

ReConnect Program: Frequently Asked Questions

Evaluation Criteria and Scoring Inquiries

Updated April 7, 2020

Question: If the GIS layer in the RUS mapping tool does not adequately identify farms located on tribal lands, can the tribal leader of the area in question submit documentation that supports farms not identified and get the associated points.

Answer: For farms in tribal areas not identified in the GIS layer, the tribal leader of the area can submit documentation supporting the number of farms in the PFSA and will receive 1 point for every 10 ten farms identified in the PFSA up to a total of 20 points. A certification that the facilities exist and meet the definition for a farm and are being used must be submitted by the tribal leader.

Question: Where can applicants find an explanation of application evaluation points?

Answer: The application evaluation point system is provided in the FY2020 Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA) that was published on December 12, 2019. The Evaluation Criteria can also be found at <https://reconnect.usda.gov> under Scoring Criteria. Additional information will be provided in the Application Guide that will be published prior to the start of accepting applications.

Question: What are the application evaluation criteria?

Answer: Applications for the 50/50 loan-grant combination and 100% grants will be scored and ranked against the following criteria. Please consult the FY2020 FOA for details on the criteria:

- **Rurality of Proposed Funded Service Area (25 Points):** Applicants receive 25 points for serving the least dense rural areas as measured by the population of the PFSA per square mile, or if the PFSA is located at least one hundred miles from a city or town that has a population of greater than 50,000 inhabitants.
- **Farms Served (20 Points):** Applicants receive 1 point for every 10 farms served up to a maximum of 20 points. Farms will be counted using the GIS layer located in the RUS Mapping Tool, which is based on the 2017 Census of Agriculture data.
- **Performance of the Offered Service (20 Points):** Applicants receive 20 points for projects that propose to build a network capable of providing at least 100 Mbps symmetrical service to all

premises. Note that the certification from the professional engineer (PE) must certify that the proposed system can deliver these speeds to every premise in the PFSA.

- **Businesses (15 Points):** Applicants receive 1 point for each business that pre-subscribes for broadband service up to a maximum of 15 points. Applicants are required to submit signed pre-subscription forms to receive points for businesses.
- **Healthcare Centers (15 Points):** Applicants receive 1 point for every healthcare center served for a maximum of 15 points. Healthcare centers will be identified using the GIS layer located in the RUS Mapping Tool.
- **Educational Facilities (15 Points):** Applicants receive 1 point for every educational facility served for a maximum of 15 points. Educational facilities will be identified using the GIS layer located in the RUS Mapping Tool.
- **Essential Community Facilities (15 Points):** Applicants receive 1 point for every essential community facility served for a maximum of 15 points. Facilities will be identified using the GIS layer located in the RUS Mapping Tool.
- **Opportunity Zones (5 Points):** Applicants receive 5 points for an application that proposes to provide service in at least part of an area identified as an Opportunity Zone. Opportunity Zones will be analyzed using the GIS layer located in the Mapping Tool. This criterion is new; it was added in the FY2020 FOA.
- **State or Tribal Broadband Activity (20 Points):** Applicants receive up to 20 points for State or tribal broadband activity, broken down as follows:
 - 10 points for projects that are in a State or tribal area that has a broadband plan that has been updated within five years of the date of publication of this FOA;
 - An additional 5 points for projects located in states that do not restrict utilities from delivering broadband service;
 - And, 5 more points for projects located in states that expedite right-of way and environmental requirements.

Applicants are required to submit evidence from the appropriate State or tribal official demonstrating the above stipulations. If the project is in multiple states, an applicant must supply supporting information for each state in the project. For projects located wholly in tribal areas, a letter from a tribal leader may be used to claim points.

Question: How is population density (or rurality) calculated for application points?

Answer: For the purposes of the ReConnect Program, rurality is measured in one of two ways: 1) if the population of the proposed funded service area per square mile is 6 or less, or 2) if the proposed funded service area is located at least 100 miles from a population center (a city or town that has a population of

greater than 50,000 inhabitants). If multiple service areas are proposed, the density calculation will be made on the combined areas as if they were a single area, and not the average densities. Please note, areas with population densities with fewer people per square mile will receive the same number of points as areas with 6 people per square mile. No partial points will be awarded for other densities.

Additionally, applications can only receive the score once and will not receive extra points for satisfying both criteria described above. For the FY2020 FOA, a layer has been added to the Service Area Mapping Tool that shows distance from population centers. The Application System will automatically calculate rurality points.

Question: For purposes of the Reconnect Program application evaluation criteria, are ranches and dairies considered farms or businesses?

Answer: According to the FY2020FOA, a farm is defined as any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were sold or would normally be sold during the year. A business is defined as a commercial or mercantile activity engaged in as a means of livelihood. The ReConnect program counts farms separately from businesses for scoring purposes.

Farms will be counted automatically by the Service Area Mapping Tool in the Application System. Farms included in the GIS layer of the Mapping Tool are determined by the 2017 Census of Agriculture. Applicants are no longer required to submit pre-subscription forms for farms.

Question: Do I need to have businesses complete pre-subscriber forms?

Answer: Yes, applicants will receive 1 point for each business that pre-subscribes for broadband service up to a maximum of 15 points. Applicants must have the owner of the business sign the presubscription form provided in the Application System and submit them as part of their application. The form can also be found on the ReConnect website at <https://reconnect.usda.gov> under Forms and Resources.

Question: Essential Community Facilities, Healthcare Centers and Educational Facilities in my area are missing from the map, how do I get these added?

Answer: There is not a challenge process for missing facilities in these datasets, and there will not be an opportunity under this FOA to submit additional facilities for consideration. An exception to this is if the missing facility is located on tribal land. If this is the case, an applicant can submit documentation from the tribal leader identifying the missing facility and stating that it is currently being used for the indicated purpose. This information is further outlined in the FY2020 FOA.

Question: Farms in my area are missing from the map, how do I get these added?

Answer: There is not a challenge process for missing farms in these datasets, and there will not be an opportunity under this FOA to submit additional farms for consideration. There are two exceptions to this rule:

1. If the missing farm is located on tribal land, an applicant can submit documentation from the tribal leader identifying the missing farm; or
2. Projects located in a territory or possession of the United States can submit documentation that supports the number of farms not identified and get the associated points.

Question: If the GIS layer in the RUS mapping tool does not adequately identify farms located on tribal lands, can the tribal leader of the area in question submit documentation that supports farms not identified and get the associated points?

Answer: For farms in tribal areas not identified in the GIS layer, the tribal leader of the area can submit documentation supporting the number of farms in the PFSA and will receive 1 point for every 10 ten farms identified in the PFSA up to a total of 20 points. A certification that the facilities exist and meet the definition for a farm and are being used must be submitted by the tribal leader.

Question: What is an Opportunity Zone?

Answer: An opportunity zone is an economically-distressed community where new investments, under certain conditions, may be eligible for preferential tax treatment. Localities qualify as opportunity zones if they have been nominated for that designation by the state and that nomination has been certified by the Secretary of the U.S. Treasury via his delegation of authority to the Internal Revenue Service.

Question: How can I ensure that my project receives the maximum points possible under the state broadband activity section?

Answer: The following actions should be taken to ensure that the maximum possible points are derived from the state broadband activity section:

- To receive the 10 points under the state broadband plan, applicants will be required to submit evidence from the appropriate State or tribal official that a broadband plan has been adopted or recognized by the state government as the official state broadband plan, that the plan has been updated or information has been added to the plan in the last five years from the date of the

publication of the FOA, and provides the web site (URL) where the plan is being made publicly available.

- To receive the additional 5 points that will be awarded to projects located in states that do not restrict utilities, please ensure that the certification letter signed by the governor in the appropriate state(s) confirms that there are no restrictions on utilities participating in the provision of broadband service in the state. Documentation for this item can include examples of laws, regulations, or similar legal documents which indicate that utilities can engage in the provision of broadband service.
- To receive the addition 5 points for projects located in states that expedite right-of-way and environmental requirements, please ensure that the certification letter signed by the governor in the appropriate state(s) confirms that there are procedures in place for expediting administrative activities for completing right-of-way and environmental permitting requirements that can be executed for the project if necessary, in order to meet the Agency's project build-out timelines. Documentation for this item can include examples of laws, regulations, procedures or other similar documents which indicate that there are procedures in place for expediting administrative activities for completing right-of-way and environmental permitting requirements.

Question: Are the evaluation criteria datasets available?

Answer: USDA has made the datasets that are used to determine special evaluation criteria available to download. These datasets represent a specific moment in time and will not be modified during the course of the current FOA, nor can the data be challenged. The Special Evaluation Criteria Datasets available for download include: Essential Community Facilities, Educational Facilities, Healthcare Facilities, Number of Farms by County, Opportunity Zones, and Rurality – 100 Miles from Urbanized Areas. Additionally, a Tribal areas layer is included on the Eligible Area Map for reference. More information about the Eligibility Area Map Datasets can be found on the ReConnect website here:

<https://www.usda.gov/reconnect/eligibility-area-map-datasets>.