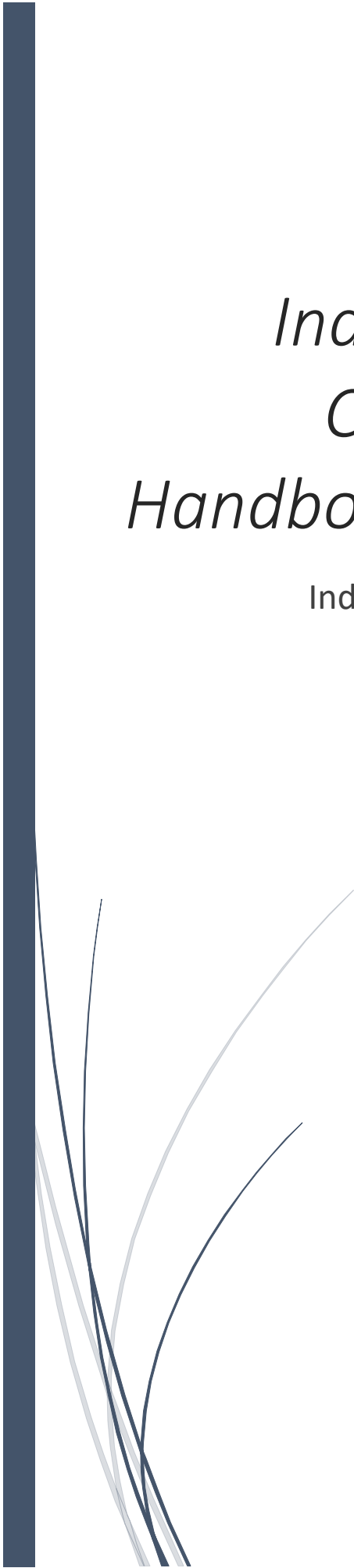




# *Indiana Land & Water Conservation Fund Handbook 1: Program Overview*

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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 (LWCF) 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 IN DNR for LWCF grants ranging from \$250,000 to \$1,000,000.

#### Grant Fund Availability

The LWCF Program supports both state and local projects. The state is entitled to use some, or all, of the LWCF funds at its discretion. Currently, the state plans to utilize LWCF funds on a biennial basis. This results in a public-facing LWCF round every two years, currently on even-numbered years.

#### Matching Funds

The LWCF program is a matching fund and reimbursement program. The program will match a maximum of 50% of the total project cost up to \$1,000,000. With overmatch, LWCF total project costs may exceed \$2,000,000. The project sponsor must have the full local match share available at the time of application submission.

In general, apart from the Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG), 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.

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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.

### 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 should be processed quarterly, biannually at minimum.

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 in 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 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.

### Professional Services & Qualified Individuals

Required federal regulatory review processes, quarterly reporting, design, bidding, maps, land acquisition, and project/construction oversight will require professional expertise and experience as such, it is recommended that LWCF applicants work with a qualified design/engineering firm or consultant early in the application process.

Potential applicants should read LWCF Handbooks 1-3, and 4 if the project includes land acquisition to determine what professional services may be needed. In addition, consider the following:

- Professional service fees are eligible costs for reimbursement.
- Professional services must be selected in accordance with state and federal procurement processes.
- The National Park Service has identified specific professions as “qualified individuals” to complete environmental review processes related to NEPA. Projects will need either of the following professionals to complete portions of the state and federal applications.
  - Wildlife Biologist (where endangered species and habitats are concerned)
  - Environmental Scientist (all NEPA-related reviews)

### Eligibility Requirements

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

1. A current local Park & Recreation Master Plan must be approved and on file with the IN DNR Planning Section.
2. The project sponsor must schedule a valid pre-application meeting by June 30<sup>th</sup>.
3. Matching funds must be available at the time of application.

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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.
6. The project sponsor must operate and maintain the site for public outdoor recreation after project completion.

*The requirement to maintain a park board has been rescinded effective April 2026. Applicants with an existing, formally established park board should indicate this in their application. Projects supported by an established park board will receive additional consideration during the rate and rank process.*

### When not to apply

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

1. If project scope and layout are not finalized, a project is not ready for an LWCF application.
  - a. If engineered site plans are not available, a conceptual design is an acceptable placeholder for the state application. Engineered site plans are required at the point of federal submission.
  - b. Changes to the site layout after state selection will result in project delays
2. If 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 is in the closeout phase (determined by CG&T staff), they may apply for a second LWCF grant.
  - b. Properties are limited to two LWCF projects within an eight-year period.
3. 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.
4. Indoor facilities are not eligible for LWCF. Exceptions may be made for support facilities.
5. Facility renovations due to neglect, poor maintenance, vandalism, etc. are not eligible.

### What projects are eligible?

- 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.
- Renovation. Existing facilities may qualify for renovation if the need to update is based on use, age, updating to meet health, safety, and accessibility standards, or the changing needs of the community.
- Acquisition. The core of the LWCF program is natural resource conservation. Purchasing land, especially tracts which will protect current natural resources (woodlands, water bodies, wetlands, habitat for endangered or threatened species, etc.), is recommended. Additionally, purchasing land to enhance or establish (native) natural resources is appropriate.
  - a. Acquisition only projects must have a plan to develop the property for outdoor recreation use within three (3) years of the finalized purchase.

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

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input and current community need should be the driving force behind the highest percentage of the project.

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.

### Project Selection Process: Rate & Rank

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 Indiana 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.*

This approach is intended to give project sponsors more freedom to design and fund facilities that meet community needs.

### Program Scoring Priorities

Program priorities focus on six 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 a community focused park and/or park system with connection between and among park elements will also be considered.

The Indiana LWCF program organizes general measurables by order of preferential priority. Grant staff may adjust the ranking of a measurable in response to the Indiana SCORP or federal LWCF program needs. If a project *does not* address at least one of the high priority measurables, LWCF may not be the best funding partner.

Until further notice, the measurables are prioritized as follows:

#### **High Priority**

**Accessibility:** at minimum, adhering to the [Architectural Barriers Act](#) and [2010 ADA Standards](#) guidelines is required. Planners and designers should consider accessibility, safety, and both intergenerational and universal design far beyond structures, walkways, and signage. Designs should address generational differences, behavioral and physical health needs, and other whole-community considerations.

**Meeting Local Needs:** the five-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.

#### **Medium Priority**

**Recreational Opportunity:** this area pulls everything together and focuses on the breadth of the project scope. No matter the project focus, the scope should reflect public input and highlight unique recreation opportunities. In general, holistic projects are more competitive.

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**Comprehensive Project Impact:** This criterion encourages applicants to share the impact of the proposed project on community, regional, and statewide scales. What aspects of the project will help the application stand out amongst the applicant pool? See *Handbook 2: Step by Step Application Instructions*, for inspirational questions to potentially satisfy this measurable.

### **Low Priority**

**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 which protects existing natural resources such as woodlands, prairies, endangered species habitat, wetlands, and bodies of still or running water is encouraged.

**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.).

### Administrative Criteria

Administrative Criteria is an internal ranking so 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

For the purposes of rate/rank scoring, administrative criteria is considered a medium-priority measurable.

## Applying for a LWCF grant

### The Pre-Application Meeting

Pre-application meetings are the first opportunity for applicants to showcase their project to the Grant Staff. These meetings allow Grant Staff to identify potential hurdles in the project, provide technical assistance, and openly discuss the federal regulatory review process should an application be selected for state recommendation.

**The pre-application meeting must take place by June 30 to establish eligibility for the year's LWCF grant cycle.** See *Handbook 2: Step by Step Application Instructions*, for pre-application meeting requirements.

Multi-project consultation calls do not establish LWCF eligibility. Consultation calls are subject to grant staff availability and should be scheduled *well in advance* of the June 30 deadline.

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## The Application Packet

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

The application packet should be clear, concise, 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 sponsors' behalf and 2) to showcase why this project should be awarded funding (over another project).

## Grant Timeline Overview

The Indiana LWCF program utilizes a dual-phase application process. This timeline can be either very concise or quite lengthy depending on a variety of factors including, but not limited to, complexity of the project, state and federal grant staff capacity, changes in funding allocation amounts, and an applicant team's technical capacity. A high-level timeline overview includes the following.

### State Applications (year 1)

- Pre-application meetings are welcomed January – June 30 of the application year.
  - One virtual pre-application meeting is required.
- Applications are welcomed via email July 1 – Aug. 1.
- The state aims to announce their selection by the end of the same calendar year.

### Federal Applications (year 2)

- Grant coordinators are assigned to state-selected projects, and work begins on the federal application packet.
  - See *Handbook 2: Application* and *Handbook 3: Federal Compliance Review* handbooks.
- The State submits full federal proposals to the National Park Service.
  - The NPS's deadlines for final grant proposals vary slightly year by year, consult with your grant coordinator for the most up-to-date deadline and expectations.
  - Failure to meet NPS's deadlines may result in a delay in federal approval.
- The state works with NPS staff to finalize the federal proposal, with support from the local applicants as needed.

## 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 are submitted to the LWCF DC team for final review.

*Handbook 2: Step by Step Application Instructions*

*Handbook 3: Federal Compliance Review*

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*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*

Applicants and grantees should also review the LWCF FAQ section of the Indiana LWCF Program Webpage. The FAQs are updated more frequently than the handbooks, most often reflecting changes in federal program standards.

## 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 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*.