

BACKGROUND

The National Forest Foundation (NFF) has recently updated its [Matching Awards Program](#) (MAP) to prioritize engagement. The expanded program goals are to create lasting change that will allow all communities, especially underserved communities, opportunities to benefit from activities on National Forest System lands or adjacent public lands. Additional information about the program change is addressed in this [news release](#).

To incorporate input from potential applicants before finalizing changes to MAP, the NFF asked organizations and individuals to provide input via an online survey. In early November 2022 the NFF released a summary of proposed changes for external feedback. The summary included a preview of the revised program focus areas, eligibility criteria, and evaluation criteria categories. The NFF solicited survey responses by direct email and posting on the NFF website over a period of three months. To distribute the survey, the NFF sent email requests to 4,000 existing NFF contacts and 1,200 contacts that had not worked with the NFF before. The former were members of the NFF conservation email list, and the latter were organizations that included those working on diversity and equity in the outdoors, affinity group nonprofits, Tribes, and other Indigenous organizations. The NFF received a total of 374 responses to the survey. All responses were anonymous and respondents did not receive compensation for their time. See the final page of this report for additional details on survey respondents.

The NFF is grateful to the organizations and individuals that were able to help improve and finalize the program criteria for MAP, and is releasing this document to summarize the feedback received and describe how it was incorporated.

Survey Questions: What We Asked

- What do you like about the program?
- What don't you like about the program?
- How does it compare to other programs you might apply to?
- What types of organizations/programs do you think are excluded?
- Do you see the program benefiting your organization?
- How do you see or not see your organization in the program? For example: does it resonate, and/or does it apply to your mission?
- What non-monetary assistance or capacity would your organization need that would allow you to engage in the program?

Summary of Feedback Themes: What We Heard

Positive Feedback	Constructive Feedback
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Like the shift toward public engagement as a key component • Like that the shift is more inclusive and encourages diversity • Like the broader scope/flexibility of projects, especially ability to fund some types of monitoring and visitor education • Like the new concept in general and believe it fits with U.S. Forest Service needs and organizations' missions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1:1 cash match is a major barrier to low-capacity applicants • Requiring projects to take place on USFS lands limits applicants • Letters of Support from the U.S. Forest Service can be difficult to obtain • Many engagement projects benefit from a project timeframe longer than one year • Would like to see more types of organizations eligible to apply

Discussion of Feedback Received on Programmatic Shift

The majority of survey respondents commented positively on the shift in the MAP program to focus primarily on engagement. A small subset of respondents that were familiar with the MAP program previously were concerned about giving less emphasis to the on-the-ground stewardship results of a project, given the great need for stewardship on National Forests and Grasslands.

The NFF is proud of the extensive stewardship outcomes that MAP grantees have accomplished in previous years, and NFF continues to support through its other funding mechanisms. The vast majority of current NFF funding supports large- and small-scale stewardship activities. Given the ongoing need to engage new and more diverse populations in caring for their National Forests, the NFF believes the new program emphasis uses the available resources most strategically.

Discussion of Feedback Received on Eligibility Criteria

1:1 CASH MATCH

What we heard: The barrier to applications most often mentioned was the requirement of raising a 1:1 nonfederal cash match. Approximately one third of respondents cited match as a primary difficulty, noting both that it was a barrier to their own organization applying, and also that they believed it to be an obstacle to smaller, grassroots, and minority-led organizations.

What we want to do going forward: The cash match requirement is a central component of the funding agreement between the NFF and the Forest Service, and these are the funds that make this grant program possible. Consequently, the NFF cannot change this requirement without statutory change. The NFF will be working with its Board of Directors and with partners at the Forest Service, to explore ways to change or be flexible about matching requirements in future rounds. In the meantime, the extension of the eligible project performance period (described below) may provide some assistance by allowing applicants more time to raise and implement matching funds.

4 PROJECT LOCATION

What we heard: Many respondents noted that limiting projects to National Forest locations is a barrier. Respondents noted that National Forest System lands are not equally distributed across the country and tend to be farther from urban areas. Other organizations also already have programming on lands adjacent to National Forests that benefits National Forest lands and did not wish to be excluded.

What we did: The NFF has broadened the MAP geographic scope and will accept applications for projects on adjacent public lands as well as National Forests or Grasslands, if the projects can clearly demonstrate benefit to National Forest System lands. Due to the terms of the funding agreement with the Forest Service that supports MAP, demonstrated benefit to National Forest lands is required.

4 LETTERS OF SUPPORT

What we heard: Several respondents reported that securing letters of support from Forest Service Supervisors can be challenging due to agency capacity and the time it takes to build relationships.

What we did: Given that getting a letter of support can be challenging in some cases, NFF has changed MAP requirements and will accept letters from District Rangers as a default. Additionally, the NFF will provide resources and templates for applicants that can guide the process of requesting a letter of support. Tribal entities applying to MAP may provide a letter of partnership instead of a letter of support or reach out to the NFF to discuss different documentation that may be more appropriate to their status as sovereign nations.

4 PROJECT TIMELINE

What we heard: Many respondents noted that the required 12-month performance period was not always conducive to engagement projects, which often require significant time for recruitment and planning in advance of implementation windows. Additionally, several respondents underscored that authentic community engagement, especially with new populations, can take years and requires slow and thoughtful relationship building.

What we did: Starting with MAP Round 2 2023, the NFF is piloting the opportunity for recipients to choose either a 12-month or 18-month performance period. To allow this flexibility in performance period and also provide clear direction about when an organization may reapply to MAP, organizations must now fully close out a prior MAP grant before reapplying.

What we want to do going forward: The NFF acknowledges the great need for relationship- and capacity-building funding where relationships or methods of engagement are not yet in place to implement the kind of engagement that can be funded through MAP. The NFF is in the planning stages of a separate competitive funding program that would provide support for those activities.

ELIGIBLE APPLICANTS

What we heard: Several respondents noted that some types of organizations that are adept at implementing engagement activities were not eligible to apply – such as nonprofits with status other than 501(c)(3) and local governments. Respondents commented that in some rural areas, local governments and other types of organizations may be the only entities that have the capacity to apply for and administer grants.

What we did: All types of nonprofit organizations and Tribal governments and organizations are now eligible to apply.

What we want to do going forward: Due to timing and policy constraints, the NFF was not able to allow applications from local governments at this time and will explore including them in future rounds.

New Resources

The NFF recognizes that grants are a lot of work and that many questions come up when deciding whether to spend time applying. In addition to the changes noted above, the NFF worked to clarify definitions and language throughout the Request for Proposals, and is providing additional resources for applicants on the [MAP page of its website](#), including a new Frequently Asked Questions page.

Information about Survey Respondents

Out of 374 responses, 295 were from the NFF's existing list, and 61 were from the new list. None of the survey questions were answered by all 374 respondents, because respondents were free to choose which questions to answer.

Figure 1: Percentage of Survey Respondents by Organization Type

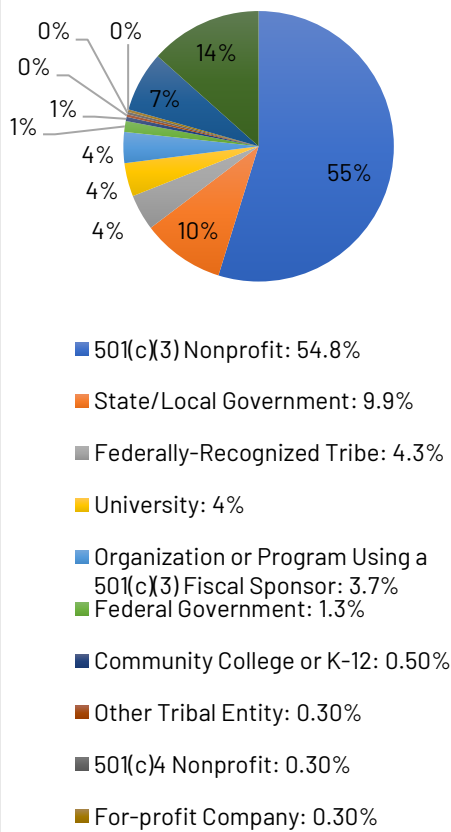


Figure 2: Respondent Self-Identification of Organization's Focus Areas

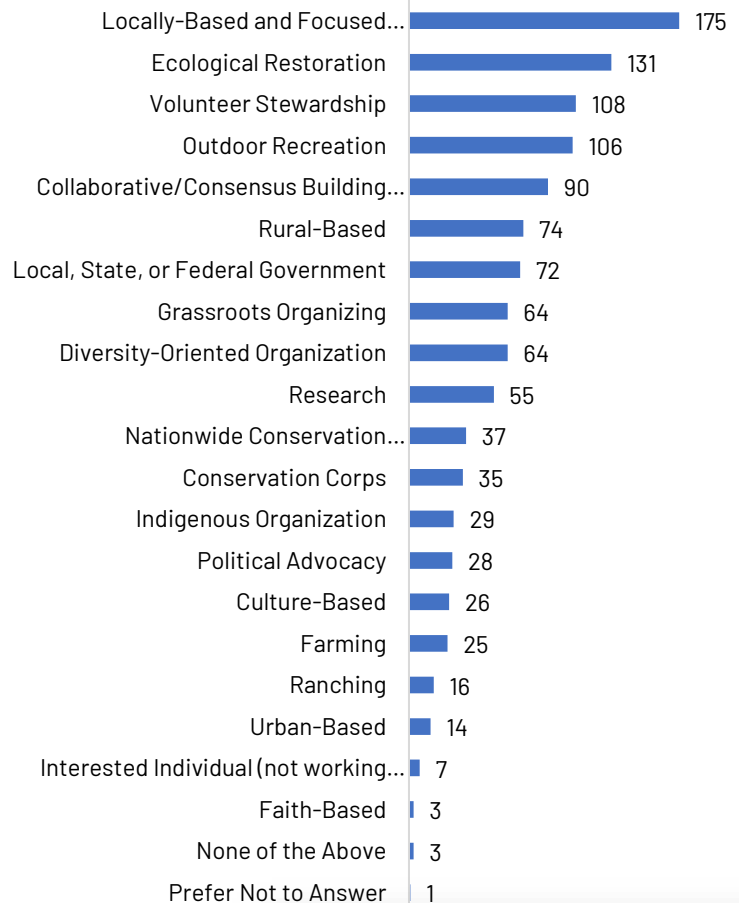
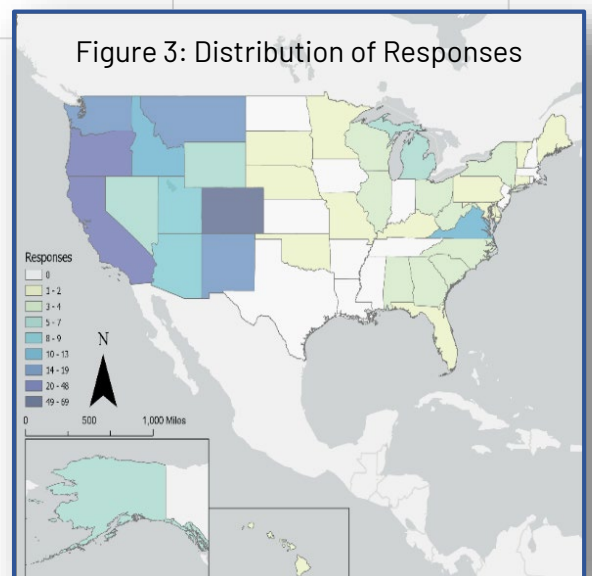


Figure 3: Distribution of Responses



Respondents by Type of Organization: The most responses came from 501(c)(3) non-profits with 205 responding, 50 that did not answer, and 37 from state/local government (Figure 1).

Respondents by Focus Area: Respondents were also given the opportunity to self-identify. The most organizations identified as locally-based and focused, ecological restoration focused, and volunteer stewardship focused (Figure 2).

Tribal Responses: There were 31 total responses from Tribes, other Tribal entities, or self-identified Indigenous organizations.

Respondents by State: The most responses were from Colorado with 69, California with 48, and Oregon with 32. Overall, a total of 38 states were represented (Figure 3).