United States Department of Agriculture

Veteran Farmers

Natural Resources Conservation Service - North Carolina

2014 Farm Bill

Veterans of the U.S. Armed Services receive preference for NRCS conservation programs offered in the 2014 Farm Bill. This preference became effective on Feb. 7, 2014, the day the 2014 Farm Bill was signed. Preference will be given to eligible Veteran Farmers or Ranchers applying for several types of conservation financial assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

EQIP provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers in order to address natural resource concerns and deliver environmental benefits. These include improved water and air quality, conserved surface and ground water, reduced soil erosion and sedimentation, and improved or created wildlife habitat.

CSP helps agricultural producers maintain and improve their existing conservation systems and adopt additional conservation activities to address priority resources concerns. Participants earn CSP payments for conservation performance — the higher the performance, the higher the payment.

An eligible Veteran Farmer or Rancher:

- meets the definition of a Beginning Farmer or Rancher
- has not operated a farm or ranch; or hasn't operated a farm or ranch for more than 10 consecutive years
- was discharged or released, under conditions other than dishonorable, from the United States Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, its reserve components and the National Guard

Veteran Farmers or Ranchers may also qualify as a Socially Disadvantaged Farmer or Rancher by meeting additional criteria.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

Your guide to the new Farm Bill Conservation Programs

Below is a quick summary of changes made to conservation programs in the new Farm Bill, enacted on February 7, 2014. These programs are administered by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. The new Farm Bill streamlines conservation programs that enable farmers, ranchers and forest landowners to get assistance.

To get started with NRCS, visit **www.nrcs.usda.gov/GetStarted** or visit your local USDA service center.

	Previous Farm Bill	vs.	New and Streamlined Farm Bill
Financial Assistance	Environmental Quality Incentives Program Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program	→	Environmental Quality Incentives Program
	Conservation Stewardship Program	→	Conservation Stewardship Program
	Agricultural Management Assistance	→	Agricultural Management Assistance
Easements	Wetlands Reserve Program Grassland Reserve Program Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program	→	Agricultural Conservation Easement Program
	Healthy Forests Reserve Program	→	Healthy Forests Reserve Program
Partnerships	Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative Agricultural Water Enhancement Program Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative Great Lakes Basin Program	→	Regional Conservation Partnership Program
Other	Technical Service Providers	→	Technical Service Providers
	Conservation Innovation Grants	→	Conservation Innovation Grants
	Agriculture Conservation Experienced Services Program	→	Agriculture Conservation Experienced Services Program
	Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program – administered by Farm Service Agency	→	Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program
	Emergency Watershed Protection Program	→	*Emergency Watershed Protection Program**
	Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program	→	*Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program**

THE BASICS *OF THE* 2014 FARM BILL

The 2014 Farm Bill was enacted on February 7, 2014. Under the new Bill, NRCS will continue to offer voluntary Farm Bill conservation programs that benefit both agricultural producers and the environment. Furthermore, all conservation programs are made available for continual sign-up. Details on each program and new sign-up information will be available on our State website at www.nc.nrcs.usda.gov. Current Farm Bill contracts remain in effect.

The Farm Bill's conservation assistance is divided up into three categories.

Financial Assistance

NRCS offers financial and technical assistance to help agricultural producers make and maintain conservation improvements on their land.

EQIP provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers in order to address natural resource concerns and deliver environmental benefits such as improved water and air quality, conserved ground and surface water, reduced soil erosion and sedimentation or improved or created wildlife habitat.

The **Conservation Stewardship Program** helps agricultural producers maintain and improve their existing conservation systems and adopt additional conservation activities to address priority resource concerns. Participants earn CSP payments for conservation performance—the higher the performance, the higher the payment.

Easements

NRCS offers easement programs to eligible landowners to conserve working agricultural lands, wetlands, grasslands and forestlands.

The **Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)** provides financial and technical assistance to help conserve agricultural lands and wetlands and their related benefits. Under the Agricultural Land Easements component, NRCS helps Indian tribes, state and local governments and non-governmental organizations protect working agricultural lands and limit non-agricultural uses of the land. Under the Wetlands Reserve Easements component, NRCS helps to restore, protect and enhance enrolled wetlands.

Partnership

NRCS works with partners to leverage additional conservation assistance for agricultural producers and landowners in priority conservation areas.

The **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)** promotes coordination between NRCS and its partners to deliver conservation assistance to producers and landowners. NRCS provides assistance to producers through partnership agreements and through program contracts or easement agreements.

RCPP combines the authorities of four former conservation programs – the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program, the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Program, the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative and the Great Lakes Basin Program. Assistance is delivered in accordance with the rules of EQIP, CSP, ACEP and HFRP; and in certain areas the Watershed Operations and Flood Prevention Program.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Overview

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers in order to address natural resource concerns and deliver environmental benefits such as improved water and air quality, conserved ground and surface water, reduced soil erosion and sedimentation or improved or created wildlife habitat.

What's New in EQIP

The former Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program was folded into EQIP.

Advance payment opportunities now exist for veteran agricultural producers.

Advance payments for socially disadvantaged, beginning and limited resource farmers, Indian tribes and veterans were raised from 30 percent to 50 percent.

Payment limitations are set at $450,000 with no ability to waive.

Benefits

Eligible program participants receive financial and technical assistance to implement conservation practices, or activities like conservation planning, that address natural resource concerns on their land. Payments are made to participants after conservation practices and activities identified in an EQIP plan of operations are implemented. Contracts can last up to ten years in duration.

Eligibility

Agricultural producers and owners of non-industrial private forestland and Tribes are eligible to apply for EQIP. Eligible land includes cropland, rangeland, pastureland, non-industrial private forestland and other farm or ranch lands. Socially disadvantaged, beginning and limited resource farmers, Indian tribes and veterans are eligible for an increased payment rate and may receive advance payment of up to 50 percent to purchase materials and services needed to implement conservation practices included in their EQIP contract.

Applicants must:
- Control or own eligible land
- Comply with adjusted gross income limitation (AGI) provisions
- Be in compliance with the highly erodible land and wetland conservation requirements
- Develop an NRCS EQIP plan of operations; additional restrictions and program requirements may apply.

NRCS OFFERS FINANCIAL AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TO HELP AGRICULTURAL PRODUCERS MAKE AND MAINTAIN CONSERVATION IMPROVEMENTS ON THEIR LAND.

Benefits

Through CSP, participants take additional steps to improve the resource conditions on their land—including soil, air and habitat quality, water quality and quantity, and energy conservation.

CSP provides two types of payments through five-year contracts: annual payments for installing new conservation activities and maintaining existing practices; and supplemental payments for adopting a resource-conserving crop rotation. Producers may be able to renew a contract if they have successfully fulfilled the initial contract and agree to achieve additional conservation objectives. Payments are made soon as practical after October 1 of each fiscal year for contract activities installed and maintained in the previous year.

Eligibility

Eligible lands include private and Tribal agricultural lands, cropland, grassland, pastureland, rangeland and non-industrial private forest land. CSP is available to all producers, regardless of operation size or type of crops produced, in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and the Caribbean and Pacific Island areas. Applicants may include individuals, legal entities, joint operations or Indian tribes that meet the stewardship threshold for at least two priority resource concerns when they apply. They must also agree to meet or exceed the stewardship threshold for at least one additional priority resource concern by the end of the contract.

Producers must have effective control of the land for the term of the proposed contract. Contracts include all eligible land in the agricultural operation. Additional restrictions and program requirements may apply.

Overview

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) helps agricultural producers maintain and improve their existing conservation systems and adopt additional conservation activities to address priority resource concerns. Participants earn CSP payments for conservation performance—the higher the performance, the higher the payment.

What's New in CSP

The 2014 Farm Bill increased the program's focus on generating additional conservation benefits, removed the limitation on the number of non-industrial private forestland acres that can be enrolled in CSP, and increased flexibility to enroll land coming out of the Conservation Reserve Program.

Payment Limit: A person or legal entity may not receive more than $200,000 during fiscal years 2014 through 2018.

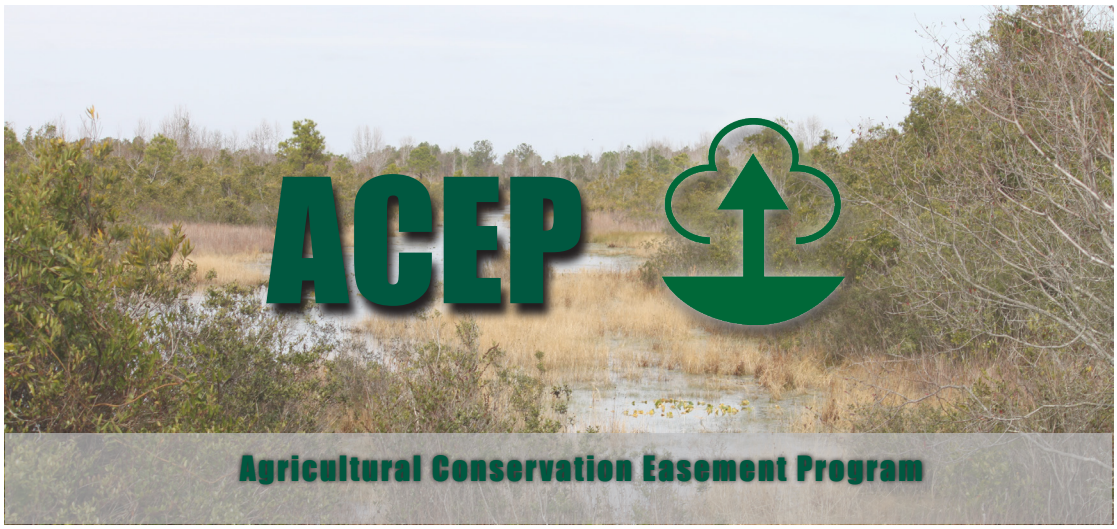
EASEMENT PROGRAM

Overview

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) provides financial and technical assistance to help conserve agricultural lands and wetlands and their related benefits. Under the Agricultural Land Easements component, NRCS helps Indian tribes, state and local governments and non-governmental organizations protect working agricultural lands and limit non-agricultural uses of the land. Under the Wetlands Reserve Easements component, NRCS helps to restore, protect and enhance enrolled wetlands.

What's New in ACEP

The ACEP is a new program that consolidates three former programs -- the Wetlands Reserve Program, Grassland Reserve Program, and Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program.



Benefits

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. Land protected by agricultural land easements provides additional public benefits, including environmental quality, historic preservation, wildlife habitat and protection of open space.

Wetland Reserve Easements provide habitat for fish and wildlife, including threatened and endangered species, improve water quality by filtering sediments and chemicals, reduce flooding, recharge groundwater, protect biological diversity and provide opportunities for educational, scientific and limited recreational activities.

Agricultural Land Easements

NRCS provides financial assistance to eligible partners for purchasing Agricultural Land Easements that protect the agricultural use and conservation values of eligible land. In the case of working farms, the program helps farmers and ranchers keep their land in agriculture. The program also protects grazing uses and related conservation values by conserving grassland, including rangeland, pastureland and shrubland. Eligible partners include Indian tribes, state and local governments and non-governmental organizations that have farmland or grassland protection programs.

Under the Agricultural Land component, 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.

NRCS OFFERS EASEMENT PROGRAMS TO ELIGIBLE LANDOWNERS TO CONSERVE WORKING AGRICULTURAL LANDS, WETLANDS, GRASSLANDS AND FORESTLANDS.

Wetland Reserve Easements

NRCS also provides technical and financial assistance directly to private landowners and Indian tribes to restore, protect, and enhance wetlands through the purchase of a wetland reserve easement. For acreage owned by an Indian tribe, there is an additional enrollment option of a 30-year contract. Through the wetland reserve enrollment options, NRCS may enroll eligible land through:

- Permanent Easements are conservation easements in perpetuity. NRCS pays 100 percent of the easement value for the purchase of the easement, and between 75 to 100 percent of the restoration costs.
- 30-Year Easements expire after 30 years. Under 30-year easements, NRCS pays 50 to 75 percent of the easement value for the purchase of the easement, and between 50 to 75 percent of the restoration costs.
- Term Easements are easements that are for the maximum duration allowed under applicable state laws. NRCS pays 50 to 75 percent of the easement value for the purchase of the term easement and between 50 to 75 percent of the restoration costs.
- 30-year Contracts are only available to enroll acreage owned by Indian tribes. Program payment rates are commensurate with 30-year easements.

For wetland reserve easements, NRCS pays all costs associated with recording the easement in the local land records office, including recording fees, charges for abstracts, survey and appraisal fees, and title insurance.

Eligibility

Land eligible for agricultural easements includes cropland, rangeland, grassland, pastureland and non-industrial private forest land. 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. Land eligible for wetland reserve easements includes farmed or converted wetland that can be successfully and cost-effectively restored. NRCS will prioritize applications based on the easement's potential for protecting and enhancing habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife.

To enroll land through agricultural land easements, NRCS enters into cooperative agreements with eligible partners. Each easement is required to have an agricultural land easement plan that promotes the long-term viability of the land.

To enroll land through wetland reserve easements, NRCS enters into purchase agreements with eligible private landowners or Indian tribes that include the right for NRCS to develop and implement a wetland reserve restoration easement plan. This plan restores, protects, and enhances the wetland's functions and values.

PARTNERSHIP

NRCS WORKS WITH PARTNERS TO LEVERAGE ADDITIONAL CONSERVATION ASSISTANCE FOR AGRICULTURAL PRODUCERS AND LANDOWNERS IN PRIORITY CONSERVATION AREAS.

Benefits

RCPP encourages partners to join in efforts with producers to increase the restoration and sustainable use of soil, water, wildlife and related natural resources on regional or watershed scales. Through RCPP, NRCS and its partners help producers install and maintain conservation activities in selected project areas. Partners leverage RCPP funding in project areas and report on the benefits achieved. The Secretary of Agriculture may also designate up to eight critical conservation areas to focus RCPP assistance.

Eligibility

Eligible Partners - Agricultural or silvicultural producer associations, farmer cooperatives or other groups of producers, state or local governments, American Indian tribes, municipal water treatment entities, water and irrigation districts, conservation-driven nongovernmental organizations and institutions of higher education. Eligible Participants - Under RCPP, eligible producers and landowners of agricultural land and non-industrial private forestland may enter into conservation program contracts or easement agreements under the framework of a partnership agreement.

RCPP assistance is also available independent of a partner if the land is located either in a partner project area or in a critical conservation area designated by the Secretary. Conservation program contracts and easement agreements are implemented through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) or the Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP).

NRCS may also utilize the authorities under the Watershed and Flood Prevention Program, other than the Watershed Rehabilitation Program, in the designated critical conservation areas.

Overview

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)promotes coordination between NRCS and its partners to deliver conservation assistance to producers and landowners. NRCS provides assistance to producers through partnership agreements and through program contracts or easement agreements.

RCPP combines the authorities of four former conservation programs – the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program, the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Program, the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative and the Great Lakes Basin Program. Assistance is delivered in accordance with the rules of EQIP, CSP, and ACEP; and in certain areas the Watershed Operations and Flood Prevention Program.

What's new?

RCPP is a new partnership program that combines the authorities of four former programs - including EQIP, CSP, and ACEP, and Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations in Critical Conservation Areas.