



United States Department of Agriculture  
Natural Resources Conservation Service

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# NEWS RELEASE

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## **Massachusetts Hmong farmers included in USDA pilot project to extend the growing season while protecting the environment**

HOLDEN, Mass. (April 6, 2010) – Eight Hmong farmers will protect natural resources while extending the growing season for the specialty produce they raise at the Flats Mentor Farm in Lancaster, Mass. thanks to \$85,936 in funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to install seasonal high tunnels – also known as hoop houses – on the farm.

Earlier this year, NRCS announced a high tunnel pilot project to help farmers increase the availability of locally grown produce in a conservation-friendly way. Funding is provided through the agency's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

The Flats Mentor Farm growers are among 17 Massachusetts farmers that are receiving technical help and a statewide total of \$178,000 in financial assistance from NRCS for high tunnels this year.

A seasonal high tunnel is a greenhouse-like structure, at least six feet in height, which modifies the climate inside to create more favorable growing conditions for vegetable and other specialty crops grown in the natural soil beneath it. The climate inside the high tunnel is modified by the protection of the structure alone, without the use of heating or ventilating equipment. This pilot will test the potential conservation benefits of growing crops under these structures.

"This is a monumental achievement for these beginning farmers who worked very hard to learn how to grow crops from their native country and market them at the many farmers markets in Massachusetts," said Maria Moreira, Flats Mentor Farm Project Director. "The high tunnels will not only serve to address conservation issues, but it will truly make a difference in the income for these farmers and their families."

The Flats Mentor Farm, located on a 70-acre river bottom parcel of land in Lancaster, assists and supports small farmers of diverse ethnic backgrounds with the land, farming infrastructure and marketing assistance needed to promote and sustain successful farming enterprises. The farm also promotes economically viable agricultural production that protects the environment through the practice of sustainable farming methods.

"These eight growers represent two thirds of the Asian agricultural producers in Worcester County, according to the latest Census of Agriculture," said Walter Albarran, District Conservationist overseeing the NRCS field office in Holden, Mass. "Everyone involved is pleased that the funding worked out for this project. We hope to start working with the farmers soon to get the high tunnels installed."

(MORE)

“Massachusetts is one of 38 states participating in this three-year study that will verify if high tunnels are effective in reducing pesticide use, keeping vital nutrients in the soil, extending the growing season, increasing yields, and providing other benefits to growers,” said Christine Clarke, State Conservationist for NRCS in Massachusetts. “The Flats Mentor Farm growers will be an important part of this study.”

NRCS Rhode Island State Conservationist Phoukham (Pooh) Vongkhamdy, who was born in Vientiane Province, Laos and emigrated to United States in 1981, served as a translator between NRCS Massachusetts staff and the Hmong farmers during the application process.

The high tunnel pilot project is part of the “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” initiative, a USDA-wide effort to create new economic opportunities by better connecting consumers with local producers. Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food encourages sustainable agriculture practices and systems so that our nation’s natural resources - our soil, water, and air - will be available for the next generation.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service is an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture that helps people conserve, maintain, and improve our natural resources and environment. NRCS has seven Massachusetts field offices – in Greenfield, Hadley, Holden, Hyannis, Pittsfield, Westford, and West Wareham – that work with local conservation districts and other partners to serve farmers and landowners throughout the commonwealth.

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