Scoring criteria

This is an old version of the page

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For recent changes to this guidance, please see the bottom of the page .

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1. Introduction

1.1 Within the Agri-Environment Climate Scheme (AECS), the following categories each have their own scoring criteria:

Agri-environment: The scoring criteria for the 2025 round are described in Section 2 below.

Organic Conversion and Organic Maintenance: The scoring criteria for the 2025 round are described in Section 3 below.

Water-use Efficiency Irrigation Lagoon: The scoring criteria for the 2025 round are described in Section 4 .

You can find the scoring page for the 2024 round using the archive.

2. Agri-Environment scoring criteria

This section describes the scoring criteria we will use to assess the Agri-Environment category within AECS applications in the 2025 round.

The score sheet template for 2025 is available separately for download (see below).

 Agri-Environment Climate Scheme score sheet (MS Word, Size: 85.5 kB)
doc_external_url: https://www.ruralpayments.org/media/resources/Agri-Environment-Climate-Scheme-Score-Sheet-doc.docx Agri-Environment Climate Scheme score sheet

2.1 Scale of delivery

In-bye and moorland management

The more land on your holding that you propose to manage under the Agri-Environment Climate Scheme, in comparison to the total area of your holding, the more points you will be allocated.

We will separately assess the proportion of in-bye and the proportion of moorland in your application in relation to the total areas of in-bye and moorland on your holding.

We will allocate points on a sliding scale depending on the percentage to be managed.

Diffuse pollution risks – Only applicable to new (first time) agri-environment applicants or returning applicants with new land that was not included on the preceding contract Farm Environmental Assessment

Where diffuse pollution risks are identified within the Farm Environment Assessment, the more of these you address through Agri-Environment Climate Scheme management, the more points you will be allocated.

We will only carry forward the highest score between in-bye, moorland or diffuse pollution risks.

2.2 National priorities

We will allocate extra points for applications which help to deliver at least one of the following national priorities:

National priorities
Protected nature sites: enhancing the condition of designated features of SSSIs, SACs, SPAs and the Flow Country World Heritage Site (WHS).
Biodiversity: enhancing biodiversity in the wider countryside by conserving vulnerable priority species.
Climate change: enhancing carbon stores through peatland restoration.
Water environment: contributing to the 'good status' of water bodies under the Water Framework Directive.

Protected nature sites: Enhancing the condition of designated features of SSSIs, SACs, SPAs and the Flow Country World Heritage Site (WHS).

You will be allocated points if you meet all of the following requirements:

- Your application includes land on or adjacent to a designated site. Exceptionally land adjacent to the designated site where the management is essential for the designated site feature(s) may be considered.
- The proposed management is considered by NatureScot to benefit the features of the designated site:
  - A 'feature' is a habitat, species or earth science interest which has been identified as of particular importance in the citation for the designated site.
  - 'Benefit' means maintaining the features in favourable condition, or helping the features to recover if their condition is unfavourable, for those parts of the features that are under your control.
  the features that are under your control.
  - For the Flow Country WHS there must be benefit to the peatland habitat.

Information on designated sites and features of SSSI, SACs and SPAs can be found using Sitelink. For the Flow Country WHS, a site map can be found under the 'Documentation' section on the Flow Country World Heritage webpage . You are strongly advised to contact Nature Scot to discuss your designated site proposals, well in advance of preparing an application. Please see also the Designations webpage .

Biodiversity: enhancing biodiversity in the wider countryside by conserving vulnerable priority species (VPS)

You will be allocated points if your application will directly benefit the population of at least one of the vulnerable priority species in the table below. Additional points can be scored if the management proposed will benefit additional vulnerable priority species.

You must refer to the Vulnerable Priority Species supporting guidance pages to ensure you meet the species specific criteria.

You must submit a Vulnerable Priority Species recording form containing the information requested below with your application. Failure to do so will result in no points being awarded in this category.

 Vulnerable Priority Species recording form (MS Word, Size: 116.5 kB)
doc_external_url: https://www.ruralpayments.org/media/resources/AECS-VPS-reporting-form-oct-23.docx
Recording form template

Farmland waders • curlew • lapwing • oystercatcher • redshank • snipe
Other species with significant Scottish population declines which depend on appropriate management. • corncrake • corn bunting • chough • twite (on in-bye only) • black grouse • hen harrier • marsh fritillary • great yellow bumblebee • great crested newt • freshwater pearl mussel

In order to score points under this criterion, you must

- Confirm that the management option / capital item proposed is within the appropriate mapped zone for the vulnerable priority species (where applicable) or, in the case of freshwater pearl mussel, associated with one of the key rivers named.
- Include management options and / or capital items in your application which will benefit the species, located appropriately within the holding, as indicated in the Supporting guidance for each vulnerable priority species.
- For farmland waders, the undertaking of one or more of the capital items required can be waived if you provide evidence that significant capital work has already been undertaken or provide survey data showing that the area already supports significant populations of waders. The survey data must meet the requirements explained below*.

For applications which receive points for VPS waders, additional points will be awarded if recent bird survey data (within last 5 years) is provided, as explained below*, proving that there are breeding waders on your land.

*The survey for VPS waders **must** meet the methodology standards in the template and can be carried out by any of the following:

- Non-Government Organisation (NGO) – The survey should be have been conducted by an environmental NGO where the person doing the survey is experienced in undertaking wader surveys.
- Project Officer – Specialist individuals involved in wader projects. These could be funded by RSPB, Working for Waders, British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) etc. The individual must be experienced in conducting wader surveys.
- Ecologist - A member of a recognised body such as The Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) or an individual with an environmental qualification. The individual must be experienced in undertaking wader surveys.

The template to be used for wader surveys is provided on the wader option pages.

Note: Applications that do not warrant wader VPS points cannot be awarded points for provision of wader survey data.

Climate change: enhancing carbon stores through peatland restoration

You will be allocated points if you meet both of the following conditions:

- your application includes management to restore peatlands using one or more of the following capital items:
  - Ditch Blocking – Peat Dams
  - Ditch Blocking – Plastic Piling Dams
  - Control of Scrub - Follow up treatment
  - Control of Scrub or Woody Vegetation – Primary treatment – Intermediate and Heavy Vegetation
  - Control of Scrub or Woody Vegetation – Primary treatment – Light Vegetation
  - Control of Scrub or Woody Vegetation – Removal from Site of the Cut Vegetation

and

- the management will be undertaken within a peatland area.

Points are only awarded for ditch blocking where ALL drains within a discrete hydrological unit on the land that you manage are to be blocked. Where you have more than one hydrological unit on your land, you must address at least one in your application to be awarded points.

Peatland area map (PDF, Size: 2.4 MB)
doc_external_url: https://www.ruralpayments.org/media/resources/Maps-for-website---national-priorities---peatland-map-area.pdf Peatland area map – national priorities

If you are unsure whether your holding is within this area, please contact your local RPID office for advice.

If you propose to carry out Ditch Blocking on land outwith the peatland area map, you can be awarded points if your Case Officer is satisfied that the land is actually peatland. Again it is recommended that you seek confirmation pre-submission that the location is peatland. If you have obtained this from NatureScot, you should attach this with your AECS application.

It is recommended that you seek advice for the scale, nature and methodology of the restoration work you intend to do from NatureScot before applying for Peatland restoration, and include the advice in your application.

Water environment: contributing to the 'good status' of water bodies under Water Framework Directive. This is primarily aimed at new applicants that have identified Diffuse Pollution risks and are using AECS to mitigate those risks for the first time. Returning applicants with new land that was not previously in an AECS contract can also access these points if Diffuse Pollution issues are identified on that new land and are being mitigated by the proposed AECS options.

You will be allocated points if your application will contribute to improving water quality in the diffuse pollution priority area which comprises Scotland's diffuse pollution priority catchments and focus areas.

Diffuse pollution priority area for SRDP (PDF, Size: 1.3 MB)
doc_external_url: https://www.ruralpayments.org/media/resources/87332-AECS-Review---2018-map---WQ-Diffuse-pollution-priority-area.pdf National priority: water environment

Applications must:

- Be supported by a Farm Environment Assessment to identify diffuse pollution risks and target options appropriately.
- Include measures needed to address all diffuse pollution risks on the land holding (or justify why not).

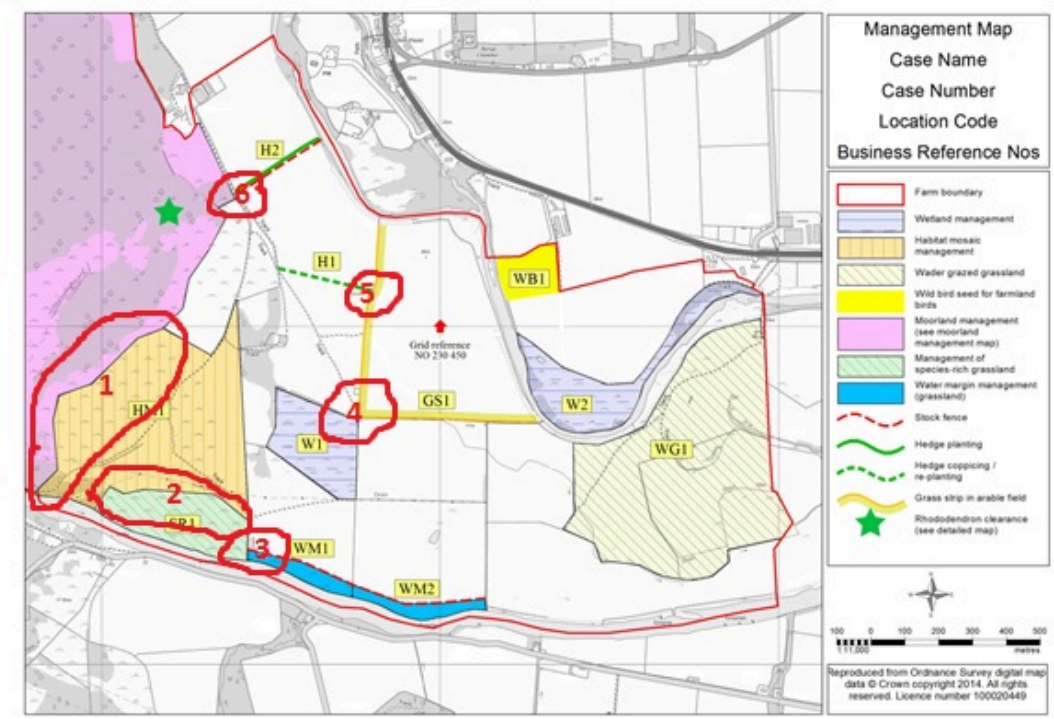
2.3 Habitat linkage

This recognises that managing habitats across a holding, where there is linkage between them, can provide additional benefits; for example by creating wildlife corridors.

We will assess the linkage across the holding and allocate points accordingly. The greater the linkage across the holding the more points will be allocated.

The habitats may already exist and not be proposed for specific funding under the Agri-Environment Climate Scheme but so long as the habitats are marked on the farm environment map and a proposed Agri-Environment Climate Scheme option links those habitats together, then a score may be justified. See further guidance below.

For example,



In this case example, there are [6] habitat linkages as a result of habitats proposed for management in the application (noting that there could be other linkages with existing habitats which would be taken into account as well).

They include the following examples;

- moorland linked to inbye habitats such as habitat mosaic, species rich grassland
- habitat mosaic linked to species rich grassland linked to water margin
- wetlands linked by grass strip in arable fields
- grass strip in arable fields linked to hedgerow management

While this criterion is about the creation of physical linkage of sites, if you can make a fully justified case for site linkage across a holding where the sites are not physically linked then points may be allocated. You must demonstrate additional environmental benefit beyond what would otherwise be achieved as individual standalone sites. For example, pockets of species rich grassland, habitat mosaic or wetland where you have evidence that Marsh Fritillary butterfly has been present in the areas proposed for management. This species usually exists in discrete populations dispersed across pockets of habitat containing its favoured food plant: devils bit scabious. Habitats can be within a 2 – 5km radius e.g. within a glen or coastline containing predominately cattle grazed pasture.

Habitat linkage across neighbouring holdings

If habitat linkages across neighbouring holdings are being claimed then the holdings involved need to be part of a collaborative application that meet the collaboration scoring criteria.

Links with open or running water

Any connection between open or running water and an adjacent habitat, which is being managed as part of the AECS proposal, will count towards the habitat link score.

Please note however that there will only be one link per option type connected. For example, if the application contains five unconnected water margins they don't each count as one link to the water. There will only be one link awarded to the connection between water margins and open/running water for example. The same applies to other options which connect to water.

Where habitat links should not be counted

Hedgerows or woodlands between fields managed as wader grazed grassland or wader mown grassland do not qualify for habitat linkage points as shrubs and trees attract wader predators and therefore can be detrimental to waders. It is best practice not to site boundaries of habitats managed for waders less than 30 metres from a hedgerow or woodland edge and so there should not be a physical link between these two types of habitat anyway.

Habitat linkages should be between different habitats. Where the same habitat is made up of more than one adjoining LPID this is considered to be a single habitat area and therefore links between those LPIDs will not be counted.

2.4 Long-term benefit

This is designed to recognise that some options deliver environmental benefit for a period longer than the duration of the contract.

There are five categories listed below. For each category, you will score points if your application includes one or more of the management options or capital items listed and if you also meet the other requirements listed.

Habitat management or structural works to improve water quality or reduce flood risk

- Converting arable at risk of erosion or flooding to low-input grassland
- Management of floodplains
- Management of existing species rich grassland and restoration of SRG where appropriate (can be within a habitat mosaic)
- Wetland management, where the proposal is to create a new wetland and/or manage an existing wetland (can be within a habitat mosaic)
- Hard Standings for Troughs and Gateways
- Livestock Crossing
- Livestock Tracks
- Managing Steading Drainage and Rural Sustainable Drainage Systems
- Pesticide Handling Facilities
- Restoring (Protecting) River Banks
- River Embankment Breaching, Lowering or Removal
- Rural Sustainable Drainage Systems - Pond
- Rural Sustainable Drainage Systems - sediment trap and bunds
- Rural Sustainable Drainage Systems - swales
- Rural Sustainable Drainage Systems - wetland
- Water-use Efficiency - Irrigation Lagoon
- Wetland Creation - Field Drain Breaking
- Wetland Creation - Pipe Sluices

For the species rich grassland and wetland options listed above, these need to be adjacent to a water course or water body in order to demonstrate improvements to water quality or flood risk mitigation.

For the avoidance of doubt, fencing to create a water margin will not qualify for long term benefit score.

Restore dykes using the "Restoring drystone or flagstone dykes" capital item:

Greater than 5% of the dykes on the holding must be restored under the application to score points. This % will be calculated on the basis of the dykes as recorded on the Farm Environment Assessment maps.

Sand dunes management using the "Planting of dune grasses" capital item.

Creation and/ or Management of wetland and Management of existing species rich grassland or restoration of SRG where appropriate (minimum 1 ha)

Qualifying options are:

- Restoration of species rich grassland
- Management of species rich grassland
- Habitat mosaic management (where minimum 1ha is existing species rich grassland or wetland)
- Wetland management, where the proposal is to create a new wetland and/ or manage an existing wetland.

Capital works benefiting peatlands and moorlands

Qualifying capital items are:

- Ditch blocking - peat dams*
- Ditch blocking - plastic piling dams*
- Scrub control
- Non-native invasive species, rhododendron control where the entire extent of the species cover in the managed area is proposed to be removed

* Points are only awarded for ditch blocking where ALL drains within a discrete hydrological unit on the land that you manage are to be blocked. Where you have more than one hydrological unit on your land, you must address at least one in your application to be awarded points.

2.5 Value for money

This recognises that management of habitats delivered at a lower capital infrastructure cost provides better public value for money than those applications which require higher capital infrastructure costs. In other words, more money is spent on management of habitats than on associated capital items.

Applications under the value of £20,000 delivering at least one national priority will attract additional points under this scoring criteria. This is in recognition that applications of this size can offer value for money but otherwise not score highly against other criteria.

Where relevant we will deduct points under this criteria when assessing applications greater than £20,000. The deductions are based on a sliding scale depending on the percentage of capital infrastructure compared to total application costs for the capital items listed below-

We also recognise that there are some standalone capital options that should not be considered in this calculation as they deliver significant environmental outcomes in their own right.

Therefore the only capital items to be included in this value for money calculation are:

- Stock Fence
- Deer Fence
- Gates
- Restoring drystone or flagstone dykes

2.6 Collaborative approach

This recognises that collaboration between applicants can lead to better environmental outcomes, for example by delivering management at a landscape scale. Within a collaboration, each of the collaborators must be from a separate business with its own Business Reference Number.

To be eligible for collaboration points, the person leading on the collaborative project must correctly complete a Collaborative Management Plan (using the template below) along with a map or maps clearly showing the extent of the collaborative work proposed.

 Collaborative Management Plan (MS Word, Size: 27.0 kB)
doc_external_url: https://www.ruralpayments.org/media/resources/Collaborative-Management-Plan.docx
Plan Template

The Plan must be agreed with all parties involved. It must list all participants and must clearly demonstrate the contribution each participant applying to AECS will make.

A copy of the completed Plan and map(s) will be provided by the lead person to each AECS applicant. It must be submitted by each AECS applicant involved in the collaborative project, along with their AECS application.

Those identified as collaborating partners must be AEC Scheme participants or applicants (unless the collaborative project is to be carried out by a third party – see below*).

The initial collaborators must apply in the same year; however, once they have contracts in place, other land managers may join in the following years.

Points will be allocated on a sliding scale according to the number of collaborators. Whilst older AECS contracts can be included in the general information about a Collaborative project, only AECS contracts arising from 2024 applications and applications submitted in 2025 will be considered, when awarding collaboration points this year. This is due to the fact that contracts must be run more or less concurrently to ensure activities are being undertaken collaboratively over the lifetime of the contract between all farms.

Simply referencing a neighbouring applicant also managing land under the Agri-Environment Climate Scheme will not be sufficient to score points under this criterion.

Collaborative Management Plans must demonstrate that there will be greater environmental benefit than would be achieved if the individuals involved were to act independently.

For example, extra benefit due to creating contiguous and complementary management and improving habitat connectivity.

It is also desirable for the collaborative project to include any of the following:

- The sharing of resources (e.g. staff time and machinery)
- Contributing to a strategic environmental management plan
- Involving an existing group of land managers with a track record of working together

Below are further examples of situations which may be relevant to collaboration, as long as they also meet the requirements noted above.

1. Taking part in an existing partnership project e.g. a wader management project

2. Holding sits within and likely to contribute to a strategic landscape scale planning area e.g. a river catchment management plan

3. Part of a species management plan e.g. Deer Management Group – Deer Management Plan Area

4. More than one applicant working together to increase the area of habitat for a local population of one of the vulnerably priority species e.g. Black grouse or Corncrake

5. More than one applicant managing either side of a single area of habitat like a wetland, species rich grassland or bog

6. More than one applicant collaborating over the same management activity e.g. predator control, shared grazing.

7. Applications made under a Contractual Licence involving multiple partners. For example, an NGO applying to carry out a catchment-scale project for control of Invasive Non-Native Species on land belonging to multiple RPID registered businesses. Each participating land manager would be considered a collaborator.

*If you are a third party applicant, with a contractual licence to carry out collaborative capital works on a number of land holdings, you will be the sole AECS applicant for the collaborative project. Your Collaborative Management Plan must identify the land holders involved and points will be awarded for each participating land manager provided they are also signed up to the contractual licence and have a valid Business Reference Number.

2.7 Additional points

This criterion rewards certain activities that will increase environmental outcomes.

2.7.1 Spatial Priorities

Points will be awarded if the application includes management to benefit water quality, peatland or black grouse as described below.

Water quality:

Undertaking any of the following management options and capital items within priority areas for water quality, as shown in the map.

- Water Margins in Arable Fields
- Water Margins in Grassland Fields
- Converting Arable at Risk of Erosion or Flooding to Low-input Grassland
- Management of Floodplains
- Alternative Watering
- Rural Sustainable Drainage Systems – Sediment Traps and Bunds
- Rural Sustainable Drainage Systems – Swales
- Rural Sustainable Drainage Systems – Pond
- Rural Sustainable Drainage Systems – Wetland

Priority areas for water quality map (PDF, Size: 1.3 MB)
doc_external_url: https://www.ruralpayments.org/media/resources/87332-AECS-Review---2018-map---WQ-Priority-area-for-water-quality.pdf Priority areas for water quality map

Peatland:

Undertaking any of the following management options within peatland areas:

- Moorland Management
- Stock Disposal
- Away Wintering Sheep
- Lowland Raised Bog
- Management of Buffer areas for Fens and Lowland Bog (where this relates to a Lowland Bog)

Peatland area map (PDF, Size: 2.4 MB)
doc_external_url: https://www.ruralpayments.org/media/resources/Maps-for-website---spatial-priorities---peatland-map-area.pdf Peatland area map – spatial priorities

If you propose to carry out the above options on land outwith the peatland area map, you can be awarded points if your Case Officer is satisfied that the land is actually peatland. If you have obtained verification of this from NatureScot you should attach this with your AECS application.

Predator control:

Undertaking the predator control management option within the range of the declining black grouse population in the south of Scotland.

South of Scotland black grouse map (PDF, Size: 452.1 kB)
doc_external_url: https://www.ruralpayments.org/media/resources/72748_70563_Black_grouse_data_March_2015_North_South_recreated-2018.pdf South of Scotland black grouse map

If you're not sure whether your holding is within these areas, please contact your local RPID office for advice.

2.7.2 Scheduled Monuments

Where proposed works meet environmental criteria and will also benefit a Scheduled Monument, additional points may be gained in recognition of the multiple benefits offered.

You can use the Targeting Tool webpage to check if there is a relevant Scheduled Monument on your holding.

The guidance note ‘Scotland Rural Development Programme – Management of Scheduled Monuments: Management options and capital items’, provides details on relevant options and capital items which can be used to benefit the Scheduled Monument.

HES Guidance on AECS and Scheduled Monuments (PDF, Size: 663.7 kB)
doc_external_url: https://www.ruralpayments.org/media/resources/HES-Guidance-on-AECS-and-Scheduled-Monuments-2025.pdf HES Guidance

You will score additional points if you propose to benefit the Scheduled Monument by undertaking these management options and / or any relevant capital items, and if you have also provided an endorsement from Historic Environment Scotland . **You can request this endorsement by contacting** HMConsultations@hes.scot.

3. Organic Conversion and Organic Maintenance scoring criteria

3.1. Scale of Delivery

In-bye and Moorland Management

The score awarded will reflect the portion of your land that you propose to enter into the Organic Conversion or Organic Maintenance sub-options in that application. We will separately assess the proportion of in-bye and the proportion of moorland proposed for organic sub-options in your application in relation to the total areas of in-bye and moorland on your holding. We will allocate points on a sliding scale depending on the percentage managed.

3.2. National Priorities: Organic farming: maintaining or increasing the area of organically managed farmland in Scotland

You will be allocated points if at least 25 per cent of your permanently held land will be managed under the ‘organic conversion’ sub-option, or at least 75 per cent will be managed under the 'organic maintenance' sub-option.

This calculation will be determined on declared areas, as per the most recent SAF declaration and includes conversion or maintenance areas from any active contracts held by the applicant business. Also, it may be the case that the business applying has more than one holding. If the current application covers only one of these holdings then it is only the land on that holding that we consider.

Please note that applications seeking organic conversion or maintenance on large areas of naturally kept moorland or rough grazings may also be subject to a value for money assessment by the National Project Assessment Committee. That assessment will consider the agricultural output from the business against the 5 year cost of the application.

The score sheet template for Organics is provided below.

Score sheet for Organic Conversion and Organic Maintenance (PDF, Size: 66.4 kB)
doc_external_url: https://www.ruralpayments.org/media/resources/Score-sheet-for-Organic-Conversion-and-Organic-Maintenance.pdf Organic score sheet Template

4. Water-use Efficiency - Irrigation Lagoon scoring guidance and scoring criteria

Guidance on Water-use Efficiency – Irrigation Lagoon scoring and the Scoring Criteria are provided below.

 Irrigation lagoon scoring guidance (MS Word, Size: 15.6 kB)
doc_external_url: https://www.ruralpayments.org/media/resources/Irrigation-Lagoon---Scoring-guidance.docx

 Score sheet for Water-use efficiency irrigation lagoon (MS Excel, Size: 14.8 kB)
doc_external_url: https://www.ruralpayments.org/media/resources/AECS-2024-Score-sheet-for-water-use-efficiency-and-irrigation-lagoon.xlsx

Recent changes

Section	Change
Introduction	You can find the scoring page for the 2024 round using the archive .
Organic Scoring Criteria	Updated for 2025

Previous versions

Previous versions of this page

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