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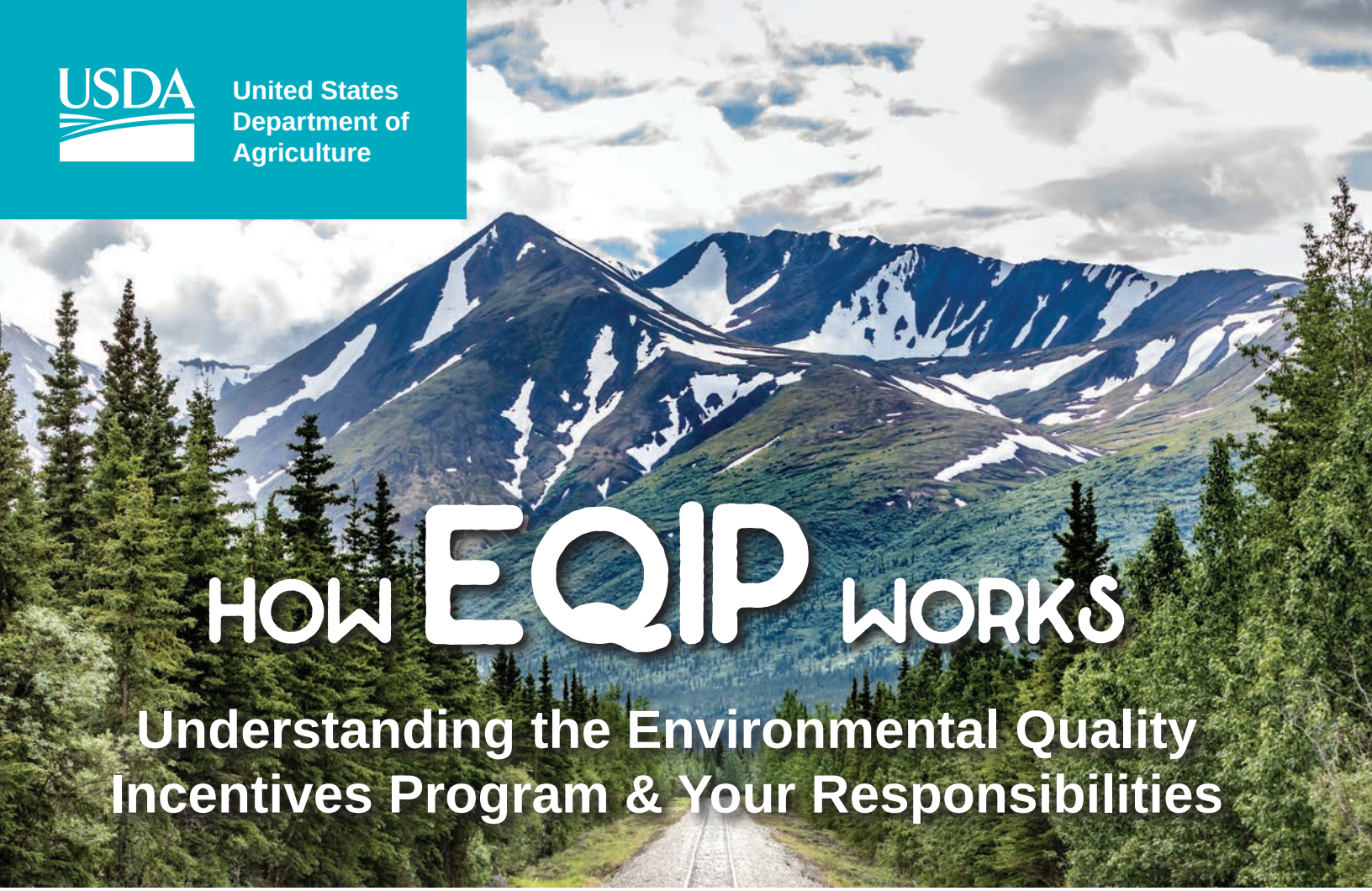

HOW EQIP WORKS

Understanding the Environmental Quality Incentives Program & Your Responsibilities

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

ALASKA

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE...

Thanks for your interest in working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to help you manage your natural resources in a sustainable manner!

This guide will help you understand the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) as you prepare to work with NRCS for the first time.

EQIP is a voluntary program. You choose whether or not to participate. EQIP provides technical and financial assistance to help plan and perform conservation practices on your land.

A conservation practice is an action or activity that you willingly apply to your operation with guidance from NRCS. Conservation practices can improve soil, water, plants, air, wildlife habitat, and related natural resources.
For eligibility purposes in Farm Bill programs, NRCS considers any land producing food or fiber, including subsistence hunting and gathering lands, as agricultural land.

Applying for and participating in federal conservation programs can be complex. This handbook is designed to help you understand the application and ranking process, your contract, and your responsibilities as a program participant.

TIP

You may also request assistance & submit a program application online via the farmers.gov portal. For more in-depth instructions visit:

farmers.gov/sign-in

This guide is organized by four primary steps...

#1 Get a Conservation Plan

#2 Apply for Financial Assistance

#3 Application Ranking & Selection

#4 Sign Your Contract & Complete Your Project

DO YOU MEET THE BASIC EQIP ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA?

If you can answer YES to the following questions, then you may be eligible to participate in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

- ❑ Do you have a social security number or employer identification number issued by the IRS?
- ❑ Will you maintain control of your land for the entire span of the proposed NRCS contract? Land control/ownership can be documented as a deed, lease, or another form of evidence.
- ❑ Is your adjusted gross income less than $900,000?
- ❑ If you're an entity, do you have signature authority to make management decisions on the land?
- ❑ Is your land used for agriculture, such as cropland, rangeland, grassland, pasture or non-industrial private forest land?
- ❑ Is your land in compliance with Highly Erodible Land and wetland conservation provisions?
- ❑ If the work you want to do with NRCS involves water, can you prove your water right (or willing to apply for water rights)?
- ❑ Do you have an interest in the agricultural or forestry operation on your land?

IMPORTANT

NRCS requires landowners to have a conservation plan when applying for EQIP. Our staff will help create a conservation plan for your property free of charge.

YOU MAY BE ELIGIBLE FOR ADDITIONAL INCENTIVES AS A HISTORICALLY-UNDERSERVED GROWER

The Farm Bill continues to address the unique circumstances and concerns of socially disadvantaged farmers, as well as beginning and limited resource farmers. It also includes veterans meeting certain conditions in the historically underserved category.

Check online to see if you qualify:

http://lrftool.sc.egov.usda.gov

Benefits include:

- **Dedicated funds** – at least 10 percent of EQIP funds are dedicated to socially disadvantaged and beginning farmers.
- **Higher payment rates** – up to 25 percent higher than the standard practice payment rates.

STEP 1: GET A CONSERVATION PLAN

IMPORTANT

Sometimes there's a waiting list to have NRCS staff help you develop a conservation plan. Contact your local office to begin the process.

What is a conservation plan? A conservation plan is a written record of resource concerns and conservation practices and systems you plan to implement and maintain on your property. This voluntary and confidential plan is your blueprint for the future of your land.

The plan combines your farming or production skills and your personal land management objectives with the science-based knowledge, skills and tools of a certified conservation planner.

NRCS Alaska requires landowners to have a conservation plan when applying for financial assistance programs such as EQIP.

How much does it cost?
There is no charge for NRCS assistance to develop a conservation plan.

How do I get a conservation plan?

- ❑ Call or visit an NRCS office and ask for assistance to develop a conservation plan.
- ❑ Fill out Form AD-2047 - Customer Data Worksheet Request for SCIMS Record Change, but complete Part A only. This form establishes you as a USDA customer and is required to be completed before receiving any NRCS assistance including developing a conservation plan.
- ❑ Describe your land management and resource problems you wish to address.
- ❑ Make an appointment for a site visit with an NRCS conservation planner.
- ❑ Walk your property with an NRCS planner, identifying your goals and objectives. The planner will collect data to evaluate the current conditions and develop solutions to your conservation concerns.
- ❑ Several conversations or field visits may be necessary with the planner, resource specialist, or an engineer to examine feasibility and options to meet your goals.
- ❑ After carefully examining the land and your goals, an NRCS planner will review alternative conservation plans with you.
- ❑ Once you select the plan you want to implement, the NRCS planner will provide you a conservation plan and review the requirements, engineering designs, and cost estimates. (You must check with local contractors for actual prices.)
- ❑ Save a copy of your plan to submit with your EQIP application.

What if I need to update my plan?
Changes in markets, weather or technology may cause you to reconsider some of the choices made in your plan. Contact your local NRCS office to discuss any changes you propose.

STEP 2: APPLY FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

- ❑ Discuss your conservation plan with an NRCS planner and ask about financial assistance. If a Farm Bill financial assistance program fits your goals, decide which practices you want to include in your application. Establish a time line.
- ❑ Work with an NRCS office and USDA's Farm Services Agency (FSA) to establish farm records and initiate eligibility paperwork. It is essential to be proactive in ensuring your eligibility requirements are met. NRCS cannot accept an application until farm records have been established.
- ❑ Establishing farm records can be a complex process. It involves all of the individuals listed on a deed and a site verification for wetland compliance and highly erodible soil determination.
- ❑ Organize your information - eligibility documentation includes income information, business plans, and more.
- ❑ Submit a completed application to your NRCS office identifying the practices you want to complete.
- ❑ NRCS initiates any required inter-agency consultations and inventories: cultural resources, essential fish habitat, and threatened and endangered species.

IMPORTANT

All applicants must comply with Highly Erodible Land and Wetland Conservation provisions to remain eligible for USDA program payments.

CONSERVATION COMPLIANCE: DON'T LOSE YOUR BENEFITS!

As part of your eligibility, you'll need to complete a form AD-1026 which documents compliance with Highly Erodible Land and Wetland Conservation provisions of the Farm Bill.

Essentially this means that plans for certain activities that involve wetlands or lands susceptible to high erosion must be evaluated by NRCS. Examples of those activities include:

- Land clearing
- Working new land
- Excavation
- Stump removal
- Creating a new drainage system
- Constructing a building or structure
- Land leveling
- Improving, modifying or maintaining an existing drainage system
- Dredging an area
- Filling an area
- Planting an agricultural commodity on land where an NRCS determination of Highly Erodible Land (HEL) or wetland has not been completed.

NEW TO USDA? ESTABLISH YOUR FARM RECORD WITH THE FARM SERVICE AGENCY BEFORE APPLYING FOR EQIP.

If you have never worked with the NRCS before, you will need to make an appointment with the Farm Service Agency (FSA) to establish records in the Service Center Information Management System (SCIMS). If you are interested in financial assistance you will also need to complete other forms and documentation to show eligibility for NRCS programs.

Why Farm Service Agency?
FSA and NRCS work together to provide program services to our clients. FSA is responsible for housing most of the farm records and client information. NRCS uses the FSA systems to check for eligibility for programs and payments. By working together, the two agencies decrease the amount of duplicate information clients need to provide to USDA.

When to submit forms
It takes time for the paperwork to be processed and additional information may be needed. It is important to start this process as soon as you have an interest in NRCS programs in order to ensure eligibility is established prior to any program deadline. If you apply for a NRCS program and the system does not show you or your entity as eligible, your application will not be evaluated for funding.

Forms needed by FSA

- ❑ **Form 2047:** Customer Data Worksheet Request for Business Partner Record Change
- ❑ **Form 2106:** Form to Assist in Assessment of USDA Compliance With Civil Rights Laws
- ❑ **Form AD 1026:** Highly Erodible Land Conservation and Wetland Conservation Determination
- ❑ **Form CCC 941:** Adjusted Gross Income Certification and Consent to Disclosure of Tax Information
- ❑ **Forms CCC 902-I and/or 902-E:** Farm Operating Plan for an Individual or Entity

What to bring

- ❑ Proof of identity such as a valid state driver's license or passport with your full legal name
- ❑ Your Social Security or Employer Identification number, property and mailing address, phone number
- ❑ Your last tax return. Ensure the name you use to establish USDA eligibility is the exact same as the name you use when filing your taxes.
- ❑ Proof of land control such as a deed or lease document
- ❑ Copy of the articles of incorporation, by-laws, partnership paperwork, etc.
- ❑ Copy of entity documents, if applicable.

TIP

It's your responsibility to work with the Farm Service Agency (FSA) to establish program eligibility & resolve any conflicts before an NRCS application can be considered for funding.

ONCE YOUR FARM RECORD HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED, YOU ARE ARE READY TO APPLY FOR EQIP.

Prepare and submit your EQIP application package with help from USDA staff. Forms are available in our offices and online at:

https://forms.sc.egov.usda.gov/

At a minimum, your application package will include the following components. Entities may require additional documentation. See an NRCS planner for specifics. Note: Items not specifically identified as FSA forms are submitted to NRCS.

Document name	Form number or explanation
Conservation Plan	Complete a conservation plan and identify the practices you wish to implement as part of the program application. See page 4.
Conservation Program Application	Form NRCS-CPA-1200 Complete after FSA farm records are established.
Average Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) Certification and Consent to Disclosure of Tax Information	Form CCC-941 (FSA) Not required for Alaska Native entities.
Highly Erodible Land/Wetland Conservation Certification (HEL/WC)	Form AD-1026 (FSA)
Members' Information	Form CCC-901: All members of an entity must meet eligibility requirements (FSA). Not required for Alaska Native entities
Signature Authority	Businesses and/or entities that utilize an EIN, but are not required to submit a membership list (such as churches and Alaska Native Tribes and Corporations), will be required to establish signature authority for NRCS programs using a resolution passed by the entity's' board of directors or similar governing body identified in their bylaws, corporate charter, or articles of incorporation.
Direct Deposit form	Form SF-1199: Electronic Fund Transfer for payments
Power of Attorney form (Optional)	Form FSA-211 or signatory verification for entities

TIP

Bring your last tax return with you to your appointment. The name you enter on the NRCS application & eligibility forms must exactly match the name you use when filing your taxes with the IRS.

STEP 3: APPLICATION RANKING & SELECTION

FAQ

What is a funding pool?

An amount of money that NRCS has set aside for special categories of applications. Each funding pool has its own ranking criteria.

You many submit an EQIP application at any time; though NRCS will wait to rank applications periodically throughout the year based on pre-announced batching dates. So depending on when the next batching date is scheduled, it could be a while before you find out if your application is selected for funding.

NRCS Alaska announces batching deadlines on our website and via email to subscribers on Gov Delivery.

All eligible EQIP applications submitted by the batching date will be ranked at the same time. Applications are ranked separately for each funding pool. **All eligibility requirements must be completed before NRCS can rank your application.**

Ranking is a process that measures the expected environmental benefits of your application and assigns a numerical score showing how projects meet NRCS program objectives. NRCS selects the highest scoring applications for funding.

If your application is selected for funding, you choose whether or not to move forward with contract development.

To calculate ranking scores, NRCS uses a sophisticated tool called the Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART). This tool identifies applicable funding pools to provide the most advantageous situation for the applicant. CART evaluates each application's assessed practice schedule for five main areas:

1. **Vulnerability**
2. **Planned Practice Effects**
3. **Resource Priorities**
4. **Program Priorities**
5. **Cost Efficiency**

National and state resource and program priorities are set through the Farm Bill, USDA Secretary and NRCS Chief Priorities, and locally-led input from Local Work Groups and the State Technical Advisory Committee.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

You will be notified by mail or by phone if your application is selected for funding. Keep in mind it may take longer to be notified depending on when you submit your application and when NRCS has its next batching deadline.

STEP 4: SIGN YOUR CONTRACT & COMPLETE YOUR PROJECT

If your application is selected for funding, you may choose to sign a contract, which will obligate federal dollars to fund your project. By signing a contract, you are entering into a legal agreement where both you and NRCS have responsibilities.

The contract specifies conservation practices that you will complete, detailing when, where, and how many, as well as associated contract payments.

The contract consists of three documents, each requiring the applicant's signature:

- ❑ **The Contract Document (CPA-1202)**, identifies the period of performance, items agreed to, and expiration date of the contract.
- ❑ **The Appendix to the CPA-1202**, describes the responsibilities of all parties in the contract. The Appendix spells out the details of the contract.
- ❑ **The Schedule of Operations (CPA-1155)**, lists each practice to be implemented through the contract, including dates of implementation, extent of each practice planned as identified on the plan map, and amount of money (payment rate) approved for each practice.

You are responsible for securing all permits, hiring and paying any contractors, and promptly communicating with NRCS about any barriers that may change the contract's completion schedule.

NRCS will honor the terms of the contract to help you successfully complete your project. NRCS must also honor terminating the contract and recovering costs from you if you don't comply with all the terms detailed in the contract appendix.

NRCS is responsible for scheduling and completing technical assistance to complete designs or other technical plans not slated for Technical Service Providers (TSP) assistance. NRCS can initiate cost recovery if contract requirements are not met.

NRCS SPECIFICATIONS

Financial assistance from NRCS is available to private landowners because there is public benefit in solving natural resource concerns. Each practice must be completed to NRCS specifications to uphold the public investment in the contract. Success is measured by completing conservation practices, thus NRCS must certify the practice was done to specifications upon completion before payment can be issued.

IMPORTANT

All payments you receive from your EQIP contract are reported to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and should be reported as income on your tax return for the applicable year.

SUMMARY OF RESPONSIBILITIES

You must understand your responsibilities in all phases of your contract, from planning and design, through implementation and maintenance. By understanding your role, you can avoid inconvenient and costly delays, as well as a possible breach and termination of your contract.

As the program participant, you are likely the person making decisions for the property. You may be the landowner, an operator, or a land manager.

By participating in EQIP, you are entering into an agreement between you and NRCS. You may also enter into a separate agreement with a contractor, should you choose to hire one, though YOU are ultimately responsible for all conservation practice requirements.

YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES AS THE EQIP PARTICIPANT:

- ❑ Completes work according to the schedule of operations
- ❑ Makes planning decisions
- ❑ Makes payments for work and materials, as incurred
- ❑ Acquires permits
- ❑ Follows federal, state and local laws
- ❑ Satisfies archaeological and wetland regulations
- ❑ Supervises construction
- ❑ May hire a contractor to assist with practice implementation
- ❑ Hosts a pre-implementation meeting with NRCS and, if applicable, a contractor
- ❑ Is responsible for the construction and maintenance of the conservation practice in accordance with NRCS specifications

CONTRACTOR/PARTICIPANT RESPONSIBILITIES:

(The following also apply to you as the EQIP participant if you choose to complete the work yourself without hiring a contractor.)

- ❑ Contacts Alaska Dig Line (811) prior to starting construction
- ❑ Purchases and/or processes specified materials
- ❑ Follows plan drawings and specifications
- ❑ Is responsible for quality control and safety
- ❑ Verifies compliance with specifications
- ❑ Job safety and health

NRCS RESPONSIBILITIES:

- ❑ When the work is completed, NRCS must review the practice and certify that it meets our requirements before your payment can be processed.
- ❑ Explains conservation practices and alternatives
- ❑ May provide design assistance
- ❑ Approves contract payments to program participant(s)

IMPORTANT

Work with your planner to ensure you understand the contract requirements before signing it. YOU are ultimately responsible for the proper construction & maintenance of the conservation practices.

READ THE FINE PRINT: YOUR CONTRACT APPENDIX

The following are some examples from the contract appendix, but all items in the appendix are essential for a successful contract:

- ❑ Establish or implement the contracted practices to NRCS specifications, as scheduled, and operate and maintain these practices for the intended purpose and life span, as identified in the contract.
- ❑ Do not start a practice before the contract is fully executed.
- ❑ Apply at least one practice within 12 months.
- ❑ Notify NRCS of the loss of control of land under the contract.
- ❑ Discontinue work or practice implementation immediately if a previously unknown endangered species, cultural, archaeological, or historical site is encountered.

HIRING A TECHNICAL SERVICE PROVIDER (TSP)

Technical Service Providers (TSP) are conservation professionals from the private sector, non-profit organizations, and public agencies that can provide direct technical assistance on behalf of USDA.

Technical assistance includes conservation planning and design, layout, installation, and checkout of approved conservation practices.

NRCS has traditionally provided these technical services and will continue to do so. Since the 2002 Farm Bill, however, USDA offers producers the option of reimbursement for technical assistance provided by certified TSPs for certain practices.

If technical assistance is provided by a Technical Service Provider (TSP), the design must meet NRCS standards and be certified by the TSP.

If you are applying for funding for a conservation activity plan (CAP), you will have to hire a TSP to develop the plan.

FAQ

What is a TSP?

Technical Service Providers are conservation professionals from the private sector, non-profit and public agencies than can provide direct technical assistance on behalf of USDA.

GETTING PAID FOR YOUR EQIP PRACTICES

EQIP payments work similar to a mail-in rebate: you pay the costs up-front to install the conservation practices, then NRCS issues you a payment via direct deposit after we certify the work has been completed according to our specifications. Therefore, it's important to consider your out-of-pocket costs and determine if the proposed project makes financial sense for your operation.

NRCS offers advance payments that can minimize your out-of-pocket costs if you quality as a historically underserved producer. Ask your local NRCS office about advance payments.

YOUR INFORMATION: WHAT'S PUBLIC AND WHAT'S PRIVATE?

IMPORTANT

Examples of documents protected under Section 1619 include: conservation plans, wetland determinations, Highly Erodible Land determinations, acreage amounts, flood damage surveys, and more.

As a federal government agency, NRCS is bound by several federal laws that govern what information about your program participation is releasable and what is not.

The Freedom of Information Act
The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is a federal law that allows any person the right to obtain federal agency records. All United States government agencies are required to disclose records upon receiving a written request for them, except for those records that are protected from disclosure. This right of access is enforceable in court.

Any person can request access to NRCS records. Requests must be in writing and indicate that the request is made under FOIA. The NRCS FOIA officer will determine whether the requested information is exempt from mandatory disclosure. For example, information that is classified to protect national security, proprietary business information, and private personal information is protected.

The Privacy Act of 1974
The Privacy Act of 1974 was enacted to protect U.S. citizens against unwarranted invasions of their privacy stemming from the collection, maintenance, use, and disclosure of personal information by federal agencies. It also grants people the right to access their own records maintained by government agencies, unless those records are covered by an exemption. It also provides procedures for correcting errors in records.

The Privacy Act requires that federal agencies take steps to protect private information. NRCS employees must protect the integrity, security, and confidentiality of the records. All private information is kept in secure areas when not in use during office hours.

Section 1619 of the Farm Bill
Section 1619 of the Farm Bill prohibits USDA from disclosing certain information that has been provided by landowners and producers in order to participate in USDA programs, except as necessary for delivering technical assistance. Some information developed by NRCS concerning your property is also protected.

Section 1619 of the Farm Bill prohibits the release of information that falls into these categories:

- Information concerning the operation, practices, or the land itself.
- Geospatial information, such as maps, surveys, and charts. Aerial photographs may be protected only if they contain data identifying characteristics of the land.

Section 1619 does not prohibit the disclosure of payment information, including the names and addresses of USDA payment recipients. Section 1619 does not apply to statistical or aggregated information that protects the name of individual landowners, producers, or sites.

Sometimes it's necessary for NRCS to share your information with partner agencies in order implement conservation programs. This is permitted under Section 1619, if the partner agency has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with NRCS.

GLOSSARY

Agricultural land: For eligibility purposes in Farm Bill programs, NRCS considers any land producing food or fiber, including subsistence hunting and gathering lands, as agricultural.

Beginning farmer: A person or entity with fewer than 10 years experience farming, ranching, or otherwise producing food or fiber on their land.

Conservation practice: A structural, vegetative, or management measure taken to maintain or improve the condition, productivity, sustainability, or usability of targeted resources. Examples of conservation practices include cover crops, nutrient management, and wildlife habitat improvement.

Contract: A binding agreement for the transfer of financial and technical assistance from NRCS for the installation and maintenance of specific conservation practices as scheduled and agreed to by NRCS and the participant.

Limited-resource farmer: A landowner with limited financial resources.

Non-industrial forest land: Rural land that has existing tree cover or is suitable for growing trees and is owned by any non-industrial private individual, group, association, corporation, Indian or Alaska Native tribe, that has definitive decision-making authority over the land.

Participant: A person or entity enrolled in an NRCS Farm Bill program, such as EQIP and who is receiving payment or is responsible for implementing the terms of a USDA contract to complete a conservation practice.

Producer: A person or entity engaged in producing food or fiber.

Socially disadvantaged: People who belong to racial or ethnic groups that historically have been underserved by USDA.

TIP

Sharing your success story is one of the best ways to educate others about natural resource conservation.

NRCS can help you tell your story and share it with other potential EQIP applicants.

SHARE YOUR CONSERVATION SUCCESS STORY

One of the best ways to educate others about natural resource conservation is by sharing your own conservation story. A personal account of your work with NRCS will help other landowners understand how NRCS can help them, too. Here are some ways you can help:

- Be featured in a conservation success story produced by NRCS
- Be available to be interviewed by local news media
- Host a site tour for visiting dignitaries, reporters or the public

Please let your NRCS conservationists know if you're willing to do any of the above and he or she will connect you with our public affairs staff.

CONTACT YOUR NRCS FIELD OFFICE

Kenai
110 Trading Bay Dr
Suite 160
Kenai, AK 99611
(907) 283-8732

Homer
432 E. Pioneer Ave
Suite C
Homer, AK 99603
(907) 235-8177

Kodiak
301 Research Court
Room 245
Kodiak, AK 99615
(907) 486-5598

Wasilla
1508A E Bogard Rd
Wasilla, AK 99654
(907) 373-6492

Juneau
709 W. 9th St
Suite 285C
Juneau, AK 99801
(907) 586-7220

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PO Box 21788
Juneau, AK 99802

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590 University Ave
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Fairbanks, AK 99709
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1420.5 Alaska Hwy
Delta Junction, AK
99737
(907) 895-4241

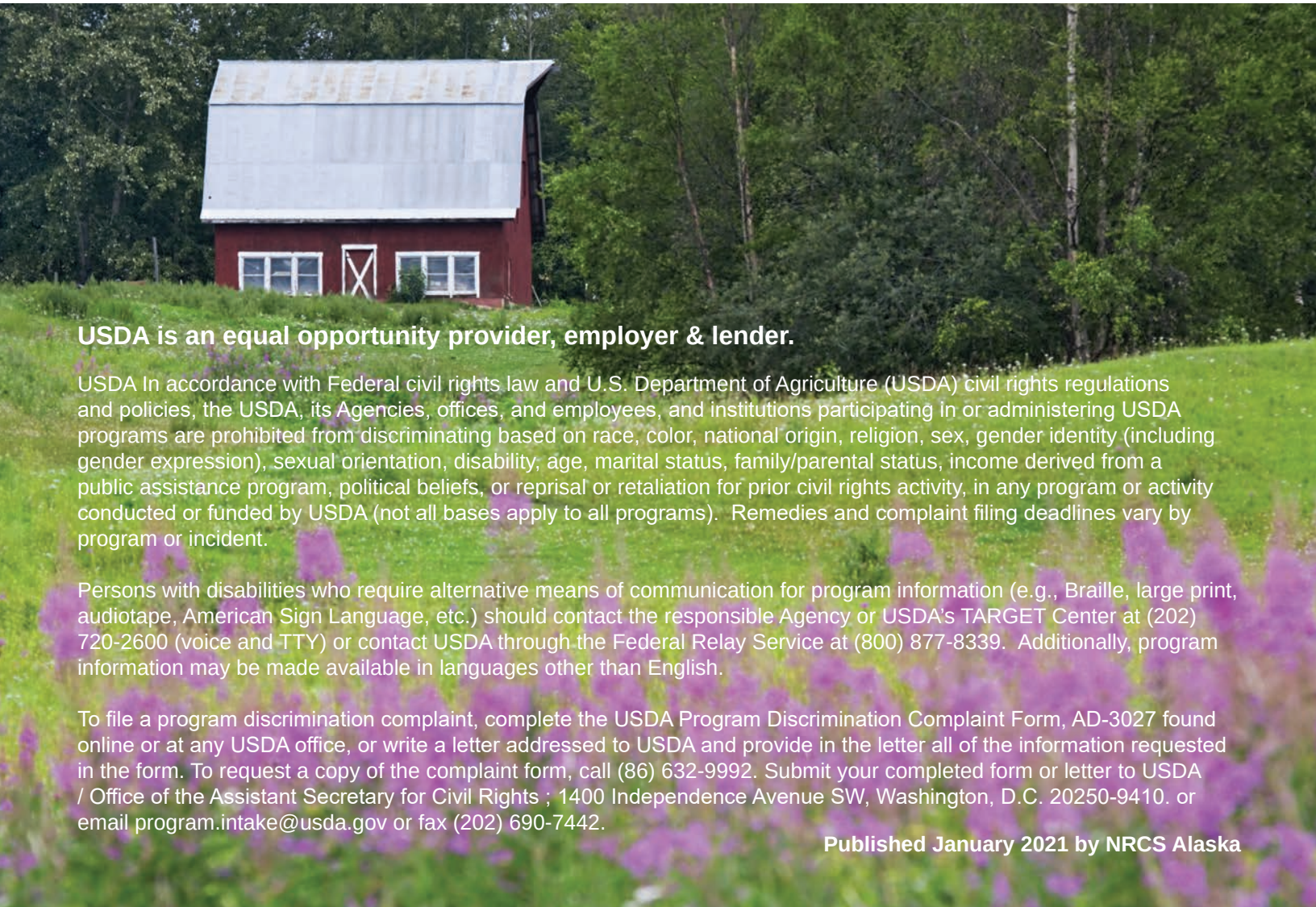
Mailing Address:
PO Box 547
Delta Junction, AK 99737

TIP

Learn more about NRCS programs & services on our website:

www.ak.nrcs.usda.gov

Follow us on Twitter @NRCS_AK



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Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact the responsible Agency or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027 found online or at any USDA office, or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (86) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA / Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights ; 1400 Independence Avenue SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410. or email program.intake@usda.gov or fax (202) 690-7442.

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