Overview

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides financial assistance to eligible entities for purchasing Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). The purpose of ALE is to protect the agricultural viability and related conservation values of eligible land by limiting nonagricultural uses.

ACEP-ALE protects working farms and ranches by conserving cropland, grassland, rangeland, and pastureland from conversion to non-agricultural uses. A conservation easement is an interest in real property established by an agreement between a landowner and an eligible entity to prohibit some uses of the land, such as nonagricultural development. The landowner, entity and NRCS work together to determine which uses should be prohibited to achieve certain conservation goals.

Eligibility

Eligible Lands: ALE land eligibility is based on several factors. Land eligible for agricultural easements includes cropland, rangeland, grassland, pastureland and nonindustrial private forestland. NRCS will prioritize applications that protect agricultural uses and related conservation values of the land and those that maximize the protection of contiguous acres devoted to agricultural use.

Eligible Landowners: All landowners of record on the property deed must be compliant with Adjusted Gross Income and Highly Erodible Land requirements. To enroll land in an ALE, the landowner chooses an eligible entity to hold the easement. The eligible entity then submits an application to NRCS. If selected for enrollment, the eligible entity enters into an agreement with NRCS.

Eligible Entity: Eligible entities purchase conservation easements from landowners to protect the agricultural and natural resource values of a property. Eligible entities include state or local government agencies, Indian Tribes, and non-governmental organizations with specific certification, such as a land trust. Only an eligible entity can hold an NRCS conservation easement. Landowners may not submit applications directly to NRCS as the easement is not held by the United States.
To Apply:
To offer land for enrollment in an ALE, eligible entities may submit application proposals anytime to NRCS. Eligible projects will be evaluated, ranked, prioritized, and selected for funding as budget allocations permit. The landowner does not submit an application directly to NRCS.

Easement Valuation:
The value of an easement is determined by an appraisal. The entity must provide an amount that is at least as much as the NRCS fund contribution. NRCS may contribute up to 50 percent of the fair market value of the agricultural land easement. Where NRCS determines that grasslands of special environmental significance will be protected, NRCS may contribute up to 75 percent of the fair market value of the agricultural land easement.

About NRCS, FSA and RMA
In more than 80 years of assisting farmers, ranchers, and private forestland owners, NRCS has assembled a body of technical standards to address natural resource concerns. The USDA’s Farm Services Agency (FSA) and Risk Management Agency (RMA) provide other critical resources such as farm loans, crop insurance and disaster assistance.

Benefits of Agricultural Easements

Agricultural land easements protect the long-term viability of the nation’s food supply by preventing conversion of productive working lands to non-agricultural uses and conserving vital cropland, pastureland and rangeland, including grasslands and shrub land.

These easements help keep lands in family hands while providing an enhanced opportunity to keep productive land available for entry into farming through increased availability of affordable land for young, beginning, veteran and under-represented farmers.

Just as important, these easements combined with the adoption of improved management techniques and additional conservation activities through an Agricultural Land Easement may assist with:

- Curbing carbon losses and possibly increasing carbon sequestration, especially on highly erodible cropland;
- Reducing soil erosion;
- Improving soil quality, thus contributing to high water infiltration rates and less runoff;
- Increasing plant and animal diversity; and
- Improving water quality.

For more information on NRCS Farm Bill conservation programs visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/ca/programs/