



Appalachian Farmland Management: A Farmer's Guide to Understanding and Using Federal Conservation Programs



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Introduction

Every five years or so the national press starts carrying articles about the Farm Bill, a massive piece of legislation that includes everything from commodity supports and trade incentives to food stamps and agricultural research. Congress must renew the Farm Bill every five years and find ways for securing the funds for this wide range of programs. The centerpiece of the often rancorous debate is the amount of crop subsidies that will be provided to major crops (such as corn, wheat, soybeans, or cotton) to ensure, as proponents explain, a safety net for American farmers in an increasingly competitive world market.

Most of these discussions seem very remote from the realities of making a living on a farm in the Southern Appalachian Mountains. Most Farm Bill programs seem unrelated to the crops, size, and diversity of farms in our region. However, there are conservation programs made available by the Farm Bill that are open and valuable to farmers across the country regardless of the number of acres they farm or the types of crops they raise.

The idea behind conservation programs is simple. For most farmers the short term expense of implementing new conservation practices can rarely be recovered by the farmer through the sale of farm products. The conservation programs provide cost share or incentives for farmers to adopt practices that protect natural resources that create public benefits for the environment and contribute to the long term viability of the farming operation.

What do conservation programs have to do with Appalachian farmers?

Until recently, Appalachian farmers have had little experience or reason to be aware of the conservation programs that are included in the Farm Bill. Growers assumed that the programs mostly applied to row crop or livestock farmers. But that emphasis began to change when the 2002 Farm Bill was passed. Conservation programs received a large increase in funds so that now there is more than **one billion dollars** available for conservation programs - more than the USDA's combined research and extension budget.

What that means is that for the first time there are sufficient dollars in programs, particularly the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), to include growers who have not received financial assistance – for example, small and medium sized farms in the Appalachian mountains. Just as important, the new Farm Bill being debated now in Congress includes a host of additional provisions that will help small farmers, organic farmers, and specialty crop growers benefit more fully from conservation programs.

Some growers in Western North Carolina have already successfully used EQIP to support the adoption of new practices, such as the use of integrated pest management (IPM) in apple orchards or the use of row covers for frost protection in strawberries. Of course, as with any effort, growers will encounter challenges in using the program as will the people in the county Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offices who are responsible for working with growers in applying for support. The following information has been compiled to make it easier for farmers to successfully take advantage of the valuable assistance that is available to them.

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For farmers interested in resource conservation, the benefits go beyond receiving technical and financial assistance. This is also a chance for farmers to look beyond the short term demands of making a living and think about how to best sustain the productive capacity of the land and resources on which the farm depends - for their children and coming generations.

As demands on farmers increase, financial and technical assistance is becoming even more critical to growers' abilities to farm profitably and stay in business. **Conservation programs are a valuable opportunity for Appalachian farmers and an increasingly viable option to help support good farming practices in our region.**



Evergreen Ridge Farm near Banner Elk, N.C., has tapped into EQIP in several ways. The farm has received technical and financial assistance in constructing a specialized building on the farm designed to safely store and handle pesticides. Evergreen Ridge has stabilized its access roads and installed ground cover to reduce erosion and runoff into streams and other water resources. What's more, EQIP funding provides cost share for pest scouting that will help the farm target pesticide applications to only where they are needed.

Evergreen Ridge owner Mike Pitman has been pleased with how NRCS has helped him tap into EQIP and technical expertise. "They've been a tremendous asset," he said. "Farm roads are the worst for erosion and sediment. You have to have access on these

steep mountains, but if you don't have the money to put into your access roads and you get a lot of rain, you're in bad shape quick," he said. "With the technical and financial assistance we've received, our roads now drain well and we're preventing erosion," he said. "We're in a lot better shape now."

David Tucker of the local NRCS office estimates that some access roads can erode up to 100 tons per year. "When you prepare these roads properly, you're keeping that sediment out of the streams, improving the fish habitat, water quality, and soil quality," he said.

Doug Clawson, owner of Clawson's Choose-and-Cut Farm in Boone, N.C., has also had positive results with EQIP cost-sharing on his access roads. "The old roads had ruts a foot deep," said Clawson. "We were able to grade it down and put filter cloth on it, and then crushed stone, and this reduces runoff and erosion," he said. "I've been well-pleased, and I would encourage everyone to see if they're eligible for these funds, and if so, use them."

Understanding and Using Federal Conservation Programs: A Step by Step guide

Farmers understand better than anyone the value of farming practices that conserve natural resources and protect the environment. They also know that implementing those practices can be expensive because the initial costs can rarely be recovered from the sale of their crops. To better support growers' efforts, the 2002 Farm Bill increased the funding available to assist growers with the expense of initiating conservation practices. The largest and most widely available program funded by the Farm Bill is the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). EQIP is a voluntary program administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) that provides payments to eligible growers for a wide range of practices on their farms.

If you have had little experience with the Farm Bill, NRCS, or government conservation programs, taking advantage of these opportunities may seem challenging. This guide is intended to be a grower-friendly aid that helps you successfully negotiate the steps in applying for EQIP assistance. Here are the four basic steps:

STEP ONE

Contact your nearest NRCS office and tell them you want to apply for EQIP

You can find your local NRCS office in the phone book. To find the NRCS office in your county look in your phone book under United States Government – Agriculture Dept. – Natural Resources Conservation Service or check: <http://www.nc.nrcs.usda.gov/about/>. Click “Find a Service Center” at the left, to access the directory.

County offices in Western North Carolina:

Alleghany 336-372-4645	Macon 828-524-3311
Ashe 336-246-5461	Madison 828-649-3313x3
Avery 828-733-2291	McDowell 828-652-4434
Buncombe 828-254-0916x3	Mitchell 828-765-4701
Burke 828-439-9727x3	Polk 828-894-8823
Caldwell 828-758-1111	Rutherford 828-287-4220x3
Cherokee 828-837-6417	Swain 828-488-3785
Clay 828-389-9695	Transylvania 828-884-3230
Graham 828-479-8562	Watauga 828-264-3943
Haywood 828-456-5132x3	Wilkes 336-667-5700
Henderson 828-693-1629x3	Yancey 828-682-2466
Jackson 828-586-6344	

If you have never participated in a USDA program before, first stop by the USDA Farm Services Agency (FSA) office in the same building as the NRCS office. There you will sign a proof of ownership or lease for the property you are farming and for which you wish to apply. You will need to supply your name, address, social security number (tax ID# if you file taxes under a different number than your SS#) and documentation of who owns the land, such as a deed or tax

statement. (If you already have an FSA loan, this step is not necessary.) If you have an aerial map of your farm you should bring it - if not your county office can help generate one for you.

At your NRCS meeting, the conservationist will discuss your plans for your farm and will help you fill out the paperwork. The conservationist will guide you through the process of applying. **While there may seem to be a lot of paper work involved, most of it is for the NRCS staff to fill out and they are skilled in simplifying the process for growers.**

ALL information in your application will be kept confidential.

STEP TWO

Work with NRCS to identify site-specific conservation practices that fit your farm

The District Conservationist, or a conservation planner working with the District Conservationist, will come to your farm to help you identify practices that are eligible for EQIP or similar programs. The goal is to work together to identify what makes sense for your farm, both for resource conservation and maintaining farm production. They will help you develop a plan to address all the concerns identified during the visit. This is a free plan for your use in choosing what you want to do and when.

For your site meeting you may want to have some of the following items available:

- A list of areas where you have conservation concerns
- A list of crops and rotation schedules, if applicable
- Pest and nutrient management records

The District Conservationist will help you identify practices and which resources (such as soil, water, air, etc.) those practices will address. In doing so he or she will also help you determine whether your application is likely to have priority for funding under EQIP. As a general rule, growers who are able to apply multiple practices that improve more than one resource have a higher priority for funding.

There are a number of practices available through EQIP that can be useful to Appalachian farmers:

Here are some practices to consider for your operation.

- Use of row covers for frost protection in strawberry production
- Use of cover crops
- Irrigation improvements
- Pasture and hay plantings
- Stream crossings
- Integrated pest management
- Nutrient management
- Ag chemical containment facility
- Field border establishment
- Windbreak establishment
- Wetland restoration
- Heavy use area protection

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You and the District Conservationist may find other practices that are applicable to your farm. The main point is that there are a wide range of practices available that may be of value to your specific crops, circumstances, and operation.

One long-time Buncombe County, N.C., farmer raises 15 -20 acres of vegetables and small fruit each year and operates a farm market along a busy road. This past year he applied to his local NRCS office for financial assistance to purchase and install row covers for frost protection on approximately four acres of strawberries. His successful experience applying for and using EQIP made the



application process fairly straightforward for him and the \$700/acre will help defray the significant cost of the row covers. In the wake of the 2007 freezes he hopes that the row covers will be valuable in minimizing future crop damage. Just as important the row covers will help reduce his water usage and the likelihood of erosion in his fields.

STEP THREE

Complete the application

Once you have determined the practices most valuable for your operation, you and the District Conservationist will complete your application.

If you are a Limited Resource Producer or Beginning Farmer you are eligible for higher payments (*Check with the NRCS staff to determine if you qualify.*)

STEP FOUR

Submit the application to NRCS

Once you have completed and submitted your application to NRCS, it will be ranked with other applications in the state based on the number of points it has received.

After you have applied

Applications are ranked with other applications in your area based on a system of points. The number of points assigned to each of the practices you want to use on your farm is related to the amount of environmental benefit resulting from these practices. Again, applications that include

multiple practices have a higher priority for funding because they offer greater conservation benefits. All applications within a given area are ranked using the same criteria to assure that everyone is treated fairly.

The NRCS District Conservationist will let you know whether or not your application is funded. If your application has been accepted, you will complete and sign a contract specifying the payments and the work you will do on your farm.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT EQIP

1) What is EQIP?

EQIP – the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, administered by USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), provides financial and technical assistance to eligible growers to support the additional cost of using a wide range of environmentally sound farming practices on their farms. Participation is voluntary and initiated by the grower who submits an application for funding.

2) Who can qualify for EQIP?

- Agricultural producers who make at least \$1,000 in gross farm sales.
- Applicant must control the land for the contract period (may own or lease).
- Individuals or entities that have an average adjusted gross income (AGI) of less than \$2.5 million for the three tax years immediately preceding the year the contract is approved.
- Growers with an AGI above \$2.5 million can qualify if 75 percent of the AGI is derived from farming, ranching, or forestry operations.
- An owner with multiple entities or management units can apply for separate contracts for those units within the same fiscal year. Eligible land includes cropland, rangeland, pasture, forestland, and other farm or ranch lands where the program is delivered.

3) How are applications selected?

- Applications are ranked with other applications in your county based on a system of points. The number of points assigned to each of the practices you want to use on your farm is related to the amount of environmental benefit resulting from these practices.
- Applications that include multiple practices have a higher priority for funding because they offer greater conservation benefits.

4) What kinds of financial assistance are available?

- EQIP provides payments as incentives to growers to perform land management practices such as nutrient management, integrated pest management, irrigation water management, and wildlife habitat management.
- Payments through EQIP may be provided for up to three years to encourage producers to carry out management practices they may not otherwise use without the program incentive.
- The rates are set to cover a substantial portion of the costs of certain conservation practices and installations, such as irrigation conversions, and other practices important to

improving and maintaining the health of natural resources in the area. Limited-resource or beginning farmers (farming for less than 10 years) may qualify for higher rates on certain practices.

5) How can a grower apply?

Producers may obtain contract applications at any USDA service center. After the initial application (one page), NRCS makes an appointment with the grower to establish which practices the grower would like to implement.

6) When should a grower apply?

Growers can fill out an initial application any time of the year, **however, you should typically plan on signing up no later than early fall if you want your applications to be considered for work that would start the following growing season. Check with your county NRCS office for the application deadline.**

7) How do you find out if your contract is approved?

The initial round of application ranking is expected to be complete by the end of December in most years. Approved applicants are informed as soon as possible after that date.

8) Is the information I provide available to the public?

The information you provide to NRCS is confidential.

9) When can the work begin on the items listed in the contract?

No work covered by payments in the contract can begin until the contract is signed. There are no retroactive payments for work initiated early.

10) How long do the contracts usually run?

- Contracts based solely on incentive payments are generally 2 – 3 years.
- Contracts that include installations can run 5 – 10 years, but most contracts are 3 – 5 years or less.

If the land is sold or leased to another entity, the contract can “follow” the new operator – but they must comply with and complete the contract.

11) When does a grower get payments from NRCS?

Contract participants are paid when a practice is certified complete and it meets the intent, purpose and specification of the NRCS practice. Generally, payments will be made within 4-6 weeks of the payment documents being signed and with current direct deposit information on file. Keep in mind that payments are classified as income for tax purposes.

12) What other conservation programs are available?

There are other conservation programs through NRCS including:

- the Conservation Security Program (CSP), a long term stewardship program that is available in selected watersheds
- the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)

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- the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP), which provides long term easements.

There are also programs available through the Farm Service Agency (FSA) such as the Conservation Reserve Program and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program that allow continuous enrollment of land that is kept out of production for conservation purposes. In addition, the CP-33 Program provides payments for farmers who set aside land for game and wildlife habitat. Your county NRCS staff can provide you with information on all of these programs on request.

13) Who administers conservation programs?

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) – originally the Soil Conservation Service which was set up during the Dust Bowl era to prevent soil erosion - administers EQIP based on national, state, and local priorities. On the national level, NRCS sets policy and develops program rules and procedures and identifies national resource priorities.

Contacts:

Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP)
729 Haywood Rd., #3
Asheville, NC 28806
828-236-1282

Center for Agricultural Partnerships
1 West Pack Square, Suite 518
Asheville, NC 28801
828-285-9340

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