



Accessing NRCS Conservation Funding: A How-To Guide

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The **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)** and **Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)** are conservation programs administered by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The programs help producers meet environmental regulations and work on environmental and resource issues on their farm. NRCS provides **financial assistance** through cost-share payments as well as **technical assistance** to help the producer with the practical details of establishing conservation practices.

CHOOSING A PROGRAM

EQIP is generally used as a “fix-it” program for a particular conservation concern, and CSP generally provides management enhancement options to improve conservation on operations with a higher level of environmental performance. EQIP typically provides cost-share assistance for the adoption of one or more practices undertaken on a portion of the agricultural operation. CSP requires a 5-year contract for the adoption of management practices across the entire agricultural option. Local NRCS staff can support producers on determining the best program fit for their individual operation.

See the USDA NRCS bulletins – [Is EQIP Right for Me?](#) and [Is CSP Right for Me?](#) – for additional information on each program, including eligibility, benefits, application, contracts and payments.

APPLICATION PROCESS

[Local NRCS field offices](#) help dairy producers with each step of the application process such as creating an application, forming conservation plans and implementing specific conservation practices to meet their goals. Producers can apply throughout the year but each state sets deadlines for ranking and selecting applicants, usually early in the year.

REVIEW AND SELECTION PROCESS

The NRCS State Technical Committee advises the State Conservationist on selecting conservation practices, allocating funds, determining payment rates, ranking contracts and delegating authority to the local level and develops a tool for prioritizing projects for funding. Dairy producer and grower-based organizations and individuals can participate in the State Technical Committee Meetings to help drive that funding to important conservation practices. With diligence, a producer may be able to find the ranking tool on their state NRCS website and utilize it for improving their application.



IMPROVING THE ODDS FOR SELECTION AND PARTICIPATION

- Ranking factors for applications include the environmental benefits and cost effectiveness of the proposal. Applications can carry over from one sign-up to the next but that doesn't improve ranking.
- NRCS programs are often oversubscribed; however, applications that are aligned with local, state and national priorities have a good chance of being funded. These priorities along with eligible practices are published on state NRCS websites, though not every state publishes this information.
- Conservation works best where there is partnership and trust. A dairy farmer will be well served by asking NRCS or conservation officials for their advice on how to make applications more effective and attractive.
- Although NRCS does not require comprehensive conservation plans, dairy producers who have them will be well served in the application process.
- Nationwide, the current emphasis on [climate-smart](#) practices will likely improve ranking of a producer's application that includes those activities.
- Regional considerations are helpful to consider. For example, in the Great Lakes and Chesapeake Bay regions, water quality practices will rank very high in project evaluation. In western regions, contracts that have water quantity conservation practices have reliably remained as some of the top funded practices for the past three years.
- NRCS uses [Landscape Conservation Initiatives](#) to accelerate the benefits of voluntary conservation programs, such as cleaner water and air, healthier soil and enhanced wildlife habitat. Click [here](#) to see if the farm's state has one of these conservation initiatives that aligns with the farm's conservation goals and may improve chances of contract acceptance.
- [Historically Underserved Producers](#) – e.g. socially disadvantaged, limited resource, beginning, and veteran farmers and ranchers – are eligible for an increased payment rate and may also receive advance payments to purchase materials and services.
- NRCS officials in some states may not work routinely with dairy operations. Be patient, persistent and ask questions to get the assistance needed for applying for funding through EQIP, CSP or any other conservation programs.

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