

Action Required By: November 9, 2012, and July 1, 2013

Purpose. To provide State Conservationists (STCs) and the Directors, Caribbean and Pacific Islands Areas, with guidance for administering FY 2013 national programmatic and landscape conservation initiatives funded through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) program, and Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP).

Expiration Date. September 30, 2013

Background. To support efficient delivery of these focused opportunities to eligible producers, this bulletin consolidates guidance for certain national programmatic and landscape initiatives to be offered through EQIP, AMA, and WHIP during FY 2013. Although legislative authorities may be unresolved and funding allocations may not be finalized, State Conservationists are to use the attached guidance to prepare to offer these opportunities in a timely manner when clarity is achieved.

Explanation. This guidance establishes action items to be completed by State Conservationists to support initiatives. Delivery and management of these initiatives are subject to all agency program rules and policies including requirements in Title 440, Conservation Programs Manual (CPM), Part 512, "Conservation Program Contracting."

<u>National Initiative</u>	AMA	EQIP	WHIP
National Air Quality Initiative (NAQI)		X	
National On-Farm Energy Initiative (NOFEI)		X	
National Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative (NSHTI)	X	X	
National Organic Initiative (NOI)		X	
<u>Landscape Conservation Initiatives:</u>			
Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW)			X
-Black-Footed Ferret (BF Ferret WLFW)			X
-Bog Turtle (Bog Turtle WLFW)			X
-Lesser Prairie Chicken (LP Chicken WLFW)		X	X
-New England Cottontail (NE Cottontail WLFW)			X
-Southwestern Willow Flycatcher (SWN Flycatcher WLFW)			X
-Greater Sage Grouse (Greater Sage Grouse WLFW)		X	X
-Gopher Tortoise (G Tortoise WLFW)			X
-Golden-Winged Warbler (G Winged Warbler WLFW)			X
Bay Delta Initiative (BDI)		X	
Gulf of Mexico Initiative (GoMI)		X	
Illinois River Subbasin and Eucha - Spavinaw Lake Watershed Initiative (IRWI)		X	
Mississippi River Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI)		X	X
Northern Plains Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative (NP-MBHI)		X	
Ogallala Aquifer Initiative (OAI)		X	
Long Leaf Pine Initiative (LLPI)		X	
New England-New York Forestry Initiative (NE/NYFI)		X	
Everglades Initiative (EI)		X	
West Maui Coral Reef Initiative (WMCRI)		X	
Driftless Area Initiative (DAI)		X	

In order to support approved national programmatic and landscape conservation initiatives during FY 2013, STCs, are to complete the following:

1) ProTracts Subaccounts and Application, Evaluation, and Ranking Tool (AERT).—States are to establish subaccounts and populate the ranking evaluation criteria in the ProTracts AERT and other actions as follows **no later than COB Friday, November 9, 2012.**

a. ProTracts Subaccounts.—Unless already populated in ProTracts by the national office, States are to establish an iteratively named and separate subaccount in ProTracts for each initiative offered and assign the appropriate "account type" as noted in the attached guidance documents. States may not establish "locally led" or "State" type subaccounts to support national initiatives.

b. Subaccount Resource Concerns.—States must assign the natural resource concerns in AERT for each subaccount established in ProTracts, as noted in the attached guidance documents. For planning purposes, States should emphasize the primary resource concerns targeted by the initiative.

c. National Approved Land Uses.—States must designate the approved land uses as eligible for each initiative as indicated in the attached guidance documents.

d. Approved Conservation Practices - Core and Supporting Practices.—The attached guidance will provide practices that are approved to support each national or landscape initiative. For purposes of this guidance, if core and supporting practices are used for an approved initiatives, the following definitions apply:

- **Core Practice.**—A conservation practice listed in the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) that is essential to address the natural resource concerns identified by an initiative.
- **Supporting Practice.**—A conservation practice listed in the FOTG that may be needed to facilitate the implementation of a core practice or, along with other approved practice, needed to address the natural resource concerns identified by the initiative.

National Programmatic Initiatives.—Carefully review the guidance provided for each initiative to determine which practices may be required to be offered. If a State does not need to offer one or more of the core practices (e.g., the practice is not needed to address a resource concern), the STC must notify the appropriate Financial Assistance Program Division (FAPD) team leader of which core practices are not needed. States are encouraged, but not required, to offer all supporting practices listed in the attached guidance documents. States may approve the use of additional supporting practices not listed in the attached guidance documents if the State Conservationist certifies that **all** the following conditions are met:

1. The proposed supporting conservation practice is needed to directly support a required or core practice.
2. The purpose of the proposed supporting conservation practice standard addresses one or more of the initiative's natural resource concerns.
3. The national Conservation Practice Physical Effects (CPPE) database indicates the proposed practice is assigned a "positive" value for the associated resource concern.

Landscape Conservation Initiatives.—Carefully review the guidance provided for each initiative to determine which practices are required to be offered. If a State does not need to offer one or more of the core practices (e.g., the practice is not needed to address a resource concern), the STC must notify the initiative coordinator, who will seek approval from the Initiative Lead Regional Conservationist. Changes to landscape initiative supporting practices, consistent with the criteria below, must be submitted to the initiative coordinator and approved by the appropriate Initiative Lead Regional Conservationist.

1. The proposed supporting conservation practice is needed to directly support a required or core practice.
2. The purpose of the proposed supporting conservation practice standard addresses one or more of the initiative's natural resource concern.
3. The national Conservation Practice Physical Effects (CPPE) database indicates the proposed practice is assigned a "positive" value for the associated resource concern.

States are responsible for associating core and supporting practices with the approved resource concerns in ProTracts AERT, as indicated in the attached guidance documents.

e. Conservation Activity Plans (CAP).—The ProTracts application type of "planning" must be associated with each EQIP CAP application and ranking of these applications is mandatory during FY 2013. Additional guidance for administration of CAPs will be provided in a separate notice.

f. Screening Criteria.—If included in the attached initiative guidance, States must utilize national screening criteria as provided to manage workload associated with the initiative. All eligible applications must have an assigned priority of "High," "Medium," or "Low" recorded in ProTracts.

g. State Ranking Criteria.—State ranking criteria to support the national programmatic and certain landscape conservation initiatives during FY 2013 have been established as shown in the attached guidance documents. States are responsible for populating the ProTracts AERT with the established State ranking criteria for each initiative offered in their State. States may not modify any FY 2013 initiative State-level ranking criteria provided in this guidance.

h. Local Ranking Criteria.—States must populate local ranking criteria in ProTracts AERT. Refer to attached guidance documents for examples of local ranking criteria to support the initiative. If example local ranking criteria are not provided in this guidance, States must develop criteria that support the goals of the initiative.

i. Payment Schedules.—States must ensure that required core practices and any necessary supporting practices are included in the current program payment schedules uploaded to ProTracts. Each payment schedule uploaded into ProTracts should include both historically underserved (HU) and traditional participant payment rates. Historically underserved items should be prefaced with “HU” to allow for ease of identification during contracting and quality assurance.

(2) Application Periods.—National Headquarters (NHQ) has established ranking periods and application deadlines to allow evaluation of all program applications from the beginning of the fiscal year through May 31, 2013. Unless specified in the attached guidance documents, State Conservationists must select and offer application periods consistent with the nationally established application and ranking periods. Additional guidance to States will be issued under a separate national bulletin.

Public Affairs - Outreach.—No State or local announcements in the media about any initiative may be made until after the national-level announcement, which will be issued either from the Department or the Chief. Announcements must be coordinated and issued through the national Public Affairs Division (PAD).

States must post initiative information to the State’s Web site. Information provided must be consistent with policy at 440-CPM, Part 515, Subpart D, Section 515.32B. If core and supporting practices are required for the initiative, this information must also be presented on the State Web site.

Fund Management.—Once States have established their ProTracts subaccount and AERT, States **must** allocate the appropriate financial assistance funds to these subaccounts. At the end of the last ranking period, any unused funds must be returned by allowance change to NHQ. STCs may add additional general program financial assistance to support the national programmatic or landscape conservation initiatives provided an allowance change request has been entered into the Allowance Change Tool (ACT).

For any initiatives that may provide EQIP financial assistance for livestock related projects, State Conservationists must ensure that applications are properly associated with an appropriate “Livestock Type.”

Obligation Deadline.—All program contracts must be obligated by COB Monday, **July 1, 2013**. Program funds not obligated by this date must be returned to NHQ by submitting an allowance change request through ACT **no later than COB July 5, 2013**, so that they can be used to address other initiative opportunities. Return of funds or request for additional funds should be done in accordance with 440-CPM, Part 512, Subpart I, Section 512.84, “Fund Allocation Changes.” States will return the appropriate technical assistance (TA) funds with the return of any financial assistance. The TA return rate for each program will be provided in the State allocation letter.

Contact. If you have any questions regarding this guidance, contact the program manager or initiative coordinator listed in the appropriate attachment to this bulletin. If you have general questions about FAPD program rules or guidance, contact the appropriate FAPD team leader: Mark Rose, EQIP Team Leader, at (202) 690-2621 or mark.rose@wdc.usda.gov, and Maggie Rhodes, AMA and WHIP, at (202) 720-6700 or maggie.rhodes@wdc.usda.gov. If you have any questions regarding the technical aspects of these initiatives, contact the appropriate Science and Technology division director: Noller Herbert, Director, Conservation Engineering Division, at (202) 720-2520 or noller.herbert@wdc.usda.gov, and Terrell Erickson, Director, Ecological Sciences Division, at (202) 720-5992 or terrell.erickson@wdc.usda.gov.

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National Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative (NSHTI)

Initiative Description/Summary: Through the National Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative (NSHTI), NRCS will assist producers to extend the growing season for high value crops in an environmentally safe manner. The initiative has the potential to assist producers in addressing a resource concern by improving plant quality, improving soil quality, and reducing nutrient and pesticide transport.

Note: The seasonal high tunnel practice is gaining recognition in many populated or urbanized areas. NRCS must consider and support all producers who submit an application regardless of where their operation is located. It is important to note that general program eligibility is not limited based on zoning. There is a common misconception that areas zoned as “urban” or “residential” (or other similar zoning types) are not eligible based on the zoning classification. However, while the applicant and land may meet program eligibility requirements, zoning may restrict a participant from installing certain practices. Participants who carry out conservation practices are responsible for obtaining the authorities, rights, easements, permits, or other approvals necessary for the implementation, operation, and maintenance of the conservation practices in keeping with the applicable laws and regulations.

As in previous years, the maximum practice extent for a Seasonal High Tunnel (798) eligible for a practice payment shall be five percent of an acre per agricultural operation. This can be a single or multiple structures for a maximum of five percent of one acre coverage.

Approved or Participating States:

- All States and Territories

Applicable Programs:

- Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) program – AMA states have the option to offer the NSHTI through the AMA program.
- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) – All states must offer the NSHTI through EQIP.

Note: Unless otherwise specified, the guidance provided below applies to both AMA and EQIP.

Program Contact Information:

AMA – Dave Mason at (202) 720-1873; dave.mason@wdc.usda.gov
EQIP - Michael Whitt at (202) 690-2267; michael.whitt@wdc.usda.gov

ProTracts Requirements:

1. Subaccount Guidance:
A single subaccount for AMA and a single subaccount for EQIP have already been created in ProTracts to support the NSHTI called “FY 13 Seasonal High Tunnel” using the account type “Seasonal High Tunnels”. No additional subaccounts may be established at the State or Local level to further support the NSHTI.
2. Application, Evaluation, and Ranking Tool Guidance – Choice Lists and Matrix Data:
 - a. Approved Land Types – States must assign the following land uses as eligible for this initiative:

Required Land Use
Cropland only

Note: No additional land types may be added or used to support this initiative.

Attachment C

b. Approved Natural Resource Concerns:

Soil Erosion
Sheet and Rill
Soil Condition
Organic Matter Depletion
Water Quality
Excessive Nutrients and Organics in Surface Water
Harmful Levels of Pesticides in Surface Water
Plant Condition
Plants not Adapted or Suited
Productivity, Health and Vigor

Note: No additional resource concerns may be added or used in ProTracts AERT to support this initiative.

c. Core Practices Required to be offered for this initiative:

Practice Name	Practice Code
Seasonal High Tunnel System for Crops	798

d. Supporting Practices that States may offer to support this initiative:

Practice Name	Practice Code
Critical Area Planting	342
Diversion	362
Grassed Waterway	412
Irrigation Reservoir	436
Irrigation System, Micro irrigation	441
Subsurface Drain	606
Surface Drainage, Field Ditch	607
Underground Outlet	620

Note: Conservation Activity Plans may not be offered as part of this initiative. The Seasonal High Tunnel System for Crops (798) practice may not be offered in any other subaccounts except for "FY 13 Organic Transition" and "FY 13 Certified Organic".

e. AERT Matrix – State shall populate the appropriate core and supporting practices in the ProTracts AERT tool and associate the following resource concerns as shown in the following table.

NRCS Approved Resource Concerns		Soil Erosion	Soil Condition	Water Quality		Plant Condition	
NRCS Natural Resource Concern Categories for ProTracts Application, Evaluation, and Ranking Tool (AERT) "C" = Core practice (Bold) required to be offered. "X" - Supporting practices are optional to be offered		Sheet and Rill	Organic Matter Depletion	Excess Nutrients and Organics in Surface Water	Harmful Levels of Pesticides in Surface Water	Plants not Adapted or Suited	Productivity, Health and Vigor
Conservation Practice	Code						
Seasonal High Tunnel System for Crops	798		C	C	C	C	C

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Critical Area Planting	342	X					
Diversion	362	X					
Grassed Waterway	412	X					
Irrigation Reservoir	436					X	X
Irrigation System, Micro Irrigation	441					X	X
Subsurface Drain	606	X					
Surface Drainage, Field Ditch	607	X					
Underground Outlet	620	X					

3. Application, Evaluation, and Ranking Tool Guidance – Ranking Criteria Questions:

The total ranking points associated with initiative are to be distributed in AERT and approved ranking questions as follows:

AERT Level	Maximum Points	Point Percentage
National Level Ranking Questions	250	25%
State Level Ranking Questions	400	40%
Local Level Ranking Questions	250	25%
Efficiency Score	100	10%
Total Points for this initiative:	1,000	100%

4. The following are detailed instructions for populating ranking questions and points in ProTracts AERT.

National Level Ranking Criteria Requirements:

National ranking criteria are established in ProTracts by the national office.

National ranking criteria must account for 250 points or 25% of total points.

Only the following national level ranking criteria apply to this initiative. All other national ranking criteria not listed are not applicable and should be answered “No” by Designated Conservationists:

2. Clean and Abundant Water: Water Quality – Will the proposed project assist the producer to:
2b. Reduce sediment, nutrients or pesticides from agricultural operations located within a field that adjoins a designated “impaired water body” (TMDL, 303d, etc.)?
2c. Reduce sediment, nutrients or pesticides from agricultural operations located within a field that adjoins a “non-impaired water body”?
5. Soil Health: – Will the proposed project assist the producer to implement practice(s) which:
5a. Reduce erosion to tolerable limits (Soil “T”)?
5b. Improve soil tilth, organic matter, structure, health, etc.?
7. High Quality, Productive Soils, Healthy Plant and Animal Communities: Will the proposed project assist the producer implement practices which:
7d. Are identified in an Integrated Pest Management plan?
7e. Are identified in a Nutrient Management plan?
7f. Apply principles of adaptive nutrient management?
9. Business Lines – Conservation Implementation Additional Ranking Considerations - Will the proposed project result in:
9a. Implementation of all conservation practices scheduled in the contract on the CPA-1155 within three years of date of obligation?
9b. Improvement of existing conservation practices or conservation systems already in place at the time the application is accepted?

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9c. Implementation of practice(s) which will complete an existing conservation system or suite of practices?

State Level Ranking Criteria Requirements:

State ranking criteria are established in ProTracts by the national office.
State level ranking criteria must account for a total of 400 points.

2013 NSHTI State Ranking Criteria	2013 Points
Answer ALL of the following criteria that apply regarding the project's impact on addressing resource concerns. Maximum points 300.	
1a: The Schedule of Operations includes a seasonal high tunnel which will assist the producer to improve plant productivity, health and vigor.	75
1b: The Schedule of Operations includes a seasonal high tunnel which will assist the producer to grow plants in areas where they are not typically suited or adapted to grow.	75
1e: The Schedule of Operations includes practices or supports the use of existing practices (such as; cover crops, residue management, and residue and tillage management) which	50
1f: The Schedule of Operations includes supporting practices necessary to support a new or existing seasonal high tunnel in order to address soil erosion.	50
2. Answer ONE of the following criteria that apply regarding the projects ability to address excess nutrients and organics in surface water.	
2a: The Schedule of Operations includes a seasonal high tunnel which will assist the producer to reduce excess nutrients and organics in surface water from a field that adjoins a designated "impaired water body" (TMDL, 303d, etc.).	75
2b: The Schedule of Operations includes a seasonal high tunnel which will assist the producer to reduce excess nutrients and organics in surface water from a field that adjoins a "non-impaired water body".	25
3. Answer ONE of the following criteria that apply regarding the projects ability to address harmful levels of pesticides in surface water.	
3a: The Schedule of Operations includes a seasonal high tunnel which will assist the producer to reduce harmful levels of pesticides in surface water from a field that adjoins a designated "impaired water body" (TMDL, 303d, etc.).	75
3b: The Schedule of Operations includes a seasonal high tunnel which will assist the producer to reduce harmful levels of pesticides in surface water from a field that adjoins a "non-impaired water body".	25
Total Points:	400

Local Level Ranking Criteria Requirements:

Local ranking criteria are approved and entered into ProTracts at the State level.
Local level ranking criteria must account for a total of 250 points or at least 25% of total points available.

Cost Effectiveness Calculation:

By agency policy, the amount of points associated with the AERT cost efficiency calculation must be 100 points or 10% of total points available.

Screening Criteria Requirements:

No screening criteria shall be used to support this initiative.