behavioral and physical health needs, cultural variety, and other inclusive fundamentals.

Acquisition: 55 counties in Indiana do not meet recommended acres of local-level public outdoor recreation land (SCORP 2021 – 2025). Land acquisition of multiple acres and/or that protects existing natural resources such as woodlands, prairies, endangered species habitat, wetlands, and bodies of still or running water is encouraged.

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Meeting Local Needs: The 5-year parks and recreation master plan, including survey and public input results, will be the driving document for the final park design, renovation, development, innovation, and/or build. The LWCF program application must be in line with the local population's wants. If the proposed project is not specifically mentioned in the master plan, additional public input could be required.

Natural Resource Preservation: While many sites have significant natural resources that need to be preserved and protected (land, woodlands, water features, etc.), all LWCF funded projects are encouraged to include features in the design to enhance or establish natural resources (rain gardens, wetlands, butterfly gardens, bioswales, alternate energy sources, recycled materials, etc.).

Recreational Opportunity: This area pulls everything together. Whether development, renovation, acquisition, or a combination of all, facilities should be varied, identified via public involvement, connected, and inclusive.

Administrative Criteria

Administrative Criteria: This is an internal ranking that applicants need not include in application. Items that will be considered include but are not limited to:

- Applicant's experience with State Parks Planning and Community Grants & Trails staff. This includes previous experience and interactions for all grants administered by the Parks and former Outdoor Recreation teams (e.g., Next Level Trails, Recreational Trails Program, Indiana Trails Program, LWCF)
- Application quality (e.g., organized, concise), attention to detail, and meeting criteria
- Communication prior to and during the application process
- Timeliness of submissions, meeting deadlines

"Comprehensive Community Impact"

As Indiana's communities change, so do their outdoor recreation needs and opportunities. Master planning and design must include input from local communities, especially when diverse cultures, ancestries, and nationalities are represented. Advance planning when working with community developers could be a prime time to have the groundwork completed to specifications that are easily adapted to native flora, animal habitat, water bodies, and meeting accessibility standards. Use of native plantings and natural drainage water features may be an excellent backdrop to a culturally specific relaxation zone that is within easy view of a play area with an ADA pathway or longer trail connecting everything. Informational kiosks can be used to educate visitors about the local natural resources, as well as other park amenities. Woven throughout the design plan should be elements that include alternate energy sources; reduce, reuse, recycle sustainability; and long-term low maintenance.

See *Handbook 5: Bid & Plan Reviews through Construction*

Applying for a LWCF grant

The Application Packet

Completing the LWCF Application Packet is covered in detail in the *Handbook 2: Step by Step Application Instructions*.

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The application packet should be clear, concise, detailed, and thorough. Although there are multiple sections to complete, most can be covered in a few well written sentences. The application is comparable to an Executive Summary style document.

The objective of the application packet is to 1) provide all information required for the Grant Coordinator to complete the federal forms that will be submitted to NPS on the project sponsor’s behalf and 2) to showcase why this project should be awarded funding (over another project).

Helpful hints to consider:

- Can the “on the ground” work and/or land acquisition wait a year or longer to start? The timeline from application submission to federal approval is long, often requiring additional information and edits. See Grant Timeline Overview.
- Is there a recreational deficit (e.g., acres, facilities, accessibility) that this project fills?
- Does the community need the financial assistance to provide top quality recreational opportunities?
- Will this project bring unique cultural, educational, generational, or other amenities to the area that otherwise would not be possible?

Grant Timeline Overview

The chart below outlines the pre-application to federal approval timeline that has been consistent for the past few years. Both Indiana and the NPS LWCF teams are working toward greater efficiency and decreasing time to approval.

Pre-application to Federal Approval - Year 1		
Date(s)	Who	Action
2024		
May - July 2024	Park Board, State Grants Team, Consultants (optional)	1) Mandatory pre-application project meeting – typically virtual 2) Q&A conversations, as needed
August 1, 2024	Project Sponsor	Submit electronic application packet by EOBD
August - 2024	Grants Coordinator	Application review
	Project Sponsor	Provide additional information if requested
	Grants Coordinator	Project site visits; Prepare presentation packets for State review team
	State Review Team	Evaluate, rate & rank projects
	State Review Team	Submit project recommendations to DNR Director
	DNR Director	Review, approve, deny, or request additional information
	DNR Director	State Approval signed and announced
	Grants Manager	Projects assigned to Grant Coordinators; Documentation to DNR Financials team to prepare for state contracts
August – October 2024	Project Sponsor	*Obtain and submit clearances/reviews to Grant Coordinator:

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) (as required) 2) National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) Section 106 3) Other as necessary (e.g., Cultural Resources Phase 1 survey, U.S. Army Corps coordination)
August - Completed	Project Sponsor	For Land Acquisition or Donation - Obtain and submit: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Uniform Appraisal Standards for Federal Land Acquisitions Appraisal (ONLY for acres to be purchased and encumbered as part of the LWCF project) 2) UASFLA Appraisal Review
October – mid-December 2024	Grants Coordinator	Prepares Federal application packet submission using local project sponsor application and additional information
	Grants Team	Bi-weekly meetings with NPS Program Officer covering proposed, current, and ongoing projects
Mid- Late December 2024	Grants Coordinator	Submits final federal application packet to regional NPS Program Officer
2024 - 2025		
Mid-December 2024 – mid-January 2025	Grants Coordinator, NPS Program Officer	Preliminary/Phase 1 federal review of application packet
	Grants Coordinator, NPS Program Officer	Request, edit, add, and resubmit all required information

Notes: *Grant Coordinators will work with project sponsors to determine if any requests for clearances or reviews should be started prior to application submission deadline or State approval of the project.

Pre-application to Federal Approval - Year 2		
Date(s)	Who	Action
2025		
January – February 2025	NPS Program Officer, NPS Compliance Officers, Grants Coordinators	Continue Phase 1 federal review of application packets, fine-tuning for Phase 2 review
	NPS Program Officer	*Submission of Phase 1 approved project applications to DC NPS team for final review
February – March 1, 2025	NPS DC Office	Final review of project applications; Request for additional information
March 2025	NPS DC Office	Successful applications approved; Federal contracts issued
April 2025	Grants Coordinators	Complete and submit financial documents to DNR Accounting for State Grant Agreement contracts
	Project Sponsors	Start “on the ground” processes (e.g., permits, bidding, contracts, construction)
3 Years Later		

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2028	Everyone	**The Project is Complete! Hip Hip Hurray!
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Note: *Not all applications will be completed in time for the first submission round to DC. The regional NPS team, Indiana Grants Coordinators, and Project Sponsors will continue the review, edit, and fine-tune until the remaining applications are approved for submission to DC (there are two additional windows for submission to DC in the calendar year, typically April-May and August-September). *Unexpected delays at any level could cause some applications to be held until the first round of the next year.*

**Billings, Progress Reports, and Post Approval responsibilities are covered in the related handbook.

Additional Information

Several of the Action items in the Grant Timeline Overview document have requirements that are best explained in stand-alone handbooks.

Handbooks 2 – 4 explain steps that must be started or completed before project applications can be submitted to the regional NPS LWCF office. All the requirements in these handbooks must be completed before applications will be submitted to the LWCF DC team for final review.

Handbook 2: Step by Step Application Instructions

Handbook 3: Environmental, Historical, and Cultural Requirements

Handbook 4: Land Acquisition – Appraisal to Encumbrance

Handbooks 5 – 7 cover processes that must be followed after the LWCF project is fully approved and the federal contract has been awarded.

Handbook 5: Bid & Plan Reviews through Construction

Handbook 6: Financials - Billing Instructions to Project Completion

Handbook 7: For Perpetuity: Stewardship & Conversion Requirements

Conclusion

The application is the beginning of a forever journey. LWCF projects are intended to last through multiple generations. Decisions made today will impact future park and program directors, communities, and citizens. Although the initial steps may seem arduous and lengthy, focusing on the outcome and the legacy makes it worthwhile.

To continue your journey into the LWCF grant world, go to *Handbook 2: Step by Step Application Instructions*.