



# WESTERN NATIVE TROUT INITIATIVE

## Project Selection Guidelines, Evaluation Criteria and Process

The Western Native Trout Initiative (WNTI) Steering Committee will review and evaluate proposals based on the criteria and considerations listed below and will also consider project rankings from species conservation teams and input from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) regional National Fish Habitat Partnership (NFHP) Coordinators. **Project proponents must address these requirements, guidelines, and criteria in their project applications.**

### NFHP Requirements

A. [Project proponents must indicate which NFHP National Conservation Priorities \(NCPs - listed below\) the project addresses.](#) This minimum benchmark set of Fish Habitat Conservation Project prioritization criteria are intended to ensure core tenets of the National Fish Habitat Action Plan are considered by Fish Habitat Partnerships when ranking projects for funding. [Read the 2012 NFHP Action Plan \(2<sup>nd</sup> ed.\) here.](#)

The National Fish Habitat Partnership has identified seven National Conservation Priorities (NCPs) to guide the work of the Fish Habitat Partnerships, the Board, and fish habitat conservation work at large for FY2025. These NCPs are provided below along with a short intent statement about the NCP and example strategies intended to evoke the intention of each NCP, but not define or limit the kinds of efforts needed to protect, restore and enhance the nation's fish and aquatic communities. The number given to each NCP is strictly for organization and does not infer priority in anyway. As used in the NCPs, the word *conserve* is broadly defined as protect, rehabilitate, restore, and improve.

- 1) **Conserve waters and habitats where all processes and functions are operating within their expected range or natural variation.** This priority focuses action on acquiring or protecting in other ways fish habitats that are currently functioning and are considered intact for the purpose of preventing future degradation. In essence: protect what is currently working.
- 2) **Conserve hydrologic conditions for fish.** This priority focuses on ensuring that appropriate hydrologic (annual and daily flows) and hydrodynamic (current or velocity) conditions are always available to allow fish to optimize their production. This is accomplished by rehabilitating degraded and improving engineered hydrographs and hydrodynamic conditions to ensure all needed fish habitats are available at the appropriate times.
- 3) **Conserve physical and living habitats and features that support viable and sustainable species and/or populations in impacted or at-risk systems.** This priority focuses on protection, rehabilitation, and/or enhancement of those critical habitat features within a waterbody that are necessary to support ecological function and processes such as structure, vegetation, habitat complexity, etc. that may be lacking, may have been altered, or simply may not be functioning effectively.
- 4) **Reconnect fragmented fish habitats.** When aquatic habitats lack full connectivity, fish cannot freely move among the places they need to complete their life cycle and optimize their production. This priority is focused on identifying, removing, rehabilitating, or otherwise addressing anthropogenic barriers so

they no longer restrict fish movement and instead allow fish to access habitats, migrate, locate refugia, and seek food and mates.

- 5) **Conserve water quality for fish.** This priority focuses on efforts to conserve the physical, chemical, and biological aspects of water quality, mitigate causes of impairment, and restore degraded conditions in support of fish habitat and fish populations.
- 6) **Support the structure and function of FHPs.** The Fish Habitat Partnerships (FHPs) conduct the foundational work necessary to ensure that NFHP achieves its mission to protect, restore and enhance the nation's fish and aquatic communities through partnerships that foster fish habitat conservation and improve the quality of life for the American people. This priority focuses on supporting strong and effective FHPs and their unique approaches to collaborative, science-driven fish habitat conservation.
- 7) **Enhance recreational, commercial, subsistence, and traditional fishing opportunities when conducting projects that conserve fish habitat.** This priority includes actions that are intended to broaden support for fish habitat conservation, increase fishing opportunities, support traditional practices, and increase participation in fish habitat conservation activities by local community, particularly young people, by improving access, education, and participation.

B. Additional NFHP project requirements:

1. Requested NFHP grant funds must be matched 1:1 with non-federal funds. Non-federal match can include cash and/or in-kind labor, materials, or equipment if there are no federal ties to those funds. State agency funds can be used for the non-federal match if labor and/or materials are not being matched to another federal grant. State agency funds that are used to match other federal grants would not be eligible as match. Match funds must be spent during the project period of performance.
2. The project applicant/sponsor has the capability/experience to complete what is proposed.
3. Project protects aquatic habitat or addresses the causes and processes behind aquatic habitat decline.
4. Project goals and objectives are realistic, measurable, and achievable. Methods are clearly defined and appropriate to meet the stated objectives.
5. Project proponents have a mechanism in place to evaluate, monitor, and disseminate the results of the project, including lessons learned, best practices, and adaptive management plans if project monitoring and evaluation indicates project objectives are not being met. Project identification of specific habitat measures of success and performance targets that are observable and amenable to pre- and post-project monitoring and evaluation and include social, economic and biological benefits such as enhanced recreational, commercial and subsistence fishing opportunities, increased public visitation, or innovative project designs that address specific fish conservation challenges.

## **WNTI Requirements**

C. Project must be consistent with at least one, and list, specific WNTI goals and objectives, (outlined in the [WNTI Strategic Plan](#)) and [WNTI's Strategic Priorities and Species of Emphasis 2018-2027](#). WNTI Goals include:

1. Protect, enhance, or restore western native trout populations.
2. Protect intact watersheds and enhance or restore habitats that have been impacted by human activities or catastrophic natural events.
3. Develop collaborative approaches and partnerships among agencies and stakeholders that emphasize cooperation and shared effort, and increased funding to implement high-priority projects for the conservation (protection, restoration, and recovery) of western native trout.
4. Develop and implement effective communication, education, and outreach programs as a tool to increase public awareness of WNTI and the NFHP effort and encourage partnerships that benefit western native trout.

D. Project must **primarily** benefit **at least one** of the following WNTI target native trout and char species or sub-species **in their historic range**: Apache Trout, Bonneville Cutthroat Trout, Bull Trout, California Golden Trout, Coastal Cutthroat Trout, Colorado River Cutthroat Trout, Gila Trout, Greenback Cutthroat Trout, Lahontan Cutthroat Trout, Little Kern Golden Trout, Paiute Cutthroat Trout, Interior Redband Trout, Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout, Westslope Cutthroat Trout, Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout, Alaskan native Arctic Char, Arctic Grayling, Dolly Varden, resident Rainbow Trout, native naturally-occurring freshwater Kokanee, or native naturally-occurring Lake Trout. Visit our [website](#) for more information.

E. For the present funding cycle, all funds awarded by WNTI are for projects that support the fundamentals of western native trout habitat conservation (protection, restoration, and enhancement). Projects considered for funding may include science-based voluntary and non-regulatory habitat conservation (protection, restoration, and enhancement) activities to benefit 21 species of western trout and char addressed by WNTI. Types of eligible activities may include riparian or instream habitat restoration, enhancement, and protection projects; or assessment projects that meet specific WNTI criteria (described below).

Some examples of habitat restoration, enhancement, or protection projects include activities that support conservation outcomes such as removing barriers and reconnecting smaller populations to create a metapopulation or reconnecting a population to its spawning habitat; barrier construction to prevent upstream movement of fish into native trout conservation areas; habitat protection, enhancement, or restoration to provide cooler water temperatures or more complex habitat to support a particular life stage or climate resiliency.

Assessments must be either range-wide, Geographic Management Unit (GMU) or watershed wide, or actionable to inform management strategies for a specific, already-identified restoration project that provide a benefit to the conservation of the target species. You will be required to provide details such as an overview of how the project provides a conservation benefit to the target species, project outcomes, and what actionable results may be produced by the assessment. WNTI does not fund assessments that are purely for research purposes and will review each proposal thoroughly to ensure it fits with the description of eligible assessment projects. Examples of previously WNTI funded assessments include [Kootenai River GMU Redband Assessment \(ID\)](#), [The rapid, range-wide, eDNA-based assessment of Bull Trout distributions: Wenatchee River basin \(WA\)](#), [Whitewater-Baldy Gila Trout habitat assessment, New Mexico](#), [A Rangewide Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout Genetic Assessment to Direct Management and Conservation Strategies to Enhance Population and Species Persistence](#), and three range-wide assessments to inform the status of each species and prioritize conservation efforts for Westslope Cutthroat Trout (funded in 2008), Interior Redband Trout (funded in 2011), Coastal Cutthroat Trout (funded in 2013). Other types of eligible activities include assessment, collection, and information required for instream flow or lake water level quantification, protection, and restoration; and habitat-related community outreach and education actions.

NFHP funds can only be used for on-the-ground habitat projects and related design and monitoring activities; funds may not be used for research, or solely to support personnel and staff salaries or benefits. Funded projects must be completed within 18-24 months of receipt of contract agreement. Multiyear projects **MUST** be broken into distinct phases by year for tasks, accomplishments, and budget. Please visit our [website](#) for numerous examples of previously funded projects.

F. Project proposals must be supported by the state and/or federal fish and wildlife management agencies, or tribal governments within project-area jurisdictions. Projects on public or private land are **required** to have a letter of support from the state fish and wildlife agency; projects on tribal lands do not require a state agency letter of support. Additional letters of support from federal or tribal fish and wildlife agencies are encouraged. The project application must include contact information for a ‘sponsoring professional’ from the relevant management agency.

G. If the project is located on private land, a support letter from the landowner is also **required** (see application for landowner letter of support template).

H. Project has an outreach/education component in the local community.

I. Projects are required to have a monitoring and evaluation component and plan.

### *General Criteria and Considerations used by the WNTI Steering Committee to evaluate project proposals*

#### **Eligibility screening points:**

- Project is eligible for NFHP funding. All FY2026 project proposals must meet at least one of the [National Fish Habitat Partnership Program National Conservation Priorities](#):
  - 1) Conserve waters and habitats where all processes and functions are operating within their expected range or natural variation.
  - 2) Conserve hydrologic conditions for fish.
  - 3) Conserve physical and living habitats and features that support viable and sustainable species and/or populations in impacted or at-risk systems.
  - 4) Reconnect fragmented fish habitats.
  - 5) Conserve water quality for fish.
  - 6) Support the structure and function of Fish Habitat Partnerships.
  - 7) Enhance recreational, commercial, subsistence, and traditional fishing opportunities when conducting projects that conserve fish habitat.
- Project is consistent with the goals identified in the WNTI strategic plan.
- Project primarily addresses at least one WNTI species.
- Fish and wildlife management agencies with project-area jurisdiction are supportive of this project.
- Project (or current phase of project) has a high probability of being completed within 18-24 months of receipt of contract agreement OR has clearly defined phases. If a multiyear project, a breakdown of tasks, accomplishments, and budget by year in distinct phases must be provided.
- Project includes an adequate/reasonable/effective monitoring and evaluation plan.

#### **Resource impacts/deliverables (protection, restoration, enhancement projects):**

- Project addresses a WNTI goal.
- Project is likely to provide long-term benefits for WNTI priority species and/or habitats.
- Project addresses a priority need/limiting factor as identified in completed management plans or assessments.
- Project conveys large conservation benefit to priority target species.
- Urgency: project window is short, or immediate action is required to forestall degradation or deterioration of the resource.
- Project directly benefits multiple native species, assemblages/communities, and non-fish stream- and riparian-dependent species and still primarily benefits a WNTI species.
- Project addresses a root cause of degradation, rather than symptoms.
- Project restores natural processes and is self-sustaining.

**OR**

**Resource Impacts/deliverables (assessment project):**

- Project addresses a WNTI goal.
- Project is likely to provide long-term benefits for WNTI priority species and/or habitats.
- Project addresses a priority need/limiting factor as identified in completed management plans or assessments.
- Project conveys large conservation benefit to priority target species.
- Urgency: project window is short, or immediate action is required to forestall degradation or deterioration of the resource.
- Assessment results in an 'actionable' and prioritized restoration or conservation plan/report.
- Scale of assessment informs management decisions across species or ranges (vs. population).

**Technical merit:**

- Project demonstrates sound technical and scientific merit and is supported by established scientific studies or principles.
- Project objectives are realistic, measurable, and achievable; methods are clearly defined and appropriate to meet stated objectives.
- Environmental and regulatory compliance requirements already met or not required.
- Mechanism in place to evaluate, monitor and disseminate the results of the project, including lessons learned and best practices used. Monitoring is the responsibility of the project proponents and is not funded by NFHP dollars.

**Partnership involvement:**

- Project has multiple and diverse partners working in collaboration, including important local/regional partners.
- Project budget includes at least a 1:1 NFHP Request:NonFederal ratio of matched resources (cash or in kind).
- Budget items and partnership contributions are clearly defined and considered reasonable.
- Project is part of a larger collaborative conservation effort.
- Project builds upon previously or currently funded WNTI/NFHP projects.

**Outreach and education component:**

- Project includes an education and/or outreach component.
- Project increases the public awareness of a native trout species, its threats, and its habitat.
- Project has great potential to foster/generate a conservation ethic through citizen/youth involvement.

**Application quality:**

- Proposal is well written and clearly conveys sufficient information to evaluate project.
- Proposal is complete and follows the template provided.

**Other administrative considerations:**

- Does the project have a well-defined budget linked to clear deliverables and outcomes?
- Have NEPA, 404, National Historic Preservation Act or other required state and federal permits been acquired? Projects with completed environmental compliance will score higher in the ranking criteria.
- Who are the various partners that will participate in the administration and implementation of the project? Is the partner list diverse? Are appropriate/relevant partners are involved (i.e., other state or federal agencies, or nonprofit partners) and contributing to budget (in kind or cash)?

- Does the Application provide adequate information to assess whether the applicant or implementing partners have the experience and capacity to successfully achieve the goals and objectives as described in the proposal?

**The Western Native Trout Initiative will not consider:**

1. Late requests or incomplete applications.
2. Requests for projects or programs already completed.
3. Reimbursement of items purchased before the project is approved or awarded.
4. Participating in or funding of any political campaign on behalf of any issues, organizations, or candidates.
5. Projects without a monitoring plan.
6. Requests for funding for general organizational operating revenue, or solely for staff salaries and benefits.

**Deadline:** Applications are due **by 5:00 p.m. Mountain time on Friday January 31, 2025.**