

## FACT SHEET:

# WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT EQIP ELIGIBILITY AND ENROLLMENT

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is one of the country's flagship working lands conservation programs. Administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), EQIP assists farmers and ranchers in implementing conservation practices on their farms through financial and technical assistance.

## WHO IS ELIGIBLE?

There is no minimum requirement for how long a person has farmed. An applicant must be the owner or operator of eligible land. All sizes and types of agricultural operations are eligible for enrollment.

EQIP does not require applicants to have an existing level of conservation. However, as with participation in all other farm bill programs, participants must be in compliance with any applicable highly erodible land or wetland conservation requirements. Applicants must also submit an Adjusted Gross Income Certification form.

Within EQIP, there are separate funding pools through special initiatives (see below). Generally, a producer is at an advantage to apply within a smaller funding pool, as there are fewer applications to compete with.

## WHAT IF I'M A BEGINNER, VETERAN, OR FARMER OF COLOR?

When filling out the initial forms on an application, farmers will be asked to give details about their operations, what is produced, and self-identify if they are organic, beginning, or socially-disadvantaged. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) uses the term socially-disadvantaged to refer to farmers and ranchers of color. This is relevant because



10% of the total funding is set aside for beginning farmers and farmers of color. Military veterans receive an additional preference within those targeted groups.

NRCS also allocates dollars specifically for organic and transitioning-to-organic producers, who may then compete in a separate pool for those dollars. Organic or transitioning-to-organic producers should ask their local NRCS staff how EQIP might work for them.

## WHAT DOES THE APPLICATION PROCESS LOOK LIKE?

In applying for EQIP, farmers and ranchers will work with NRCS technical staff to fill out the application form, which includes information about themselves and their operations, as well as a map that identifies the land they intend to enroll. Find the form—NRCS-CPA-1200—online at [forms.sc.egov.usda.gov](https://forms.sc.egov.usda.gov) by searching the form name. The fact sheet, "What to Know About Working Lands Conservation Programs,"<sup>1</sup> covers other steps that must be taken if a farmer or rancher has never worked with NRCS or the Farm Service Agency (FSA) before.



Next, NRCS staff will help the farmer select practices that will become the basis of the conservation plan on which the application is built. If the application is approved, the farmer agrees to implement the selected practices. The conservation program planning process determines how competitive the application for available funds will be, and how it is ranked by the NRCS. Applications that are more highly ranked and address multiple or prioritized local resource concerns are more likely to be funded.



## COMMON EQIP INITIATIVES FOR BEGINNING FARMERS AND RANCHERS

**The EQIP Organic Initiative** tailors the conservation plan to organic farm production. Conservation activities may include establishing buffer zones, planning and installing pollinator habitats, improving irrigation efficiencies, enhancing nutrient management strategies, and more.

Eligible producers include organic, transitioning-to-organic, and those exempt from National Organic Program (NOP) certification requirements. EQIP Organic Initiative applicants compete in a separate funding pool, where payments are capped at \$140,000 over five years. Organic producers can also apply for the general EQIP program, which has a higher payment cap but is more competitive.

**The EQIP Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative** helps farmers who want to extend the growing seasons on their farms by using high tunnels.

High tunnels (also called hoop houses) are structures made from hoops covered with plastic that act like greenhouses, but require no energy. High tunnels use natural sunlight to modify the climate inside, which creates good conditions for growing vegetables and specialty crops. Each state has its structure requirements, such as type of support bracing or height of tunnel, as well as rate of cost-share. Interested farmers should contact NRCS for more information.

Supporting practices may be needed to ensure resource concerns associated with implementing and managing high tunnel systems are addressed. Conservation practices that may help are critical-area planting, diversion grassed waterway, mulching, micro-irrigation, subsurface drain, and underground outlets.

**EQIP Incentive Contracts** differ from traditional EQIP contracts in that they must be at least five years in length and address a top resource concern in an applicant's area. Applicants tailor their conservation plans to specific priority resource concerns for their regions, as determined by NRCS.

EQIP Incentive Contracts offer longer-term, management-based contracts for farmers and ranchers interested in more comprehensive stewardship. Incentive contracts may be a good first step for producers interested in CSP.

In addition to the payment for practice implementation, incentive contracts offer annual payments to address operation and maintenance costs, as well as foregone income. Annual payments are made in October, whereas the practice payments are provided for the implementation of a specific practice.

For information on how to enroll rented land find your local USDA Service Center, check out our fact sheet, "What to Know About Working With Your Local USDA Service Center."<sup>1</sup>

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1 Find these fact sheets and more information at [cfra.org/publications](http://cfra.org/publications).

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