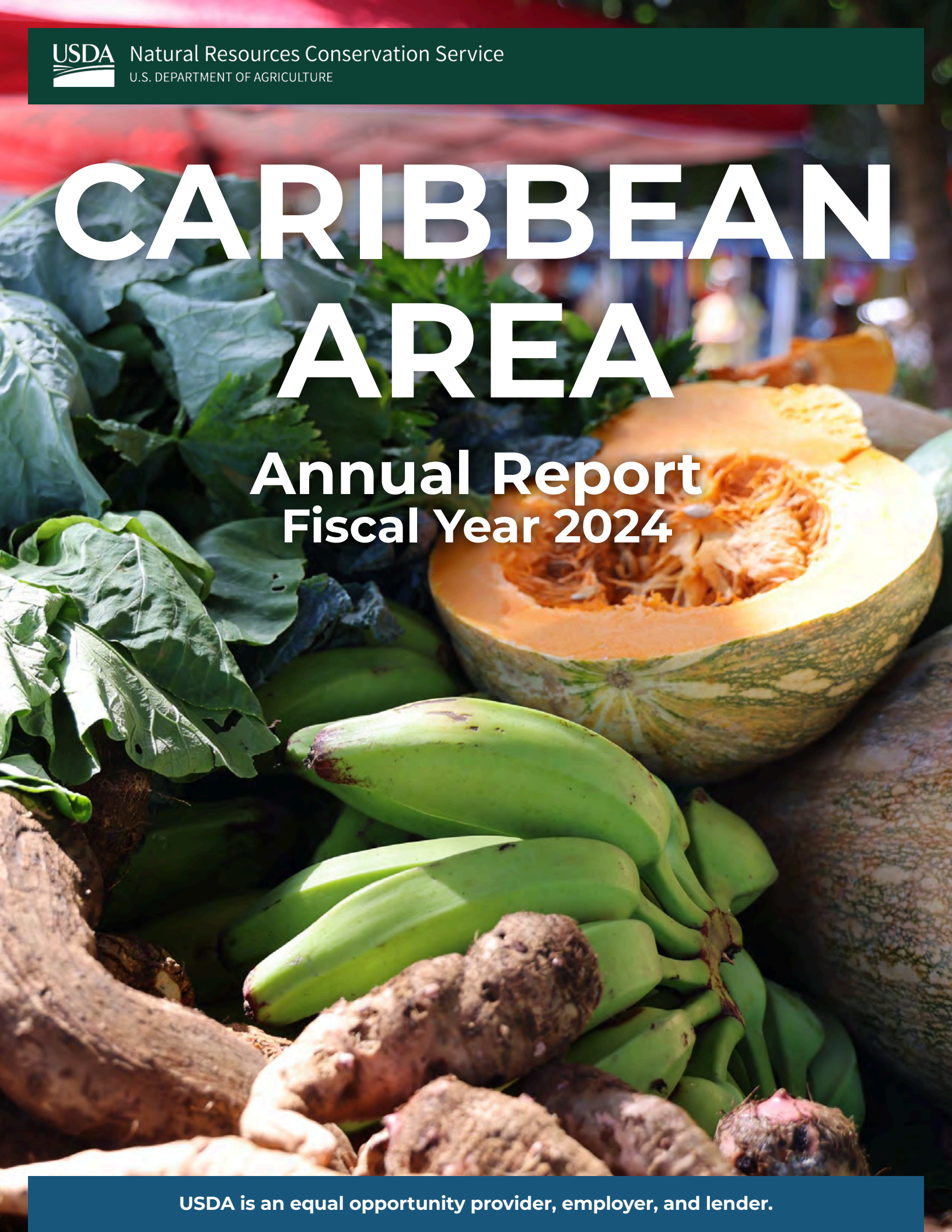
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

CARIBBEAN AREA

Annual Report
Fiscal Year 2024



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Scan the QR code to check out the NRCS Caribbean Area webpage or visit nrcs.usda.gov/caribbean-area.

FARM BILL CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

NRCS provides conservation solutions so farmers can protect natural resources and feed a growing world. We are committed to putting **farmers first** by working hand in hand with our communities to protect and improve the health of our soil, water, air, plants, animals and people. Much of the conservation work completed on private lands is done with financial assistance through Farm Bill Conservation Programs.

Total program payments for Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 were about **$12,054,584**.

Financial Assistance By Programs:

The **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)** is NRCS' flagship financial assistance program for working lands, helping producers make improvements to benefit agriculture and conservation.

EQIP

- Farmer Contracts – 227
- Obligations – $22,899,856
- Payments – $11,694,340
- Acres – 9,787

The **Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)** offers financial incentives for producers to not only maintain the existing level of conservation on the land, but to incorporate new or advanced conservation activities to take stewardship to the next level.

CSP

- Farmer Contracts – 66
- Obligations – $1,880,368
- Payments – $360,244
- Acres – 5,628

These programs are helping producers prepare their operations for the challenges ahead – from an increasing global population to extreme weather events like severe droughts and flooding.

Sugar Brown Farm in St. Thomas, VI. Photo by Outreach Coordinator Némesis Ortiz Declet.

EMERGENCY WATERSHED PROTECTION PROGRAM

The **Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWPP)** helps local communities recover after a natural disaster. EWPP offers technical and financial assistance to help communities relieve imminent threats to life and property caused by floods, fires, windstorms, and other natural disasters. During **FY 2024**, about **$3,135,088** were obligated in agreements meant for the mitigation of Hurricane Fiona in the Caribbean Area. There were **54** completed debris removal projects.

In August 2024, the Caribbean Area was hit by Tropical Storm Ernesto. By the end of **FY 2024**, NRCS received letters requesting EWPP support from three Soil and Water Conservation Districts (Caribbean, Southwest and East), the Municipality of Vega Alta, PR, as well as the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture. The potential sites will be evaluated for damages to determine EWPP eligibility throughout FY 2025.

State Environmental Compliance Specialist Lisbeth San Miguel-Rivera conducting a Damage Survey Report (DSR) at a St. Thomas, VI, potential EWPP site that was impacted by Tropical Storm Ernesto. Photo by Civil Engineer Rolando Collazo.

ENGINEERING DIVISION

Through our **Engineering Division** we support our Field Offices and clients with technical advice, design and certification of NRCS engineering practice standards. Engineering staff certified **562** engineering conservation practices during **FY 2024**, resulting in **$11,104,762** in **customer reimbursements** for implemented practices.

The most certified Engineering Conservation Practices:

1. **Combustion System Improvements**
2. **Clearing and Snagging**
3. **Obstruction Removal**
4. **Roof Runoff structures**

Agricultural Engineer Ángel Anaya Archila overseeing geotechnical investigations in the St. Thomas, VI, Bordeaux Watershed as part of an irrigation water quality and quantity infrastructure and management plan project. Photo by Civil Engineer Rolando Collazo.

SOILS DIVISION

During **FY 2024**, the Soils Division worked on extending an interagency agreement with the United States Forest Service to continue an **Ecological Site Descriptions** field data collection project, evaluated **25 requests** for **Highly Erodible Land (HEL)** and **wetland determinations** for **Food Security Act** compliance, provided **trainings** (about wetlands, Web Soil Survey, Dynamic Soil Properties, and Hydric Soils) to **over 100 participants**, and assisted and responded **24 Farm Protection Policy Act evaluations** on **1,812 acres**.

Technical soil services (TSS) provided in **FY 2024** benefited **over 1,652 people** and close to **500** different people, groups and organizations in the Caribbean Area. The provided **TSS** has had an impact in over **6,500 acres**.

The **National Cooperative Soil Survey** and the **Soil and Plant Science Division** conducted **7** projects, updating **74,688 acres** of the **Soil Survey Geographic Database (SSURGO)**, a tool that contains mapped information about soil and other natural components' properties. Updated **SSURGO** information aids the development of models to predict soils behavior under different uses for natural resources planning and management. The team also developed new local **Soil Survey** interpretations about a plantain productivity index, as well as cacao and coffee suitability. The interpretation aid land managers and users to identify the best areas to produce plantain, cacao and coffee based on the inherent soil properties of an area of interest.



Left: NRCS Caribbean Area staff analyzing a soil core while conducting technical soil services at a farm in Puerto Rico. Middle: Soil Scientist Manuel Matos demonstrating a soil profile. Left: Caribbean Area Major Land Resources staff conducting Coastal Zone Soil Surveys. Photos by Soil Scientist Jacqueline (Jacky) Vega.

ECOLOGICAL SCIENCES DIVISION

During **FY 2024**, the Ecological Sciences Division (ESD) conducted **over 12** professional development sessions and **five** technical workshops, strengthening the skills of **over 60** conservation planners and partners. They developed **five** new technical specifications, updated **over 10** conservation standards, and enhanced conservation planning quality assurance. Additionally, ESD specialists played a key role in sustainable agriculture, grazing management, and cultural resource protection, ensuring compliance with federal and local regulations while addressing the unique ecological challenges of the Caribbean. Looking ahead, the team remains committed to refining technical competencies, expanding conservation partnerships, and implementing innovative strategies to support resilient and sustainable landscapes.

Cultural resources are nonrenewable and may yield unique information about past societies and environments and provide answers for modern day social and conservation problems. As part of conservation planning, NRCS aims to protect the cultural resources to the same degree as the natural resources on farms. Photo by Némesis Ortiz Declet.

COOPERATIVE AND CONTRIBUTION AGREEMENTS

In 2024, NRCS invested **$3,562,309** in **15 Caribbean Partnerships for Conservation** agreements and **6 Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)** to assist our farmers and field offices with watershed assessments, cultural resource assessments, conservation technical assistance, dairy conservation practices and forestry, pollinator and wildlife practice planning and implementation.

Cover crop growing and mulched pathways in between beds. Photo extracted from Restoring Impacted Soils via Regenerative Agriculture in Rural Puerto Rico: A Market-Scale Demonstration Farm project progress report.

Restoring Impacted Soils via Regenerative Agriculture: What CIG is doing at JEVANA Farm

Financial opportunities, such as **CIG**, support the development of new tools, approaches, practices and technologies to further natural resources conservation. For farmers like Dr. Jesyka Meléndez and Dylan Lunney, this grant led to turning a 3-acre no-till market garden in Cayey, Puerto Rico, into a working proof-of-concept for the whole Caribbean. By using **CIG** to invest in their materials, tools and methods, Dr. Meléndez and Lunney implemented different conservation strategies such as cover crops and homemade compost teas in the garden, while monitoring organic matter, macro and micronutrients, as well as soil acidity and its microbiome. By the end of the project, they had healthier soil, high value crops (such as cherry tomatoes, sweet peas and kale) and the opportunity to spread the word by using their space as an educational garden for students, local farmers and the public.

HELPING PEOPLE HELP THE LAND

26,835 acres of conservation applied to improve **Environmental Quality**

3,226 acres of cropland with conservation applied to improve **Soil Health & Sustainability**

527 acres of conservation applied on land being actively managed for **Wildlife Habitat**

817 acres of land with conservation applied to improve **Irrigation Efficiency**

Plantain field with implemented countour farming conservation practice. Photo by Némesis Ortiz Declet.