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Important Updates

Upcoming Deadlines/ Dates:

November 10- Office Closed- Veteran's Day (Observed)

November 15- Fall Planted Crop (Winter Wheat) Acreage Reporting Deadline

November 23- Office Closed- Thanksgiving

December 1- **NAP Application for Coverage Deadline** for Perennial Grasses and Fall Planted Crops

December 4- Deadline to return **COC election ballots** for LAA's 1

December 25- Office Closed- Christmas

****Also, producers that have notices of loss for LIP (Livestock Indemnity Program) and ELAP (Emergency Livestock Assistance Program) WE NEED YOUR SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION, so we can get these applications worked up.**

FSA Encourages Farmers and Ranchers to Vote in County Committee Elections

The 2023 Farm Service Agency County Committee Elections will begin on Nov. 6, 2023, when ballots are mailed to eligible voters. The deadline to return ballots to local FSA offices, or to be postmarked, is Dec. 4, 2023.

County committee members are an important component of the operations of FSA and provide a link between the agricultural community and USDA. Farmers and ranchers elected to county committees help deliver FSA programs at the local level, applying their knowledge and judgment to make decisions on commodity price support programs; conservation programs; incentive, indemnity and disaster programs for some commodities; emergency programs and eligibility. FSA committees operate within official regulations designed to carry out federal laws.

To be an eligible voter, farmers and ranchers must:

- Be of legal voting age or, if not of legal voting age, supervise and conduct the farming operation of an entire farm.
- Have an interest in a farm or ranch as either:
 - An individual who meets one or more of the following:
 - Is eligible and capable to vote in one's own right.
 - Is a partner of a general partnership.
 - Is a member of a joint venture.
 - Participates or cooperates in any FSA program that is provided by law. A cooperating producer is someone who has provided information to FSA about their farming or ranching operation(s) but may not have applied or received program benefits.

Eligible voters in Local Administrative Area (LAA 2) who do not receive a ballot can obtain one from their local FSA county office. Customers can identify which LAA they or their farming operation is in by using our new GIS locator tool available at fsa.usda.gov/elections.

Newly elected committee members will take office Jan. 1, 2024.

More information on county committees can be found at fsa.usda.gov/elections or by contacting the County FSA office.

USDA Launches Program to Support Agricultural Employers and Farmworkers, Aiming to Increase Economic and Supply Chain Resilience as Part of President Biden's Investing in America Agenda

The Biden-Harris Administration announced that agricultural employers can begin to apply for a pilot program designed to improve the resiliency of the food and agricultural supply chain by addressing workforce challenges farmers and ranchers face. USDA, in coordination with other federal agencies, is announcing up to \$65 million in grants available for the Farm Labor Stabilization and Protection Pilot Program (FLSP Program).

The program will help address workforce needs in agriculture, promote a safe and healthy work environment for farmworkers, and aims to support expansion of lawful migration pathways for workers, including for workers from Northern Central America, through the Department of Labor's seasonal H-2A visa program.

The FLSP Program seeks to advance the following Administration priorities:

- **Address current workforce needs in agriculture:** Based on stakeholder input, USDA identified that agricultural employers have experienced increased challenges finding an adequate supply of workers, which threatens our domestic capacity to produce a safe and robust food supply. This pilot program will help address these challenges by expanding the potential pool of workers, and enhancing employers' competitiveness by improving the quality of the jobs they offer.
- **Reduce irregular migration, including from Northern Central America through the expansion of regular pathways:** While U.S. agricultural operations seek additional workers, the Biden-Harris Administration has committed to promote the expansion of regular migration pathways, as part of the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection. The FLSP offers an opportunity to support this commitment, with economic benefits for foreign workers and their families, and professional and

economic development opportunities for communities that send their workers to participate in the H-2A program.

- **Improve working conditions for farmworkers:** A stable and resilient food and agricultural sector relies on attracting and retaining skilled agricultural workers, and strong working conditions are critical to achieve that goal. Through this pilot program, USDA will support efforts to improve working conditions for agricultural workers, both U.S. and H-2A workers. The pilot will help ensure that workers know their rights and the resources available for them, and will promote fair and transparent recruitment practices.

Eligibility for this competitive grant program is limited to domestic agricultural employers who 1) anticipate meeting all Department of Labor (DOL) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) regulatory requirements for the H-2A program, including demonstrated effort to effectively recruit U.S.-based workers and hire all willing, able, and qualified U.S. workers; and 2) commit to, and indicate capacity to fulfill all Baseline Requirements, as well as any selected (supplemental) commitments that entail additive worker benefits and protections. Eligible employers include fixed-site employers, joint-employers, agricultural associations, and H-2A labor contractors.

The maximum award amount is \$2,000,000 and the minimum amount is \$25,000 per grant agreement (including any sub-awardees). Award amounts will be determined based on the projected number of full-time equivalent (FTE) agricultural employees, desired award level, as well as the competitive nature of the application. Consistent with the H-2A requirements, applicants must demonstrate insufficient availability of a U.S.-based workforce. The grant window for each recipient is 24 months, allowing producers to use the grant over the course of two agricultural production seasons.

Applications for the FLSP program must be received on or before 11:59 pm Eastern Time on November 28, 2023. More information about the application process can be found here: www.ams.usda.gov/flsp.

Turning Your Feedback Into Action on the Inflation Reduction Act

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has been given a once-in-a-generation opportunity to deliver \$19.5 billion in conservation funding through Conservation Technical Assistance, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the Conservation Stewardship Program, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, and for measuring the climate benefits that all this work will achieve. While we have been hard at work in the first year of implementation, we wouldn't have been able to achieve our current level of success without the thoughtful feedback from our partners.

To that end, we released an [Inflation Reduction Act Implementation Request for Information](#) in November 2022. NRCS received over 450 comments that are helping improve our program delivery by removing administrative burdens, streamlining, and expediting program enrollment; building agency and partner capacity to deliver services more quickly; and providing more equitable services. We are using this feedback to expand climate-smart agriculture and forestry activities and refine our measuring, monitoring, reporting and verification of greenhouse gas reduction efforts.

These thoughtful suggestions have helped accelerate our implementation of the Inflation Reduction Act. So far in fiscal year 2023, NRCS is already implementing the majority of recommendations you submitted.

Your feedback and recommendations resulted in some quick wins for NRCS, including:

- Streamlining processes for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). The agency has begun an ongoing RCPP improvement effort, which includes program changes to improve our RCPP portal for partner use, simplifying agreements, and streamlining the reimbursement process. For ACEP, we raised the national appraisal review threshold and have added 22 new certified entities this year.

- Leveraging over \$140 million in agreements with partners to deliver increased boots on the ground results, through conservation districts, state agencies, and many other conservation-focused organizations.
- Expanding connections with retired employees through the Association of Retired Conservation Service Employees to provide mentoring to the incoming workforce and added additional senior experienced workers for more workforce capacity.
- Supporting a newly staffed Technical Service Provider (TSP) branch to expedite review of applications and enhance customer service.
- Investing in training staff to increase competency around diversity, equity and inclusion principles.
- Expanding our outreach, resulting in welcoming over 60,000 new customers this year.
- Reviewing NRCS' recognized Climate Smart Agriculture and Forestry practices and developing an expanded list of practices based on available scientific research.

These changes based on your suggestions are a large part of the reason that NRCS is in such a strong position as we look ahead to the next year of increased funding in fiscal year 2024.

Of course, we recognize that there is more we can do to improve, and we are committed to continuing to do so with your feedback. Additional recommendations you submitted that will significantly improve our delivery of the Inflation Reduction Act will be implemented in the upcoming fiscal years. Be looking for more improvements related to our Technical Service Provider program; our Measuring, Monitoring, Reporting and Verification to quantify carbon sequestration and greenhouse gas emission reductions from conservation investments; and our continuing efforts to streamline our programs.

Biden-Harris Administration Makes Available Historic \$3 Billion for Climate-Smart Practices on Agricultural Lands Through Investing in America Agenda

USDA is making more than \$3 billion in funding available for agricultural producers and forest landowners nationwide to participate in voluntary conservation programs and adopt climate-smart practices in fiscal year 2024 as part of President Biden's Investing in America agenda.

These funds are provided by President Biden's [Inflation Reduction Act – the largest climate and conservation investment in history](#). This law invests an additional \$19.5 billion for USDA's popular conservation programs. These programs also advance the President's Justice40 Initiative, which aims to ensure 40 percent of the overall benefits of certain climate, clean energy, and other federal investments reach disadvantaged communities that have been marginalized by underinvestment and overburdened by pollution. On the heels of [last week's announcement](#) that USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) saw record producer interest in these resources in fiscal year 2023, the agency is now accepting applications from producers interested in this additional conservation assistance for fiscal year 2024.

These additional investments are estimated to help hundreds of thousands of farmers and ranchers apply conservation to millions of acres of land. These funds provide direct climate mitigation benefits, advance a host of other environmental co-benefits, and expand access to financial and technical assistance for producers to advance conservation on their farm, ranch or forest land through practices like cover cropping, conservation tillage, wetland restoration, prescribed grazing, nutrient management, tree planting and more.

USDA is opening up the application period for fiscal year 2024 conservation assistance giving producers the opportunity to apply for this historic funding. However, in the event of a lapse in government funding, technical assistance, one-on-one help in answering questions, and other support for producers in navigating the application process would not be immediately available until the funding lapse ends. In the event of a funding lapse, NRCS would notify producers when staff are available to assist.

What's New

Expansion of Climate-Smart Agriculture and Forestry Activities supported by the Inflation Reduction Act

NRCS is increasing [Climate-Smart Agricultural and Forestry Mitigation Activities](#) eligible for Inflation Reduction Act funding for fiscal year 2024 through the [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#) (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). These in-demand activities are expected to deliver reductions in greenhouse gas emissions or increases in carbon sequestration as well as significant other benefits to natural resources like soil health, water quality, pollinator and wildlife habitat and air quality.

In response to feedback received from conservation partners, producers and NRCS staff across the country, NRCS considered and evaluated activities based on scientific literature demonstrating expected climate change mitigation benefits. To learn more, download the [list of practices](#) and a [fact sheet](#).

When applied through this framework, these activities are expected to deliver reductions in greenhouse gas emissions or increases in carbon sequestration. NRCS will continue to evaluate additional practices as science progresses and will evaluate and identify quantification methodologies during the fiscal year.

Expansion of priorities for the ACEP investments through the Inflation Reduction Act

Additionally, NRCS is expanding the national priority areas eligible for Inflation Reduction Act funding for [Agricultural Conservation Easements Program](#) (ACEP) easements in fiscal year 2024.

For ACEP Agricultural Land Easements (ALE), NRCS is prioritizing securing:

- Grasslands in areas of highest risk for conversion to non-grassland uses to prevent the release of soil carbon stores.
- Agricultural lands under threat of conversion to non-agricultural uses.
- State-specific priorities including rice cultivation on subsiding highly organic soils.

For ACEP Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE), NRCS is prioritizing:

- Land with soils high in organic carbon.
- Eligible lands that will be restored to and managed as forests like bottomland hardwood forests.
- Eligible lands in existing forest cover that will be managed as forests.
- Several geographically specific priorities (i.e., former cranberry bogs, wet meadows, and ephemeral wetlands in grassland ecosystems).

Background

The Inflation Reduction Act provides funds to the EQIP, CSP, ACEP and [Regional Conservation Partnership Program](#) (RCPP). For fiscal year 2024, which begins Oct. 1, 2023, the Inflation Reduction Act provides an additional \$1.65 billion for EQIP, \$472 million for CSP, and \$189 million for ACEP, and \$754 million for RCPP.

How to Apply

NRCS accepts producer applications for its conservation programs year-round, but producers interested in this cycle of Inflation Reduction Act funding should apply as soon as possible. Producers interested in EQIP or CSP should apply by [their state's ranking dates](#) for consideration this year. Funding is provided through a competitive process and will include an opportunity to address the unmet demand from producers who have previously sought funding for climate-smart conservation activities.

Similarly, NRCS accepts applications year-round for ACEP Agricultural Land Easements (ACEP-ALE) and Wetland Reserve Easements (ACEP-WRE), producers interested in this funding cycle must apply by Nov. 13, 2023. NRCS will also consider previously unfunded applications in this round.

NRCS plans to roll out the next RCPP funding opportunity in late January 2024.

NRCS will announce other opportunities for agreements and partnerships at the state level for fiscal year 2024 in the coming months. The Inflation Reduction Act provides funding to support those strategic partnerships with local, regional and national organizations. This will include outreach to underserved producers to ensure Inflation Reduction Act climate funding is reaching those who have been previously unable to access conservation assistance.

Interested producers should contact the NRCS at their [local USDA Service Center](#).

USDA Launches Loan Assistance Tool to Enhance Equity and Customer Service

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) launched a new online tool to help farmers and ranchers better navigate the farm loan application process. This uniform application process will help to ensure all farm loan applicants receive equal support and have a consistent customer experience with USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) regardless of their individual circumstances.

USDA experiences a high rate of incomplete or withdrawn applications, particularly among underserved customers, due in part to a challenging and lengthy paper-based application process. The Loan Assistance Tool is available 24/7 and gives customers an online step-by-step guide that supplements the support they receive when working in person with a USDA employee, providing materials that may help an applicant prepare their loan application in one tool.

Farmers can access the Loan Assistance Tool by visiting farmers.gov/farm-loan-assistance-tool and clicking the 'Get Started' button. From here they can follow the prompts to complete the Eligibility Self-Assessment and start the farm loan journey. The tool is built to run on any modern browser like Chrome, Edge, Firefox, or the Safari browser, and is fully functional on mobile devices. It does not work in Internet Explorer.

The Loan Assistance Tool is the first of multiple farm loan process improvements that will be available to USDA customers on farmers.gov in the future. Other improvements and tools that are anticipated to launch in 2023 include:

- A streamlined and simplified direct loan application, reduced from 29 pages to 13 pages.
- An interactive online direct loan application that gives customers a paperless and electronic signature option, along with the ability to attach supporting documents such as tax returns.
- An online direct loan repayment feature that relieves borrowers from the necessity of calling, mailing, or visiting a local Service Center to pay a loan installment.



USDA Service Center

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