

ReConnect Program: Frequently Asked Questions

Evaluation Criteria and Scoring Inquiries for Round 3 Funding Opportunities

Updated: February 10, 2022

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

Answer: The application evaluation point system is provided in the October 25, 2021 Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA). Evaluation criteria can also be found at <https://reconnect.usda.gov>. Additional information is provided in the application guide – which is currently being updated – and will be made available before the application window opens at <https://www.usda.gov/reconnect> under “Forms and Resources”.

Question: What are the application evaluation criteria?

Answer: Please consult the October 25, 2021 Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA) for thorough details on evaluation criteria. Applications for loan-grant combinations, 100 percent grants, and 100 percent grants for Tribal Governments and Socially-Vulnerable Communities are scored and ranked against the following criteria:

Evaluation Criteria	Points
Rurality of the Proposed Service Area	25
Level of Existing Service	25
Economic Need of the Community	20
Affordability	20
Labor Standards	20
Tribal Lands	15
Local Governments, Nonprofits, and Cooperatives	15
Socially-Vulnerable Communities	15
Net Neutrality	10
Wholesale Broadband Services	10

Evaluation Criteria	Points
Total: 175 Points	

Question: Can you provide more details on how to qualify for the points associated with each element of scoring?

Answer: While we recommend you always refer to the FOA, regulation, and application guide (which is currently being updated and will be made available before the application window opens at <https://www.usda.gov/reconnect> under “Forms and Resources”) for comprehensive guidance, here is a summarization of scoring criteria:

- Rurality of PFSA (25 points):** Points are awarded for serving the least dense rural areas as measured by the population of the Proposed Funded Service Area (PFSA) per square mile, or if the PFSA is located at least 100 miles from a city or town with a population of greater than 50,000 people. If multiple service areas are proposed, the density calculation will be made on the combined areas as if they were a single area; not based on average densities. For population densities of 6 or fewer, or if the PFSA is located 100 miles from a city or town of 50,000 or more people, 25 points will be awarded.
- Level of existing service (25 points):** Projects proposing to build in areas not receiving service of at least 25 Mbps downstream, 3 Mbps upstream will receive 25 points, with points awarded based on the number of households lacking such service the project will serve. Applicants must provide supporting evidence that 25 Mbps downstream, 3 Mbps upstream service does not exist for those households. To the extent possible, you must identify all existing providers in the PFSA and indicate what level of service is actually being provided. However, you are not required to treat current, publicly-available FCC Form 477 data as unquestionable proof of what speed service currently exists.
- Economic need of the community (20 points):** Economic need is based on the county poverty percentage of the PFSA in the application. The percentages must be determined using the United States Census Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) Program. For applications where 75 percent of the PFSA(s) are proposing to serve communities with a SAIPE score of 20 percent or higher, 20 points will be awarded. Proposed funded service areas located in geographic areas for which no SAIPE data exist will be determined to have an average SAIPE poverty percentage of 30 percent. Such geographic areas may include territories of the United

States or other locations eligible for funding through the ReConnect Program. A GIS layer identifying SAIPE areas can be found in the ReConnect Program Service Area Map located at <https://tinyurl.com/bdcccjhap>.

- **Affordability (20 points):** Applications can receive 20 points based on the level of affordability of their broadband prices. Applications will be evaluated on the pricing of the broadband services they will offer compared to existing broadband services in the proposed service area or based on a state or national average. You must demonstrate that the broadband prices you will offer are affordable to your target markets, provide information about the pricing and speed tiers you intend to offer, and include at least one low-cost option offered at speeds sufficient for a household with multiple users to simultaneously telework and engage in remote learning. We recommend you also commit to participating in the Federal Communication Commission's Lifeline Program, the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program and any successors to those programs that provide low-income consumers with discounts on broadband services.
- **Labor Standards (20 points):** It is important that necessary investments in broadband infrastructure be carried out in ways that produce high-quality infrastructure and promote efficiency. We understand the importance of promoting workforce development, and we encourage recipients to ensure their broadband projects use strong labor standards consistent with Tribal laws when projects propose to build infrastructure on Tribal Lands. Using these practices in construction projects promotes effective and efficient delivery of high-quality infrastructure and supports economic recovery through employment opportunities.
 - If applicable, include a description of how the project will incorporate strong labor standards, including:
 - Whether workers (including contractors and subcontractors) will be paid wages at or above the prevailing rate*
 - If the project will be covered by a project labor agreement
 - What safety training, professional certifications, in-house training or licensure will be required of workers (including contractors and subcontractors)
 - Whether a locally-based workforce will be used
 - If work will be performed by a directly-employed workforce, or whether the employer has policies and practices in place to ensure employees of contractors and subcontractors are qualified
 - Whether the applicant, its contractors, or subcontractors have had any violations of state or federal labor, workplace safety and health, or employment laws within the last five years.

*Prevailing rate means that all laborers and mechanics employed by contractors and subcontractors are paid wages at rates not less than those prevailing, as determined by the U.S. Secretary of Labor in accordance with the Davis-Bacon Act (information available at this link: <https://go.usa.gov/xexef>). Please refer to the Davis-Bacon Act for all questions pertaining to prevailing wages.

Twenty points will be awarded to applicants that commit to strong labor standards consistent with Tribal Laws when the project proposes to build infrastructure on Tribal Lands. Projects that propose to build infrastructure on Tribal Lands must follow Tribal Laws, including Tribal Employment Rights Ordinances (TERO) to be in compliance with a ReConnect award, regardless of receiving points under this standard. Rural Development reserves the right to adjust award amounts for unforeseen circumstances.

- **Tribal Lands (15 points):** For applicants that are Tribal Governments and Tribal entities as defined in the FOA – and at a minimum, 50 percent of the geographical area of the PFSA(s) will provide service on Tribal lands – 15 points will be awarded. For non-Tribal entities where at least 50 percent of the geographic area of the PFSA(s) will provide service on Tribal lands, 10 points will be awarded. Tribal lands are analyzed using the GIS layer in the ReConnect Program Service Area Map available at this link: <https://tinyurl.com/bdcccjhap>.
- **Local governments, nonprofits and cooperatives (15 points):** Applications submitted by local governments, nonprofits or cooperatives (including projects involving public-private partnerships where the local government, nonprofit, or cooperative is the applicant) will be awarded 15 points. As defined by the October 25, 2021 Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA), “local government” means “the administration of a particular town, county, or district, with representatives elected by those who live there.”
- **Socially-Vulnerable Communities (15 points):** For applications where at least 75 percent of the PFSA(s) propose to serve Socially-Vulnerable Communities, as defined in the October 25, 2021 FOA, 15 points will be awarded.
- **Net neutrality (10 points):** For applicants that commit to net neutrality, 10 points will be awarded. A board resolution or its equivalent must be submitted in the application confirming that the applicant’s networks shall not:
 1. block lawful content, applications, services, or non-harmful devices, subject to reasonable network management

2. impair or degrade lawful internet traffic on the basis of internet content, application, or service, or use of a non-harmful device, subject to reasonable network management
 3. engage in paid prioritization – meaning the management of a broadband provider's network to directly or indirectly favor some traffic over other traffic – including through use of techniques such as traffic shaping, prioritization, resource reservation, or other forms of preferential traffic management, either (a) in exchange for consideration (monetary or otherwise) from a third party, or (b) to benefit an affiliated entity
- **Wholesale broadband services (10 points):** Recipients that commit to offering wholesale broadband services at reasonable and nondiscriminatory rates and terms will receive 10 points.

Question: For “Level of Service,” what is the range of points based on the number of households not receiving 25 Mbps downstream, 3 Mbps upstream service?

Answer: There is no range of points for this scoring criteria. You will either receive all of the points, or none of the points. USDA's Rural Utilities Service (RUS) will evaluate evidence of broadband service at or below 25 Mbps downstream, 3 Mbps upstream submitted by applicants seeking Level of Service points. To receive the 25 points, you must include clear and compelling evidence of the lack of 25/3 broadband access for households within your PFSA.

To be considered for these points, you must:

- Identify the number of households within each PFSA that lack access to broadband service at speeds of at least 25/3
- Provide supporting evidence the households lack access to such service

To the extent possible, you must identify all existing providers in the PFSA and indicate what level of service is actually being provided.

Question: How does an applicant determine what an affordable rate is for the PFSA?

Answer: Review the medium household income for the PFSA, identify any potential competition in the PFSA – including what rates they are proposing – and also review Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Urban Rate Survey Data and Resources (available at this link: <https://go.usa.gov/xe35x>). Use this information to demonstrate the affordability of your proposed rate packages. You also are free to provide additional supporting information on the low cost option you are proposing.

Question: How will an applicant receive points for Labor Standards?

Answer: You must submit support demonstrating you will include clauses in construction contracts requiring contractors to implement wages at rates not less than those prevailing, as determined by the U.S. Secretary of Labor in accordance with subchapter IV of chapter 31 of title 40, United States Code (commonly known as the “Davis-Bacon Act” – information available at this link: <https://go.usa.gov/xexef>).

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 fewer people
2. If the proposed funded service area is located at least 100 miles from a population center (a city or town with a population of greater than 50,000).

If multiple service areas are proposed, the density calculation will be made on the combined areas as if they were a single area, not the average densities. **Note:** areas with population densities with fewer people per square mile will receive the same number of points as areas with 6 or fewer people per square mile. No partial points will be awarded for other densities.

Question: How do I get points for wholesale broadband services?

Answer: Wholesale broadband services are broadband services purchased for resale to end-user customers. Applicants that commit to offering wholesale broadband services at rates and terms that are reasonable and nondiscriminatory will receive 10 points.

Question: Are evaluation criteria datasets available for download?

Answer: Yes. The datasets used to determine evaluation criteria are available to download at this link: <https://go.usa.gov/xextf6>. **Note:** These datasets represent a specific moment in time and will not be modified during the course of the current Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA), nor can the data be challenged. The Evaluation Criteria Datasets available for download include:

- Economic Need of the Community (SAIPE)
- Rurality – 100 Miles from Urbanized Areas
- Socially-Vulnerable Communities
- Tribal Lands

Question: Are all scoring criteria “all or nothing,” or can partial points be awarded?

Answer: Scoring criteria points are “all or nothing.” Partial points are not awarded under any of the ReConnect scoring criteria. You will either receive all points available in a given scoring category, or none.