

High Tunnel System Initiative

Frequently Asked Questions

Feeding urban and rural communities through fresh, local, and sustainable crop production.

What is a high tunnel system?

High tunnels are unheated, plastic-covered structures that provide an intermediate level of environmental protection and control compared to open field conditions and heated greenhouses. They are easy to build and maintain and provide an energy-efficient way to extend the growing season. High tunnels may also reduce or avoid use of pesticides, and reduce runoff and leaching of nitrogen into the soil.

The frame is metal, and Polyethylene covers must be UV (ultraviolet light) protected. High tunnels are usually covered with a single layer of plastic sheeting and are passively ventilated using roll-up side and end walls which can be opened or removed.

What is a “manufactured” high tunnel?

To be eligible for NRCS financial assistance, high tunnels must be purchased as a kit with installation instructions from the manufacturer. High tunnels must be planned, designed, and constructed in accordance with the manufacturer’s specifications and the Montana NRCS jobsheet.

Can I install a used high tunnel system?

A used high tunnel must be planned, designed, and constructed in accordance with manufacturer’s specifications and backed by a warranty from the manufacturer. Used materials must comply with requirements in the NRCS National Engineering Manual.

Can I construct my own high tunnel?

No. High tunnel kits must be obtained from a commercial source in order to receive NRCS funding. There are commercial sources available in Montana and across the nation.

Is there a size limit for the high tunnel system?

There is no maximum size limit to the high tunnel system. However, there is a practice payment cap for NRCS financial assistance, based on a 30-foot x 72-foot structure. Also, high tunnels must be a minimum of 6-feet in height at the peak of the structure.



Can I install electricity to power heating or cooling units in the high tunnel system?

Electricity, venting systems, lighting, etc. can be installed providing the additions meet the manufacturer’s designs and specifications. However, the grower is responsible for those costs.



Interested in extending your growing season?

At USDA, we believe it's important for all communities to have access to fresh, locally-grown foods—especially in places where farm-fresh produce isn't readily available or accessible. That's why the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is offering financial assistance to help farmers, Indian Tribes, and community organizations expand their local crop production by installing a high tunnel system. Units of government are not directly eligible. To find out if a high tunnel system is right for you, and to apply, contact your local USDA Service Center.



Are there any limitations on how much financial assistance I can receive for a high tunnel system?

Montana NRCS has a payment cap at 2,160 square feet. If you qualify as a historically underserved producer, you may be eligible for a higher payment. The applicant is limited to one structure per agricultural operation per year.

If I already have a high tunnel, can I apply for another one?

Yes. An applicant can apply for a high tunnel system even if he or she already has an existing high tunnel, funded by NRCS or not.



Can I apply for a high tunnel system under multiple NRCS EQIP- based initiatives?

Yes. An applicant can apply for a high tunnel under other EQIP initiatives, but can only receive funding for one per year. Each initiative has its own requirements and a separate application process. It is important to note that the practice payment cap applies to all programs in Montana that offer the high tunnel system.

Can I apply for a high tunnel system under the EQIP organic initiative?

Yes, you may be eligible to apply for a high tunnel under the organic initiative if you are a certified or transitioning organic farmer.

The organic initiative offers high tunnel as a practice. It is important to note that the practice payment cap applies to the organic initiative.

Can high tunnel systems be portable?

Yes, they can be moved to facilitate cropping systems as long as the high tunnel remains located within the farm, tract, and field number associated with the EQIP contract.

Can I leave the high tunnel system up all year?

Management of the high tunnel will depend on climatic conditions. Most high tunnels are not guaranteed to withstand extreme snow loads, high wind conditions, or intense duration of sunlight. It is recommended the cover be removed and stored at the end of each growing season. Consult manufacturer's specifications and climate conditions in your area. It is the responsibility of the contract holder to repair and maintain the structure for the lifespan of the high tunnel (five years).

Are there limitations on where I can install a high tunnel system?

The high tunnel can be placed on land capable of producing crops and where crops are grown in the natural soil profile. Raised beds may be installed but cannot be higher than 12 inches in depth. Structures must be located on level ground and avoid buried public utilities.

Are there limitations to what can be produced in high tunnels?

High tunnels can be used for crops that are grown in the natural soil profile or in raised beds. These typically include vegetables, small fruit crops, or other high value crops that need an extended growing season. Crops grown on benches, in pots, or in violation of Federal laws are not allowed.

Eligibility

The high tunnel system initiative is open to individuals, businesses, non-profits, Indian Tribes, legal entities, or joint operations who are either currently engaged in crop production (for example, an established community garden or farm) OR who have a demonstrated interest in crop production. Examples of eligible groups include individual farmers, farm entities, or grower groups which may consist of community garden organizations, non-profits, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operations, and more.

Participants new to USDA, will need to register with the USDA Farm Service Agency before applying for the high tunnel through NRCS programs.

Keep in mind that this program is not intended for backyard hobby gardens or orchards—rather, it's intended to support agricultural enterprises that provide crops for local communities.

High tunnel systems are offered through the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP). To learn more or to sign up visit your local USDA Service Center or www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov.

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