

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 Iowa NRCS jobsheet.

Can I install a used 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 (not from a kit)?

No. High tunnel kits must be obtained from a commercial source in order to receive NRCS funding. There are commercial sources available in Iowa 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 30-foot maximum width. Also, high tunnels must be a minimum of 6-feet in height at the peak of the structure.

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 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.

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.



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 limitations on where I can install a high tunnel system?

The high tunnel can be placed on land currently under crop production in the natural soil profile. 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 annual and perennial crops that are grown in the natural soil profile. These typically include vegetables, small fruit crops, or other high value crops that need an extended growing season. Raised beds with structural sides are NOT permitted. Mounding natural soil without structural sides is allowed. Crops grown on benches, in pots, or in violation of Federal laws are not allowed.



Are any other practices available to help me implement with my high tunnel system?

Yes, supporting practices are available to ensure that resource concerns associated with implementing and managing high tunnel systems are addressed. NRCS Conservation Planners will meet with you on your site for conservation planning and to determine if you have resource concerns that need to be addressed with additional conservation practices. Supporting practices included in the high tunnel initiative are:

- Conservation Cover
- Cover Crop
- Critical Area Planting
- Grassed Waterway
- Mulching
- Irrigation System, Micro-irrigation
- Subsurface Drain
- Underground Outlet

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. One option is for 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 any limitations on how much financial assistance I can receive for a high tunnel system?

Iowa NRCS has no payment cap. If you qualify as a historically underserved producer, you may be eligible for a higher payment. All EQIP applications are limited to a \$450,000 Payment Limit for the life of the current Farm Bill.

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

No, in Iowa an applicant is only eligible to apply for a high tunnel under the high tunnel initiative, even if you are a certified or transitioning organic farmer or Historically Underserved producer. Historically Underserved producers will still be eligible for the increased financial assistance for conservation practices, dedicated conservation funding, and access to advance payments for conservation practice implementation under the high tunnel initiative.

Are there any other eligibility requirements to be met?

Applicants must:

- Control or own eligible land
- Comply with adjusted gross income limitation (AGI) provisions
- Be in compliance with the highly erodible land and wetland conservation requirements
- Develop an NRCS EQIP plan of operations
- Be willing to maintain the conservation practices for the entire practice lifespans

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.ia.nrcs.usda.gov.

Iowa

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