

## Section 2: Regional Block Grants

### Eligible Applicants

Eligible regional block grant applicants are: (1) Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (“GSAs”), (2) federally recognized California Native American tribes, (3) non-federally recognized California Native American tribes on the contact list maintained by the Native American Heritage Commission; (4) public agencies; (5) nonprofit groups with 501(c) status; and (7) Watermasters implementing an approved groundwater sustainability plan or approved alternate plan.

Eligible applicants that are not Groundwater Sustainability Agencies or tribes must partner with at least one Groundwater Sustainability Agency to submit an application. The application must include a resolution or letter from the Groundwater Sustainability Agency(ies) stating their support for the project, and how the Groundwater Sustainability Agency will be involved in the applicant's work.

Eligible applicants must also be either: 1) locally-based, which is defined as an entity that maintains a local office and focuses on issues within or proximal to the region or basin that is the focus of the application; or 2) non-local, where there are strong local partnerships between the applicant, the local GSA(s), and other important stakeholders.

### Partnering and Collaboration

This grant program requires partnering and collaboration among stakeholders within regions or basins. Proposals should demonstrate multiple, committed partnerships and extensive collaboration with other agencies, organizations, entities, and individuals with interests in their proposal area.

Partnering is defined as commitments by other organizations, government agencies, private citizens or volunteer groups to provide funds or in-kind services. Partners will be eligible to receive program dollars to support their participation in work toward the program deliverables. Partnerships must be initially evidenced by letters of commitment that explain the relationship between the partner and block grant recipient and outline the partner's contributions to the program. As land repurposing projects progress toward implementation, the Department will require partners to enter into memoranda of understanding with the block grant recipients to formalize roles.

Collaboration is defined as working with other organizations, government agencies, groups, and individuals to ensure that all entities work in agreement and are non-duplicative of each other's activities, and to ensure that diverse interests are meaningfully incorporated into the block grant recipient's work. Collaboration may be evidenced by letters of support, signed agreements, board resolutions, or other signed documents.

### Eligible Groundwater Basins

Eligible proposals are those that address a project area as defined by the applicant and comprised of one or more SGMA critically overdrafted basins managed under an approved groundwater sustainability plan or alternate plan, one or more high- or medium-priority groundwater basins where a state emergency drought declaration has been declared, or a combination of the two. A map of eligible basins is provided in Appendix A.

## Regional Block Grant Deliverables

Regional block grant recipients must include each the following activities in their scope of work:

1. Develop a **Multibenefit Agricultural Land Repurposing Plan** to reduce reliance on groundwater while providing regionally appropriate benefits, including community health, economic wellbeing, water supply, flood resilience, habitat, renewable energy, and climate benefits;
2. Complete **project development and permitting** to generate implementation-ready projects to repurpose agricultural lands for funding consideration;
3. Implement **land repurposing projects** that achieve multiple benefits;
4. Support **capacity needs of partners** to achieve the deliverables of the grant;
5. Conduct **outreach, education, and training** as needed to facilitate and build capacity to implement the above activities; and
6. Conduct **monitoring** to ensure defined conservation outcomes from projects have been achieved and maintained for the agreed upon duration the benefit.

The majority of each block grant recipient's budget should go toward project development and project implementation. Block grant recipients may conduct work toward each deliverable in parallel or sequentially as is appropriate for their region and the successful implementation of their grant.

### *Multibenefit Agricultural Land Repurposing Plans*

Each block grant recipient must use a portion of this funding to develop a Multibenefit Agricultural Land Repurposing Plan that identifies and prioritizes land repurposing strategies and projects to address groundwater sustainability within their region. Plans must be consistent with the relevant Groundwater Sustainability Plan(s) for the region and prioritize projects that provide meaningful benefits to disadvantaged communities and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

Desired outcomes from the Plan's development and implementation include:

- Identification and prioritization of agricultural land repurposing strategies and projects that can be implemented at scale within their region
- A quantifiable estimate of project benefits, such as reduction in groundwater demand, quantity of recharge, stream flow improvement, or habitat acreage/quantity
- Protection of long-term viability of agricultural economies through support for agricultural systems with flexible water demand and sustainable groundwater management
- Attainment of strong regional support for the Multibenefit Agricultural Land Repurposing Plan and identified projects through broad inclusion of stakeholders and partners
- Development and management of a broad collaborative structure and effective networks of partners and collaborators

- Coordination of agricultural land repurposing efforts across land ownerships
- Resource and habitat connectivity
- Identification of habitat restoration opportunities that are located adjacent to land with high habitat value and provide habitat for endangered plant or animal species
- Identification of adaptive management strategies to avoid adverse impacts on neighboring properties of repurposed lands
- Economic development planning to support regional land-based economies through sustainable groundwater management implementation
- Durable, long-term benefits that meet the program goals
- Short- and medium-term emergency groundwater demand reduction to address environmental or public health needs caused by drought
- Benefits to disadvantaged communities and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers
- Tribes' ownership, co-ownership, co-management of, and access to the land
- Support for local jobs, local communities, small businesses, and local economies.

Desired outcomes from the priority projects identified in each Plan should be consistent with the outcomes listed for Land Repurposing Projects below.

Each Plan must:

- be developed in coordination with the applicable groundwater sustainability agency, farmers and ranchers, local/state/federal agencies, local disadvantaged communities, tribes, non-governmental organizations, and environmental justice organizations
- be consistent with the applicable Groundwater Sustainability Plan
- Include a description of all disadvantaged communities in the region and the extent to which the program will benefit those communities
- Identify a clear process for engaging disadvantaged communities in project development and implementation.

Block grant recipients should ensure that their plan is consistent with the best available state, regional, and local data (water, climate, habitat, etc).

Block grant recipients will lead the development of the Plan for their region, partnering directly with organizations in their region through sub-contracts or other agreements as needed throughout the process.

Block grant recipients and partnering entities will work in coordination with the Department, the Agency Advisory Group, and the statewide support entity to ensure that the Multibenefit Agricultural Land Repurposing Plan is consistent with the program's goals and desired outcomes for plans.

If a comprehensive multibenefit agricultural land repurposing plan already exists for the region and substantially meets the requirements above, that plan may be used in lieu of

development of a new plan, at the discretion of the Department. Block grant recipients may also incorporate relevant portions of existing plans into their Multibenefit Agricultural Land Repurposing Plan as applicable.

### *Land Repurposing Project Development and Permitting*

Block grant recipients must use a portion of this funding to support preliminary project development and permitting activities for the priority projects identified in their Plan or previously contemplated projects that were identified prior to development of the Plan and already have regional support. Developing and completing permitting for these projects should ensure that projects are ready to receive implementation funding from state and non-state programs. These projects should contribute to the desired outcomes identified for land repurposing projects.

To ensure that disadvantaged communities are engaged in and meaningfully benefit from projects developed using this funding, as part of a project's development, block grant recipients must:

- Identify and describe the disadvantaged communities near the proposed project
- Describe to what extent each disadvantaged community near the proposed project will benefit from the project or, if no benefit is provided to a particular disadvantaged community, provide justification why
- Describe the process by which the block grant recipient will engage with the relevant disadvantaged communities in the project's development and implementation
- Engage the relevant disadvantaged communities in the project's development

Project development and permitting may occur in parallel with the development of the Plan pursuant to consultation with the Department.

Desired outcomes for project development and permitting include:

- Completed project design and permitting
- Established non-state partnerships, support, and funding, as well as broad partnerships with regional stakeholders
- Completed memorandums of understanding with project partners to implement projects
- Developed pipeline of multiple years of implementation-ready projects that meet the goals of the Plan available for funding consideration
- Integrated benefits to disadvantaged communities and tribes

### *Land Repurposing Project Implementation*

Block grant recipients must use a majority of their grant to implement multibenefit agricultural land repurposing projects that achieve the goals of the program. Projects must result in multiple benefits lasting at least 10 years, unless they are directly responding to a state emergency drought declaration, in which case, benefits must be reasonably durable.

Block grant recipients must prioritize projects that:

- Meaningfully benefit disadvantaged communities
- Are conducted on lands that are least viable for irrigated agriculture
- Contribute to resource connectivity (e.g., connectivity of habitat, agricultural landscapes, renewable energy centers, etc.)

Multibenefit projects are those that provide both groundwater sustainability benefits as well as at least one other community health, economic wellbeing, habitat, flood, renewable energy, or climate benefit.

Block grant recipients should identify regionally appropriate project opportunities throughout the grant period.

Block grant recipients will work with the statewide support entity to identify performance measures to assess desired outcomes of projects.

Block grant recipients should propose the most effective means to implement projects to meet their goals. This may include subcontracting with conservation partner organizations, paying farmers and ranchers to lead implementation, working with academic institutions, or other options as appropriate.

The program encourages early action on funding-ready implementation projects while supporting thoughtful development of project priorities through the Multibenefit Agricultural Land Repurposing Plan. Land repurposing projects funded by this program must be consistent with the Groundwater Sustainability Plan for the area and may either be identified through the Multibenefit Agricultural Land Repurposing Plan or pre-identified, shovel-ready projects that meet program requirements and maximize the project outcomes outlined below.

Examples of strategies and projects that may be funded include:

- Rewilding landscapes, including through creation or restoration of habitat such as pollinator habitat, wetland habitat, upland habitat, and riparian habitat
- Creation of multibenefit recharge areas
- Restoring floodplains
- Transitioning irrigated land to dryland farming or non-irrigated rangeland
- Transitioning to less water intensive crops, including for native seed production
- Planting cover crops or conservation cover
- Reestablishment of tribal land uses
- Implementation of tribal cultural practices
- Facilitation of renewable energy projects that have an overall net GHG reduction
- Creation of parks or community recreation areas
- Incentive payments to landowners, farmers, and ranchers to implement multibenefit land repurposing projects that create a public benefit for at least ten years
- Land acquisitions to facilitate land repurposing and protect repurposed land uses
- Voluntary land transfers to tribes or qualified public entities to facilitate land repurposing and protect repurposed land uses
- Easement acquisitions, including conservation easement and flood easement acquisitions, to facilitate land repurposing and protect repurposed land uses

The block grant recipient will work with the Department to develop reasonable incentive payments to landowners, farmers, and ranchers to implement multibenefit land repurposing projects.

Land acquisitions, land transfers, and easement acquisitions must occur in conjunction with at least one non-acquisition land repurposing strategy or project type on the acquired land.

Desired outcomes for land repurposing projects include:

- Reduced groundwater use
- Increased groundwater recharge
- Improved baseflows in rivers and streams
- Transition of land to less water intensive, regenerative uses while maintaining natural and working lands
- Creation and/or restoration of wildlife and pollinator habitat and/or migratory resources
- Protection of cultural resources
- Improved water quality
- Land use agreements to accomplish prioritized opportunities
- Quantified achievement of multiple benefits of the program
- Incorporated participation from multiple partners, collaborators, and funding sources
- Replicability and scalability
- Integrated benefits to disadvantaged communities and tribes
- Increased community outreach, involvement, and education
- Increased regional workforce development opportunities and support of local business
- Diversified economic opportunities.

Funding for project implementation will only be released upon Department review of individual projects and confirmation that said projects are consistent with the goals of the program.

SB 170 (Committee on Budget Statutes of 2021-22) requires that any groundwater recharge achieved through these strategies and projects must be subtracted from any calculation by the Groundwater Sustainability Agency from the groundwater available for extraction by water users for the duration of the benefits paid for by the program. Payments for benefits must be linked to the achievement and delivery of the defined conservation outcomes for the project and the duration of those outcomes.

### *Partner Capacity Needs*

The program requires broad partnerships with entities to participate in regional planning, project development, and project implementation, and support broader block grant implementation to achieve the program's goals. Block grant recipients must develop mechanisms to support the critical capacity needs of their partners to ensure their participation can be sustained and meaningful and to meet program goals.

The Department will work with the block grant recipient and fiscal control entities to determine whether actual expenditures are reimbursable, but examples of partner capacity needs that should be considered include:

- financial compensation for program staff time
- minor office materials
- compensation for participation by non-paid members of organizations that bring specific expertise to the grant.

### *Outreach, Education, and Training*

Critical to all the above activities, the Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program intends to support outreach to a broad and diverse range of communities within each region to develop a comprehensive understanding of and support for the program. This includes block grant recipients' outreach to and engagement of farmers, ranchers, and disadvantaged communities in the development of Multibenefit Agricultural Land Repurposing Plans. Further, the program aims to strengthen grantees' skills by developing region-wide peer-to-peer training opportunities. Block grant recipients must use funds from this program to further the above goals.

Desired outcomes of outreach, education, and training efforts associated with each block grant include:

- Community-level engagement and education, including to disadvantaged communities, regarding the need to repurpose land, options for repurposing land, and what happens in a “do-nothing” scenario
- Targeted outreach to and engagement of farmers and ranchers about land repurposing, including education regarding the need to repurpose, options for repurposing, and what happens in a “do-nothing” scenario
- Practitioner-level education and regional coordination
- Regional understanding of the benefits of land repurposing strategies and projects identified in the Multibenefit Agricultural Land Repurposing Plan
- Broad regional support for Multibenefit Agricultural Land Repurposing Plan
- A collaborative stakeholder structure that can implement the Multibenefit Agricultural Land Repurposing Plan long-term

### **Optional Activities**

In addition to the deliverables outlined above, block grant recipients may use funds to support research and demonstration projects needed to test innovative land repurposing strategies of interest to block grant recipients.

## Eligibility Criteria

Below are the Eligibility Criteria upon which each proposal will be evaluated. Applications must receive a 'yes' on all eligibility criteria to be considered for funding under this solicitation.

| Criteria  | Y/N |
|---|-----|
| Applicant is a (1) Groundwater Sustainability Agency; (2) federally recognized California Native American tribe, or (3) non-federally recognized California Native American tribe on the contact list maintained by the Native American Heritage Commission <b>OR</b> is a public agency; nonprofit group with 501(c) status; or Watermaster implementing an approved groundwater sustainability plan or approved alternate plan and is partnering with a GSA to submit an application.   | Y/N |
| Applicant is locally based or has strong, well-documented ties to local communities, stakeholders and/or GSA(s).  | Y/N |
| Applicant has overall capacity to administer the grant.   | Y/N |
| Application is for one or more SGMA critically overdrafted basins managed under an approved groundwater sustainability plan or alternate plan; one or more high- or medium-priority groundwater basins where a state emergency drought declaration has been declared; or a combination of the two <b>AND</b> application does not include ineligible areas.   | Y/N |
| <p>Application includes the following deliverables in the scope of work and budget:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a <b>Multibenefit Agricultural Land Repurposing Plan</b> to reduce reliance on groundwater while providing regionally appropriate benefits, including community health, economic wellbeing, water supply, habitat, renewable energy, and climate benefits;</li> <li>• Complete <b>project development and permitting</b> to generate implementation-ready projects to repurpose agricultural lands for funding consideration;</li> <li>• <b>Implement land repurposing projects</b> that achieve multiple benefits;</li> <li>• <b>Support capacity needs of partners</b> to achieve the deliverables of the grant;</li> <li>• Conduct <b>outreach, education, and training</b> as needed to facilitate and build capacity to implement the above activities; and</li> <li>• <b>Conduct monitoring</b> to ensure defined conservation outcomes from projects have been achieved and maintained for the agreed upon duration the benefit.</li> </ul> | Y/N |
| Application is complete and was received by the deadline  | Y/N |



## Selection Criteria

Factors to be considered when selecting regional block grant recipients include:

| Criteria   | Points      |
|--|-------------|
| <b>Goals.</b> The extent to which the applicant's vision for an agricultural land repurposing program in their region aligns with the program's goals.   | /30         |
| <b>Community Engagement and Collaboration.</b> The extent to which the applicant demonstrates experience and expertise in conducting effective and inclusive engagement and collaboration across diverse communities and organizations, as well as the extent to which the applicant plans to engage with and meaningfully include the feedback of: farmers, ranchers, disadvantaged community members, tribes, and other interested practitioners in the development and implementation of their land repurposing work. Applicants who demonstrate experience and expertise collaborating with farmers, ranchers, disadvantaged communities, and tribes will receive more points. | /20         |
| <b>Partnerships.</b> The extent to which the applicant has strong existing regional partnerships, and a plan to expand these partnerships and enter into new partnerships to execute the grant. Partnerships are demonstrated through letters of support outlining the financial and in-kind commitments of partner organizations to the work conducted under the grant.   | /20         |
| <b>Fiscal and Administrative Capacity.</b> The extent to which the applicant has the fiscal and administrative control systems to adequately oversee the expenditure of block grant awards.  | /15         |
| <b>Policy and Project Expertise.</b> The extent to which the applicant demonstrates the policy and project implementation expertise necessary to complete the grant deliverables. Applicants may demonstrate this ability in-house or through partnerships and collaborations.   | /15         |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>/100</b> |

## Application Review and Award

### *Materials and Submission*

The application template is provided in Appendix B and is available on the [Department's website](#). Applicants should familiarize themselves with this solicitation prior to completing the application.

Applicants must submit all required application materials via email to [mlrp@conservation.ca.gov](mailto:mlrp@conservation.ca.gov). Applications must be received digitally by 11:59 p.m. on April 1, 2022.

Incomplete applications, applications that don't meet all the eligibility criteria, and applications not received by the deadline will not be evaluated for funding.

Each applicant will receive an acknowledgement upon the Department's receipt of their application.

The schedule for this solicitation is provided in the "[At-A-Glance](#)" section of this solicitation. The schedule is subject to change.

### *Application Review Process*

Applicants for regional block grants will be required to submit an application for funding and participate in a virtual interview with reviewers to discuss their project prior to funding decisions being made.

Applications will be evaluated by Department of Conservation and scored by a review panel comprised of representatives from the Agency Advisory Group, collectively "reviewers." Mean scores will be calculated and ranked.

The reviewers will convene to provide consensus for funding recommendations.

### *Project Selection*

The projects and selection scoring will be presented to the Director of the Department who will consider the comments and recommendations of the reviewers and make the final funding decisions. The Department will notify applicants within 10 days of the Director's determination as to whether their project was approved for funding.

Eligible projects will be presented to the Director in ranked order based on the amount of points received during the selection criteria evaluation. The Director may consider the following when making awards:

- Selection criteria ranking
- Interview responses
- The availability of funds
- The program purposes
- The balance and distribution of funding among program priorities and/or geographic area.

## **Program Participation**

Block grant recipients must participate in all of the following activities:

- An orientation
- Monthly check-in meetings with the Department
- Monthly block grant recipient webinars with the statewide support entity
- Quarterly progress report meetings with the Department and Agency Advisory Group members