



A Cooperative of New Hampshire, Vermont, Maine, New York, and the USDA Forest Service for Research to Benefit Northern Forest Lands and Communities

Northeastern States Research Cooperative Structure, Governance and Operating Guidelines

The Northeastern States Research Cooperative (NSRC) is a competitive research grant program specifically created for studies of the 26-million-acre Northern Forest – a forested region spanning the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York. Congress established the NSRC in 1998 (Public Law 105-185, Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Research Act of 1978 section 1642 (d) (3) as amended in 2003). This charter describes governance and operational principles for the NSRC. The NSRC supports and disseminates cross-disciplinary, collaborative ecosystem, socio-economic, forest product, and conservation research that benefits the unique landscapes and communities of the Northern Forest region.

EXCLUSIVITY

This charter replaces and supersedes any previously dated version.

STRUCTURE

The NSRC partners include the Northern Research Station (NRS) of the United States Department of Agriculture/Forest Service (USDA/FS), the University of Vermont (UVM)—an instrumentality of the State of Vermont, the University of New Hampshire (UNH), the University of Maine (UM), the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in New York (ESF), the Hubbard Brook Research Foundation (HBRF). A new representative from a Tribal Nation will be added as a partner in 2023. The six non-federal entities will henceforth be referred to as the “Collaborators” and will work collaboratively as described. The USDA/FS, represented by the Northern Research Station (NRS), is the federal agency sponsor for the NSRC and will henceforth be referred to as the “Sponsor”. The operational relationship between the Sponsor and the Collaborators is detailed in a separate memorandum of agreement (MOA). Collectively the Collaborators and the Sponsor are the “Partners” in the NSRC. These Partners shall collaborate to facilitate new research and knowledge synthesis for managers, policy makers, businesses, and communities in the Northern Forest Region.

GOVERNANCE AND COORDINATION

Each Collaborator shall designate one Director to serve on the NSRC Executive Committee (EC) and may elect to designate a Manager who will support the EC via a Management Committee (MC). The Sponsor shall designate one person to serve as an *ex officio* member on the EC and a second member to serve on the MC. The entire seven-

member EC (Table 1) shall manage the NSRC collaboratively. In partnership with the Sponsor, the Collaborators shall have the specific responsibilities to recommend the scope and content of the annual RFP, the eligibility of applicants, and a recommended final roster of projects for funding, with responsibilities and guidance as explained below.

TABLE 1: NSRC Partners as of 2023.

NSRC Entity	Unit	Role	Executive Committee Member	Management Committee Member
USDA Forest Service	Northern Research Station	Sponsor	Daniel Dey (ex officio)	TBN
University of Vermont	Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources	Collaborator	Anne Jefferson	Julianna White
University of New Hampshire	Department of Natural Resources and the Environment	Collaborator	William H. McDowell	Michelle D. Shattuck
University of Maine	Center for Research on Sustainable Forests	Collaborator	Aaron Weiskittel	Margaret Fergusson
State University of New York – College of Environmental Science and Forestry	Department of Sustainable Resources Management	Collaborator	René H. Germain	Mary Beth Malmsheimer
Hubbard Brook Research Foundation	Hubbard Brook Research Foundation	Collaborator	Anthea Lavalley	Sarah Garlick
A Tribal Nations Representative	TBN	Collaborator	TBN	TBN

The MC shall be composed of program managers identified by the Director from each Collaborating entity. The primary purpose of the MC is to ensure the smooth operation of the NSRC. The MC shall achieve this purpose by sharing the responsibilities to execute the Operational Guidelines described below. Together, the EC and MC form the NSRC management team.

The EAC shall be composed of approximately 16 members selected to be representative of the communities, businesses, industries, agencies and Tribal Nations in the Northern Forest Region that contribute to and benefit from knowledge generated by research funded via the NSRC. The members of the EAC shall collectively represent the perspectives of all four collaborator states. The primary role of the EAC will be to advise the EC and MC about the specific research needs for each request for proposals (RFP) for general research projects and for projects supported by the Indigenous Forest Knowledge Fund (IFKF). If the MC deems it helpful, NSRC may request that additional external consultants also advise the EC and MC about the specific research needs for the annual RFPs.

Figure 1 shows the relationships between the NSRC Partners, expert advisors, and institutional leadership. Interactions among the Partners are described in the Operational Guidelines section.

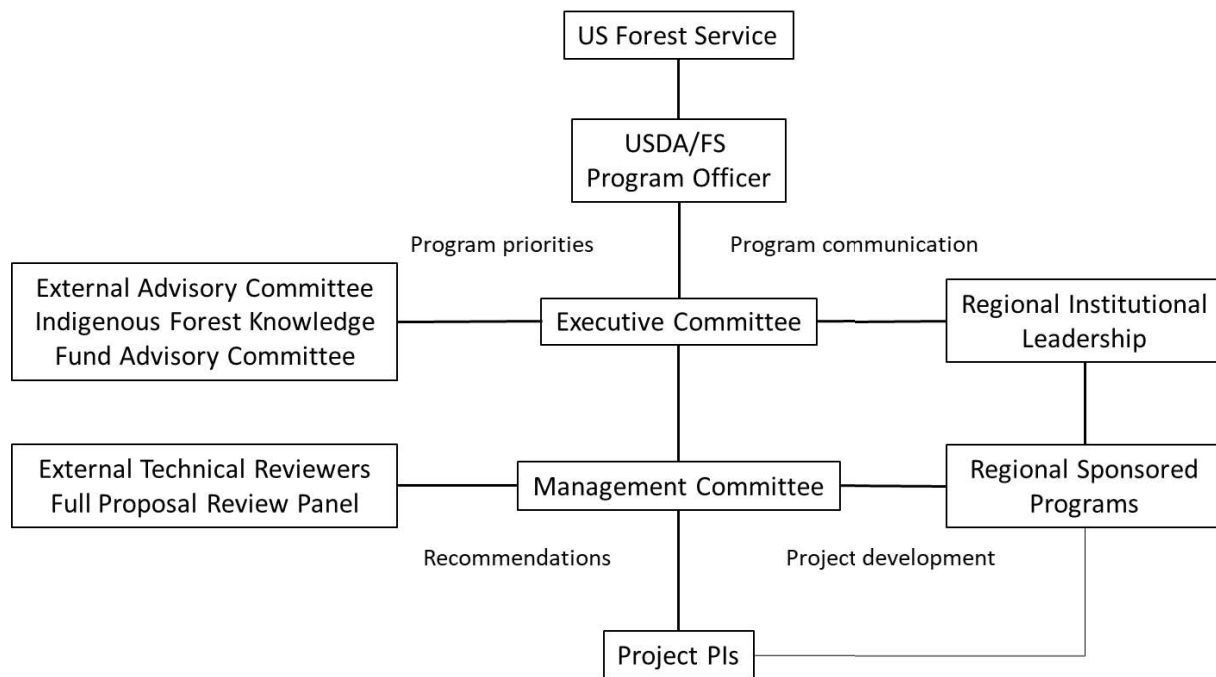


Figure 1. Relationship structure of the NSRC.

OPERATING GUIDELINES

The NSRC Partners share common objectives to solicit, select, fund, and administer research projects across the Northern Forest Region that will address the NSRC mission. We will achieve these objectives through competitions for general research projects and the IFKF. The processes are as follows:

- The EC and MC will collaborate to identify individuals to serve on the EAC.

- Annually, the HBRF will consult the EAC to identify specific research themes for the annual RFP. Members of the EAC will be provided with the strategic priorities of the NRS, for context. This consultation will occur in person, remotely, or in hybrid mode well in advance of the intended start dates for selected projects (6-12 months).
- Annually, the HBRF will consult with thought leaders from Tribal Nations, including a US Forest Service tribal liaison, to advise on current priorities for the IFKF annual RFP. This consultation will occur in person, remotely, or in hybrid mode well in advance of the intended start dates for selected projects (6-12 months).
- Henceforth the members of the EAC and IFKF advisory committee will be referred to as the “Advisers.”

Competition Guidelines

- Based on input from the Advisers, the MC will draft a general research RFP and an IFKF RFP for review by the EC and approval by the Sponsor. The approved RFPs will be circulated as widely as possible in the four-state region by the Partners. The RFPs shall enumerate a set of research priorities as identified by the Advisers, for which research will be solicited that year. The RFPs will specify who is eligible to apply, the amount of funding available, and the estimated number of awards expected. More than one type of funding vehicle may be described in the RFP (e.g., larger/longer “programmatic research” awards and smaller/shorter “project” awards). The RFPs will include a Letter of Intent and full proposal stages.
- Letter of Intent will be received by the MC who will acknowledge that the Letter of Intent have been received. At the Letter of Intent stage, there will be no assessment of the intellectual or technical merit of the idea proposed. PIs must submit a Letter of Intent to be eligible to submit a full proposal. The Letter of Intent will be used to gauge the number and scope of technical reviewers required.
- The MC will receive all submitted full proposals for the general RFP and will organize at least two (2) external, expert technical reviews for each full proposal received. External reviewers must adhere to common standards governing Conflicts of Interest, as detailed in NSRC’s Conflict of Interest Policy.
- The MC will convene an in-person or virtual, *ad hoc*, Full Proposal Review Panel (FPRP) composed of panelists who have reasonable technical knowledge of the areas covered by the annual RFP and the way that this knowledge could

benefit stakeholders. The purpose of the panel is to use the panelists' knowledge and the external reviews to rank the full proposals for consideration by the Partners. Members of the FPRP will abide by the NSRC's Conflict of Interest Policy. All members of the FPRP must adhere to common standards governing Conflicts of Interest, as detailed in NSRC's Conflict of Interest Policy

- The FPRP will use the criteria described in the general research RFP to evaluate each proposal. These criteria include but are not limited to:
 - Proposal clearly states (a) **problem** of practice or (b) **research question** to be addressed and why it is important in the Northern Forest.
 - The problem to be addressed is well-defined, with an appropriate **approach and methods** that correlate to a high likelihood of success within the project period.
 - The project is **widely applicable** to the NSRC region (versus narrow benefit to a specific location or entity).
 - The proposal has a solid **rationale and communications plan, and outputs** will lead to wide use by practitioners, decision-makers, or other target audiences.
 - **Partners and stakeholders will be involved** throughout the design and execution of the project.
 - The project demonstrates a favorable **cost-benefit ratio**.
 - The project has high or exceptional **potential to address stakeholder priorities** in the Northern Forest.

The criteria and weight of each criterion may be modified with future experience and/or input from the EAC.

- As soon as possible after the FPRP meets, the EC will meet to consider the recommendations of the FPRP and the external technical reviews to finalize a ranked slate of specific projects for awards that year. All proposals must first meet the stated criteria of direct relevance to the general research RFP noted above. In selecting final proposals to recommend for awards, the EC will also be guided by priorities derived from statute 16 USC § 1644 Forestry and rangeland competitive research grants [[link](#)], as follows:
 - Priority for awards will be given to applicants that provide at least 50 percent non-federal matching of the federal award amount
 - Priority also will be given to proposals that include substantive collaboration with a USDA/FS researcher. USDA/FS researchers may lead, participate, and benefit from NSRC-funded projects but may not draw salary or benefits from NSRC funds. This priority is additive to the priority described above, for 50 percent matching funds.
 - Proposed research is conducted as part of an existing private and public partnership that involves several interested research partners. This priority is additive to the first and second priorities for 50% matching funds and include substantive collaboration with USDA/FS researchers.
 - Additional appropriate selection criteria may be considered by the EC, including EAC-defined priorities for the RFP, the topical and geographic

balance of projects, and involvement of early-career professionals.

- Proposals submitted to the IFKF RFP will be reviewed by a subcommittee of the Partners plus Tribal liaisons. The committee will apply the same criteria and priorities used for the general research RFP (described above) with additional guidance provided by the IFKF Advisory Committee and individual proposal endorsements by Tribal Leaders in the form of signed letters of support.
- The EC will recommend a final roster of general research and IFKF projects to the Sponsor for final approval to fund. Once approved the MC will report the funded projects to the Advisers, for their information.

PARTNER RESPONSIBILITIES

- The representative from the USDA/FS on the EC will be the primary liaison between the NSRC and the Sponsor. They will ensure that the NSRC Executive Committee and Management Committee understand all requirements of the primary award that supports the NSRC.
- UVM will serve as the primary recipient and fiscal agent of the NSRC award from the Sponsor. UVM will establish and transmit all subawards for Collaborator administration and research projects, track match contributions, monitor subcontract progress, process invoices, collect project reports, and provide necessary technical and fiscal reports to the Sponsor.
- HBRF will coordinate a meeting of the EAC to develop input for an annual RFP. HBRF will summarize the recommendations of the EAC for the EC and MC and provide feedback to the EAC members to ensure that they feel that their recommendations were heard and implemented. HBRF will also identify opportunities for the NSRC to disseminate the findings of NSRC research to broader audiences via publicly accessible media.
- The MC will coordinate the Letter of Intent review process, identify external technical reviewers for all full proposals, organize an annual full proposal review panel, and summarize the recommendations of the full proposal review panel for the EC.
- The MC will coordinate the communications strategy for the NSRC, which may include public-facing annual reports or a project webinar series to generate interest, share research objectives and findings, and discuss management implications of NSRC-funded activities.

- The EC will work with the MC to provide the Sponsor with an annual business report that summarizes financial spending, project progress, and program outputs.
- The Partners will coordinate a workshop or conference to share results from NSRC-funded projects. This workshop or conference may be held in conjunction with closely related programs.

OTHER PROGRAMMATIC CONSIDERATIONS

NSRC Program Administrative Costs. The state institutional and regional collaborators shall limit the collective, direct costs of administration of the EC, EAC, and MC, as detailed in the Operational Guidelines above, to not more than 20% (15% in 2023) of the total NSRC award. As the lead organization, UVM will limit its indirect (facilities and administration or overhead) cost rate to 26%. Cost share is not required on the direct and indirect costs to administer the NSRC by the Collaborators. Any F&A costs foregone by these administrative collaborators is indicative of their interest to share the costs to administer this important program.

Individual Research Project Indirect Costs. Applicants to the NSRC RFPs who are not associated with the University of Vermont may use the most appropriate federal negotiated indirect cost rate (F&A rate) of their institution or organization. Applicants may elect to offer a lower F&A rate. In this case, the F&A costs foregone may be used to meet a portion of the research matching requirements of the proposed project described below. If an institution or organization does not have a federal negotiated indirect cost rate agreement (NICRA), a 10% de minimis rate can be used. All applicants from the University of Vermont must use the 26% F&A rate.

Matching Requirements for Research Projects. As per statute 16 USC § 1644 Forestry and rangeland competitive research grants ([link](#)), preference will be given to research proposals that offer cost share (matching funds) in an amount not less than 50% of the federal funds requested (i.e., \$0.5 cost share for each \$1 federal award). A portion of these matching funds may derive from overhead cost foregone. This priority is reflected in the final proposal evaluation metrics.

Maintenance of NSRC Website. The NSRC website will be hosted by UVM and will serve as the primary repository of NSRC-related information, including, but not limited to, this charter, the current RFP, and final reports of NSRC-sponsored research. The EC will review the structure and content of the NSRC website at least annually and will provide feedback and guidance to the NSRC webmaster.

Data Management. The NSRC will develop a separate data management plan and will require as a condition of funding that all recipients of NSRC funding adhere to this data management plan. The NSRC will enter into an agreement with the Forest Ecosystem Monitoring Cooperative (FEMC) to archive NSRC data according to long-standing protocols already developed by the FEMC.

Acknowledgement of NSRC Funding. Any product that is wholly or partially funded by the NSRC must acknowledge the NSRC and the USDA/FS as a source of funds. For example: *“Support for this project was provided by the Northeastern States Research Cooperative (NSRC), a collaboration among the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in New York, University of Maine, University of New Hampshire, the University of Vermont, and the Hubbard Brook Research Foundation that is coordinated with and funded through the USDA Forest Service.”* This requirement does not preclude acknowledgement of other collaborations and/or funding sources.

Independent Relationship. Each signatory to this charter is independent of each other signatory. This charter does not create or intend to create a partnership, agent/principal relationship, or joint venture of the parties and no party shall hold itself out contrary to these terms by advertising or otherwise, nor shall a party be bound by or held liable for any representation, act, or omission whatsoever of the others. Each party shall be solely responsible for any and all actions, suits, damages, liability, or other proceedings brought against it in connection with said party’s performance pursuant to this charter or the negligence or intentional misconduct of any of its officers, agents or employees. No party is obligated to indemnify the others or to hold the others harmless from costs or expenses incurred as a result of such claims. Nothing contained herein shall be construed as a waiver of the sovereign immunity of any party and each party shall continue to enjoy all rights, claims, immunities, and defenses available to it under law.