

Getting Started with NRCS

Alaska

A Guide to NRCS Programs and Services

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Thank you for your interest in working with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to help you manage your natural resources in a sustainable manner!

This guide will help you understand how NRCS can provide voluntary technical and financial assistance as you prepare to work with us for the first time.

New to farming? NRCS can help! We offer additional assistance to beginning farmers and ranchers (those who have operated a farm or ranch for less than ten years), and can help you get started or grow your operation through a variety of programs and services.

Your first step should be to contact your local USDA Service Center and make an appointment. Also consider -- what is your vision for your land and farm? What are your challenges?

Need information in a language other than English? We offer free translation services.





A Beginner's Guide to **CONSERVATION PLANNING**

Great Conservation Starts with a Plan

A conservation plan identifies options to improve the natural resources on your property. It can help you achieve your goals for your operation.

What is a Conservation Plan?

A conservation plan is a written record of the natural resources on your property and the recommended conservation practices you plan to implement and maintain. The plan includes a map of your property and detailed information about the types of soil and plants on your property. It is a roadmap for the future of your land.

What is a natural resource concern?

A natural resource concern is a problem or issue that impairs the sustainability or intended use of that resource. For example, soil compaction is a natural resource concern that occurs when soil particles become compressed. This can cause the soil

to become overly dense, which can impact the rate of water drainage and saturation and can make it harder for roots to effectively penetrate the soil. If left untreated, too much soil compaction can hinder your ability to grow desirable crops.

What is a conservation practice?

A conservation practice is an action you take on the property to address a natural resource concern. Conservation practices can be structural activities, such as building a fence. They can be engineering projects, such as designing and installing an irrigation system. They can be vegetative activities, such as planting trees or shrubs. They also can be management activities that require

What is in the plan?

- Landowner-determined objectives and goals
- Aerial photographs or diagrams and a map of your property
- Resource information, such as soil characteristics and descriptions, forage or crop potential, and optimal stocking rates for livestock
- Treatment decisions or grazing system plans for livestock
- Location and schedule for conservation applications
- Information sheets explaining how to carry out your specific management decisions
- Plan of operation and maintenance of conservation practices and systems

you to change the way you operate your land, such as changing the crops you plant in certain areas each year (crop rotation).

How do I treat a natural resource concern?

By working with NRCS to develop a conservation plan, NRCS will identify and inventory the natural resources on your property and document any natural resource concerns that exist. NRCS may recommend specific conservation practices to address each concern. You may wish to apply for financial assistance from NRCS to help you off-set the cost to install or perform conservation practices.

What are the Benefits?

- Improve soil health
- Attract desirable wildlife by creating nesting sites and winter cover
- Identify immediate or potential resource problems that could lower your production

- Adapt to your changing operational goals
- Establish a reasonable schedule and timeline to apply chosen conservation practices
- Save time, labor and energy
- Make your farm or ranch a better place to live for you and your family

Updating Your Plan

After you have made your decisions and the conservation plan is complete, you will receive your copy. Another confidential copy will remain on file at your NRCS office.

Changes in markets, weather or technology may cause you to reconsider some of the choices made in your plan.

If something happens that would force you to change your decisions, you need to revise your plan.

Contact your local NRCS office to discuss any changes you propose.



How to Get Started

It's up to you to decide on the best ways to improve the productivity, sustainability, and profitability of your property. For many people, conservation planning serves as a fundamental starting point for maintaining and improving natural resources on their land.





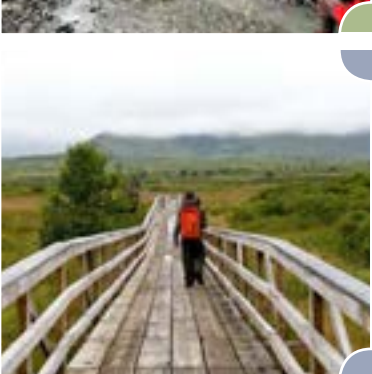
The professionals at your local NRCS office provide free assistance to help you develop or refine your conservation strategy. We'll help you develop a conservation plan that meets the unique needs of your land and your life.

Contact your local NRCS office for more information and to schedule an appointment.



COMMON CONSERVATION PRACTICES IN ALASKA

Practices	Example	Description	Benefits
1. Seasonal High Tunnel		An enclosed, covered structure that protects crops from sun, wind, excessive rainfall or cold, to extend the growing season in an environmentally safe manner.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Extend the growing season ◆ Protect crops from frost and wind ◆ Improve plant health ◆ Energy savings from local food production
2. Nutrient Management		Managing the rate, source, placement, and timing of plant nutrients and soil amendments while reducing environmental impacts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Improve plant health and productivity ◆ Reduce excess nutrients in surface and ground water ◆ Reduce emissions of greenhouse gases ◆ Improve or maintain soil health
3. Micro-Irrigation System		An irrigation system for frequent application of small quantities of water on or below the soil surface as drops, tiny streams, or miniature spray through applicators placed along a water delivery line.	<p>Conserves water through improved water use efficiency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Maintains soil moisture for plant growth ◆ Saves labor compared to hand watering ◆ Improves plant productivity and health
4. Irrigation Water Management		Monitoring and adjusting the volume, frequency, and application rate of irrigation water.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Improve irrigation water use efficiency ◆ Minimize irrigation-induced soil erosion ◆ Protect surface and ground water quality ◆ Manage moisture in plant root zones ◆ Improve plant health and productivity ◆ Reduce energy use
5. Cover Crops		Planting grasses, legumes and forbes for the purpose of providing seasonal vegetative cover and protection of the soil.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Reduces erosion from wind and water ◆ Maintains/improves soil health and organic matter ◆ Suppresses excessive weed pressures and breaks pest cycles ◆ Improves soil moisture efficiency ◆ Minimizes soil compaction

Practices	Example	Description	Benefits
6. Forest Stand Improvement		<p>Manipulating tree composition, stand structure and density by cutting or killing selected trees and understory vegetation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Improves forest health and productivity ◆ Restores or maintains natural plant communities ◆ Improves understory habitat for wildlife ◆ Reduces risk of catastrophic wildfire
7. Woody Residue Treatment		<p>The treatment of residual woody material that is created due to management activities such as forest stand improvement or natural disturbances.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Reduce wildfire risk ◆ Improve access for management purposes ◆ Improve soil organic matter ◆ Improve the site for regeneration
8. Tree/Shrub Establishment		<p>Planting seedlings or cuttings; seeding; or creating conditions that promote natural regeneration.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Establishes forest cover ◆ Enhances wildlife habitat ◆ Controls erosion ◆ Improves water quality ◆ Captures and stores carbon
9. Aquatic Organism Passage		<p>Modification or removal of barriers that restrict or impede movement of fish and other aquatic species, including replacing the object with a culvert, bridge or crossing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Enhances fish habitat ◆ Can improve fish populations by restoring access to habitat ◆ Provides management options to enhance long-term stream function
10. Trails and Walkways		<p>A constructed path with a vegetated, earthen, gravel, paved, or other hard surface to facilitate the movement of people or off-road vehicles.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Protects ecologically sensitive sites ◆ Reduces erosion ◆ Provides pedestrian or off-road vehicle access for agricultural operations ◆ Provides human access to recreation sites

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY INCENTIVES PROGRAM

Overview

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provides technical and financial assistance to producers to address natural resource concerns and deliver environmental benefits such as improved forest health, improved habitat for salmon, moose and other wildlife species, improved soil health and more.

Benefits

Through EQIP, NRCS provides agricultural participants with one-on-one help and financial assistance to plan and implement improvements, or what NRCS calls conservation practices. Together, NRCS and producers invest in solutions that conserve natural resources for the future while improving agricultural operations.

Program at a Glance

NRCS may visit your property to inventory your natural resources and identify opportunities for conservation improvements. Then you will decide how best to address your natural resource concerns. These decisions will be part of your EQIP application and will be recorded in a Conservation Plan. NRCS offers over 100 unique practices designed for working farms and forests.

Who is Eligible?

There are three tiers of eligibility for NRCS financial assistance: producer/participant eligibility, land eligibility, and resource concern eligibility.

The best way to determine your eligibility is to speak with an NRCS Conservation Planner about your specific situation.

If you're a new customer applying for USDA programs for the first time, you need to establish a farm record with the USDA Farm Service Agency first before applying for financial assistance.

Producer Eligibility:

- ◆ Must have a social security number or employer identification number issued by the IRS (entities require a Taxpayer Identification Number).
- ◆ Must show control of the land (lease, deed or other agreement) for the length of the NRCS contract
- ◆ Must have an adjusted gross income of less than \$900,000; however this requirement does not apply to Federally-recognized Tribes and Alaska Native regional or village corporations.
- ◆ If the producer is an entity, must have signature authority to make management decisions on the land.

Land Eligibility:

- ◆ Land must have an agricultural production use such as cropland, rangeland, grassland, pasture or non-industrial private forest land. Lands used for subsistence are also considered agricultural.
- ◆ Land must be in compliance with Highly Erodible Land and wetland conservation provisions

Resource Concern Eligibility:

- ◆ There must be a valid natural resource problem on the land to receive NRCS financial assistance for the project. An NRCS conservation planner will help you determine specific natural resource concerns on your property.

How to Apply

Applications for EQIP financial assistance are accepted throughout the year. If your application is selected, you will enter into a contract with NRCS to receive financial assistance for the cost of implementing conservation practices. Payment rates for conservation practices are reviewed and set each fiscal year.

Apply at your local USDA Service Center. Find your nearest Service Center at farmers.gov/servicelocator.

DO YOU QUALIFY AS A HISTORICALLY UNDERSERVED PRODUCER?



Overview

The 2018 Farm Bill includes provisions that address the unique circumstances and concerns of socially disadvantaged, beginning, limited resource, and veteran farmers and ranchers (“historically underserved producers”). The 2018 Farm Bill provides for voluntary participation, offers incentives, and focuses on equity in accessing USDA programs and services.

USDA is committed to ensuring that its programs and services are accessible to all our customers, fairly and equitably, with emphasis on reaching the underserved and socially disadvantaged farmers, ranchers, and tribes of our state.

Historically Underserved Groups:

- ◆ Beginning Farmer or Rancher
- ◆ Limited Resource Farmer or Rancher
- ◆ Socially Disadvantaged Farmer or Rancher
- ◆ Veteran Farmer or Rancher



Self-Evaluation Determination Questions

Use these questions as your guide to the NRCS-CPA-1200 Conservation Program Application block 9. To qualify as historically underserved, you must answer yes to all of the questions within a category.

Beginning Farmer or Rancher

Have you operated a farm or ranch for 10 consecutive years or less?

Yes	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Will you be materially and substantially participating in the operation of the farm or ranch such that if you did not, the operation would be seriously impaired?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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If you are a legal entity or joint operation, do all members of the entity or operation individually qualify?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Veteran Farmer or Rancher

Did you serve in the United States Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, or Coast Guard, including the reserve components thereof, and were you discharged or released therefrom, under conditions other than dishonorable?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Have you operated a farm or ranch for 10 consecutive years or less; or have you obtained veteran status during the most recent 10 year period?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

If you are a legal entity or joint operation, do all individual members independently qualify?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Limited Resource Farmer or Rancher

In each of the last two years, was your direct or indirect gross farm sales less than or equal to the pre-determined amount found online at the NRCS Limited Resource Farmer Tool? <https://lrftool.sc.egov.usda.gov/>

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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In each of the last two tax years, was your total household income less than the “County/Area Value,” as found online on the NRCS Limited Resource Farmer Tool?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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If you are a legal entity or joint operation, do all members of the entity or operation individually qualify?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Socially Disadvantaged Farmer or Rancher

Are you, as the individual or entity applying, a member of a socially disadvantaged group? (Including: American Indians or Alaska Natives, Asians, Black or African Americans, Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders, Hispanics.)

Gender alone is not a socially disadvantaged group for the purposes of NRCS conservation programs.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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If you are a legal entity or joint operation, is at least 50 percent ownership of the entity or operation held by socially disadvantaged individuals?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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ADVANCE PAYMENT OPTIONS FOR EQIP



Overview

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) advance payment option limits out-of-pocket conservation costs for historically underserved producers. EQIP provides at least 50 percent of the contracted payment for each conservation practice up front, before the practice is implemented, to purchase materials or contract services.



Under the general EQIP payment process, a producer is reimbursed after a conservation practice is implemented. This process often means that producers must pay up front costs, which can be cost prohibitive for many historically underserved producers. The advance payment must be expended within 90 days of receipt, and the practice completed as agreed to on the EQIP schedule of operations.

Who is Eligible for an Advanced Payment?

- ◆ Beginning Farmer or Rancher
- ◆ Socially Disadvantaged Farmer or Rancher
- ◆ Veteran Farmer or Rancher:
- ◆ Limited Resource Farmer or Rancher

How it Works

All EQIP practices are eligible for advance payments, including vegetative, structural, and management practices, and conservation activity plans. Producers can use the option for as many or as few practices as they choose and can change their decision before they receive payment.

Historically underserved farmers producers are also eligible for a higher payment rate.

Advance Payment Requirements

An advance payment provides the opportunity to receive up to 50 percent of the payment up front to purchase immediately-needed materials and services. However, there are some requirements you should be aware of before making the request:

- ◆ Any funds not expended within 90 days of receipt must be returned to NRCS. Therefore, participants should make sure that the advance payment is for an immediate need and any additional funding needed to purchase materials is ready and available before requesting the funds.
- ◆ Participants should also ensure their contract matches their design exactly. If not, your contract may need to be modified to reflect the appropriate practice component and quantities to exactly match your completed conservation practice design.

Schedule of Operations

Conservation practices must be completed as scheduled in your contract. The conservation practices associated with advance payment must be completed as scheduled in the EQIP schedule of operations. Failure to complete the conservation practices as scheduled will result in the EQIP contract being in violation with the terms and conditions of the contract.

CONSERVATION COMPLIANCE

Participating in most USDA conservation programs requires compliance with Highly Erodible Land Compliance and Wetland Conservation provisions.



To maintain eligibility for most USDA programs, applicants must comply with provisions for Highly Erodible Lands (HEL) and Wetland Compliance (WC). These provisions were enacted by Congress through the Food Security Act to:

- ◆ Reduce soil loss due to wind and water erosion;
- ◆ Protect the Nation's long-term capability to produce food and fiber;
- ◆ Reduce sedimentation and improve water quality; and
- ◆ Assist in preserving the values, acreage, and functions of the Nation's wetlands.

USDA Self Certification

Applicants must self-certify their compliance with the Farm Service Agency (FSA). With compliance certification you agree that you will not:

- ◆ Produce an agricultural commodity on highly erodible land without having an adequate conservation system in place;
- ◆ Plant an agricultural commodity on a converted wetland;
- ◆ Convert a wetland to make possible the production of an agricultural commodity.

What Does This Mean to You?

If you are doing any type of work on the property such as cleaning out fence lines, clearing trees, adding tile, replacing tile, adding fill or working up pasture, ensure you have contacted FSA ahead of time so you do not jeopardize USDA program eligibility.

NRCS will make a technical determination whether your property is HEL or non-highly erodible land. NRCS will also determine locations of wetlands and assign labels to them if exemptions apply. This process can vary from weeks to months, depending on complexity.

NRCS will look at past aerial photos and a soil map of the site. Quite often, NRCS may make the determination right in the office using off-site methods. NRCS may also make site visits to verify findings. Site visits will add time to the process as field determinations may only be made when conditions are favorable.

Once NRCS makes the determination, a letter and map will be issued explaining the decision-making process followed. If the decision is adverse, and you disagree, you will have an opportunity to appeal and provide information that may not have been considered.



NRCS Contact Information

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800 E. PALMER-WASILLA HWY.
PALMER, AK 99645-6546
(907) 761-7700

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Fairbanks, AK 99709
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WEST TEAM

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Homer
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(907) 235-8177

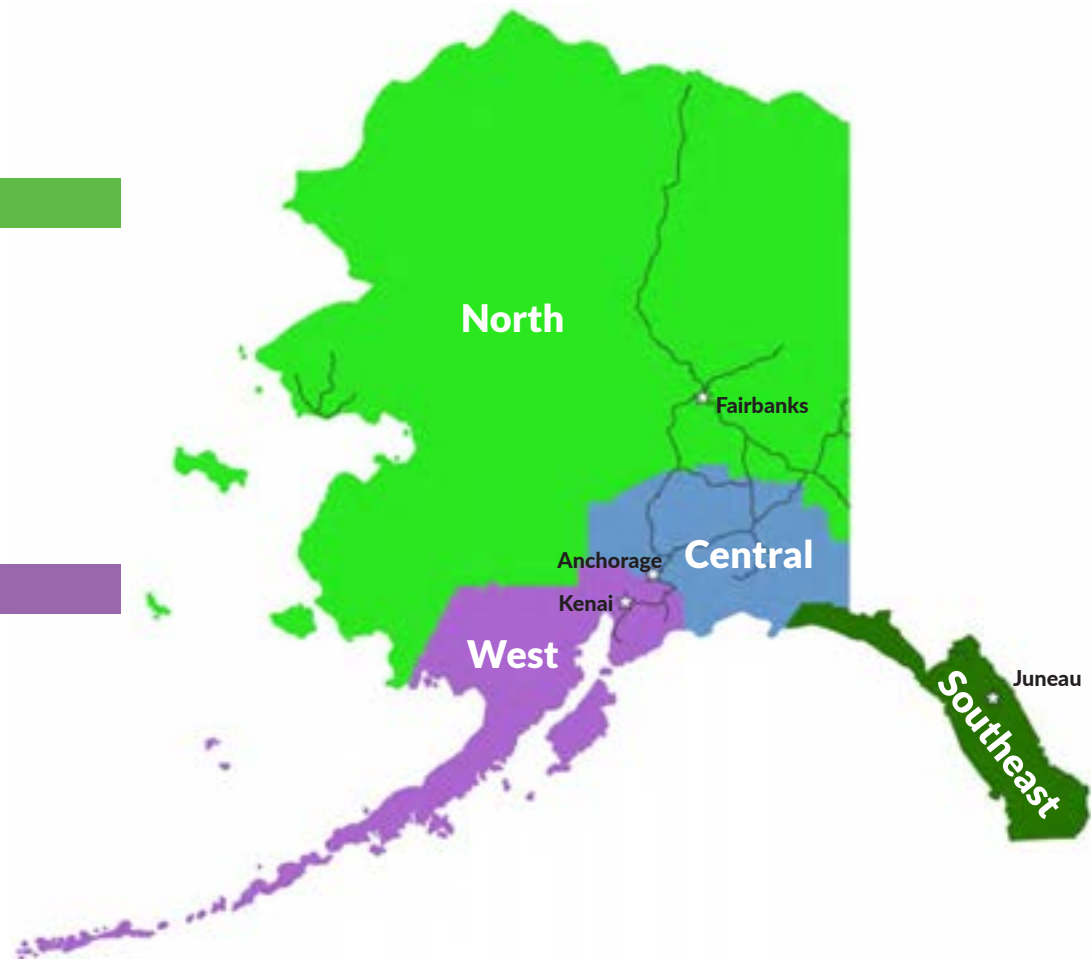
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301 Research Court, Room 245
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Farmers.Gov Website: www.farmers.gov