



THE MIFFS FARMERS' GUIDE TO EQIP

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
Environmental Quality Incentives Program

Michigan Food & Farming Systems



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INSIDER'S GUIDE TO NRCS
ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY INCENTIVES PROGRAM (EQIP):

LESSONS LEARNED FROM MICHIGAN FARMERS

The most important thing to remember when working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is that they fund conservation practices for farmers to reduce existing risks to natural resources. This means that when you want to obtain funding for a conservation practice like a hoop house or cover crops, you need to identify the associated environmental risks. When you work with NRCS, you will typically work with the District Conservationist or a Soil Conservationist (Soil Con).

The first time you walk into your NRCS Field Office, you should take the following steps:

- Tell them you are interested in applying for EQIP and would like to request a Conservation Plan for your farm. The earlier you do this the better. **Do not wait until EQIP sign up is announced!** This is a process that can take several months. You are also required to work with the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) to register your farm. Refer to the MIFFS publication *A Farmer's Guide: Working with USDA* to learn more about how to register your farm with FSA.
- Due to fact that NRCS exists to reduce risks to natural resources, you should talk to your NRCS field staff about your natural resources concerns first, and then identify associated conservation practices you would like to adopt to address them. It is not productive to walk in and simply say you want a hoop house (high tunnel) or that you want a grant for covers crops. To help you, this guide identifies common practices that beginning sustainable farmers seek cost share for and the environmental risks they address. It will also give you recommendations for practices you may be unaware of that can boost your application and increase the amount of financial assistance you may be eligible to receive through cost share.

ALWAYS GET A RECEIPT FOR SERVICE

Anytime that you communicate with a USDA office to discuss eligibility for programs or benefits, ask for a receipt for service and keep a copy with your records! This is especially important, whether in person, or email, to obtain anytime you submit documentation or paperwork for an application!! If a mistake is made, paperwork gets lost or you are given incorrect information about eligibility, your receipt for service serves as a record that you may be able to use to help resolve the issue. Ask that your Receipt for Service summarizes your visit and what you were told by USDA staff. USDA offices are required to provide you with a receipt for service by the Farm Bill. Anyone who experiences problems obtaining a Receipt for Service can call the USDA Office of Advocacy and Outreach at 1-800-880-4183.

The image shows a green poster with the USDA logo and text. At the top left is the USDA logo with 'United States Department of Agriculture'. At the top right is an orange circle with 'PUBLIC NOTICE'. The main text reads 'Ask for a Receipt for Service. It's your right.' Below this is a smaller line: 'All USDA representatives must provide you with a receipt upon request, for any approved, denied, or requested services.' The center of the poster features a hand holding a 'RECEIPT OF REQUEST FOR BENEFIT OR SERVICE OFFERED BY' form. The form includes fields for 'Agency', 'Requester Name', 'Address of Requester', 'Date of Request', and 'Method of Request' (Person, By FAX, By Mail, By Telephone, By e-Mail). At the bottom, it says 'Don't leave without it.' and provides the contact number '1-800-880-4183'.

ADVICE FROM ONE FARMER TO ANOTHER

SIGN UP FOR THE NRCS CONSERVATION CLIENT GATEWAY!

This service gives you enhanced access to NRCS resources and program applications. It can also give you additional ranking points on your application for programs like EQIP. Make sure that the person who enrolls matches the name of the person on application materials. This allows you to submit application materials online, track program payments, report completed practices, request conservation assistance, and electronically sign documents. This also helps producers access NRCS programs if their USDA service center is not close to their home or easily accessible.

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/cgate/>



ASK FOR A WHOLE FARM CONSERVATION PLAN

All farms that work with NRCS are required to have a Conservation Plan. This is a document that is developed alongside NRCS staff, outlining all of the natural resource concerns on your property and conservation practices you want to implement that are eligible for cost share. Don't wait until you want to apply for programs to ask for a Conservation Plan! The earlier you request a Conservation Plan the better. If you request one during a program deadline or a busy time in the office you may end up with a plan that only addresses practices you go into the office to request.

WHAT YOU SHOULD EXPECT FROM A CONSERVATION PLAN

- Ask NRCS Staff to schedule a time to come out to your farm and help you identify natural resource concerns. They should walk the property with you and look for things like soil erosion, potential pollution sources, runoff concerns, invasive species, habitat and soil degradation and water quality issues.
- An aerial map of your property with areas of concern identified
- A schedule of potential conservation practices you have worked on with the District Conservationist or Soil Conservationist to address natural resource concerns.
- You can also work with some Conservation District Staff to develop a conservation plan. This is especially useful when USDA staff are really busy. Ask if there is a MAEAP technician that can complete a risk assessment and help identify additional resource concerns and practices to address them.

CONSERVATION PLAN 101

There 2 types of Conservation Plans; Whole Farm Conservation Plans and Practice Plans. We recommend asking for a whole farm conservation plan.

Practice Plans: These Conservation plans document only the resource concerns (environmental risks) that are needed to justify applying for specific EQIP practices. Some NRCS offices default to drafting these types of Conservation Plans in order to increase efficiency, meet tight deadlines and reduce workload. These plans are great to apply for if you are trying to pull together an EQIP application at the last minute or if you are only interested in receiving financial assistance for one practice, such as a seasonal high tunnel.

WHOLE Farm Conservation Plan: Asking for a whole farm Conservation Plan means that you are asking NRCS staff to come to your farm, walk the property and identify potential resource concerns (environmental risks); and recommend conservation practices that can address those concerns. NRCS will schedule a site visit, walk the property, talk about farming practices and suggest ways to improve environmental stewardship on your farm. NRCS staff will make recommendations, by suggesting practices you may be eligible to apply for costshare for under EQIP program. Asking for a whole farm conservation plan can help ensure that you have identified all of the resource concerns on your farm. This can help your application when it is ranked against other applications during the review process. Remember the more resource concerns you can find, the higher your application will be ranked competitively.

When to Ask for a Conservation Plan: Ask for a conservation plan as soon as you think you may be interested in applying for EQIP. Do not wait until NRCS announces a sign-up period. USDA offices are extremely busy during this time and will not be able to provide you the level of assistance they could during other times of the year. If you request a Conservation Plan for the first time during an EQIP Sign-up period, it is common for NRCS only to be able to write a practice plan for your application. It is ideal to request a Conservation Plan the winter or summer before you intend to apply for EQIP.

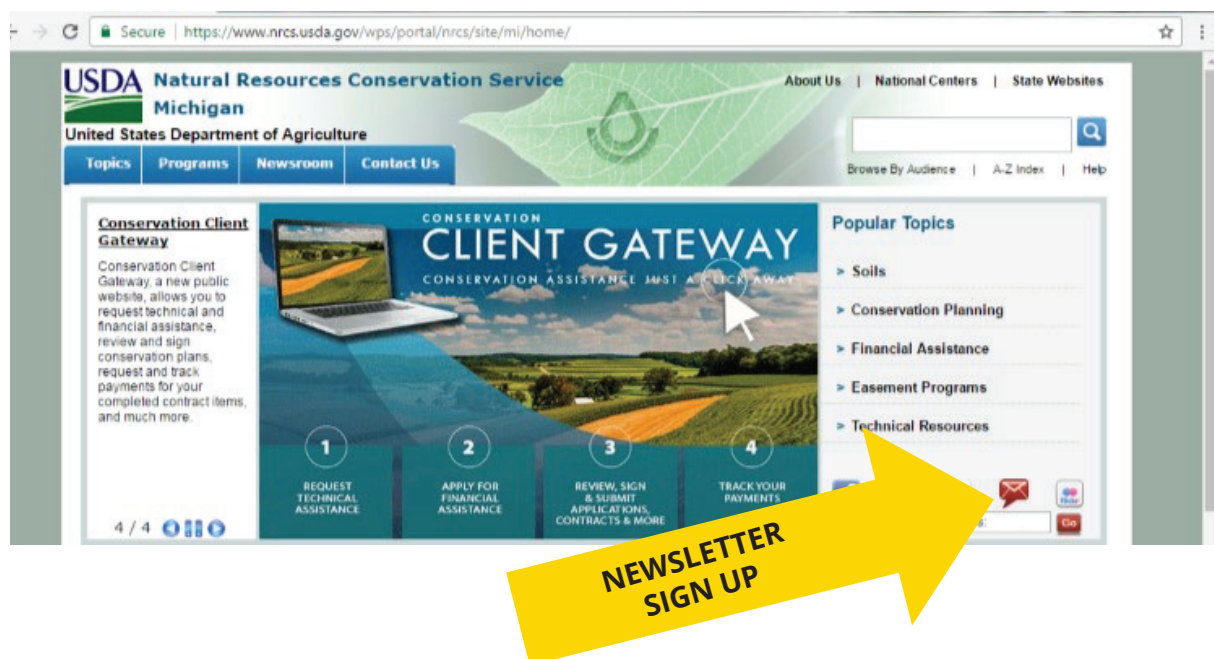
Records you should give to NRCS when drafting a conservation plan: Soil sampling results, lists or labels for all pesticides (Organic-OMRI approved pesticides included) you might use on the farm, nutrient analysis for compost, fertility amendments and fertilizers, maps showing wet areas or areas where drainage/ponding occurs, photographs of areas that are prone to flooding.

SIGN UP FOR NRCS NEWSLETTERS & TEXT MESSAGES

The best way to stay up to date with NRCS program announcements and application deadlines is to sign up for newsletters and text messages through GovDelivery. You should do this with each USDA agency you work with. In the upper right corner of the NRCS home page there is a Stay Connected bar that will take you to the agencies' social media accounts and newsletter sign ups. Click on the red envelope to sign up for the newsletter email listserv or text messages. It is important to select only the counties you farm in when applying for the email listserv in order to avoid getting too many emails.

You can also visit:

<https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/USDANRCS/subscriber/new>



OVERVIEW OF EQIP APPLICATION RANKING PROCESS & CONSERVATION PLANS

When you apply for EQIP your application will be ranked according to the number of environmental risks it addresses. The more environmental risks you can identify to reduce, the higher your ranking. They do not offer costshare for practices you already have implemented. There is another program called Conservation Stewards Program that can help improve existing practices

www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/csp/

Applications are essentially put into different funding pots so that NRCS can then compare yours to other applications on those pots. You should always ask if there are any special funding initiatives you are eligible to apply under. This will put you in to a smaller pool of applicants which can increase the chances that your application will be approved. Some of these may include:



COMMON EQIP FUNDING INITIATIVES

ORGANIC

Even if you are not a certified organic farm, but farm or want to farm following nrcs.usda.gov organic practices, this a great initiative to consider. It requires that while implementing your EQIP contract, you develop an Organic Systems Plan. This is the same type of plan that would be required by a certifying agency in order to obtain organic certification. It does not require that you obtain your organic certification before the end of your EQIP contract. Only that you develop the Organic Systems Plan. More guidance on developing organic farm plans and plan templates can be found at the Michigan State University Organic Farming Exchange:

<https://michiganorganic.msu.edu/>



HONEY BEE POLLINATOR INITIATIVE



The goal of this initiative is to protect honey bees. NRCS provides financial assistance to producers who want to plant and maintain habitat and food sources for honey bees

COMMON EQIP FUNDING INITIATIVES

GENESEE AND WAYNE COUNTY HIGH TUNNEL INITIATIVE

Also known as hoophouses, high tunnels are metal and plastic structures used for extending the growing season for fruits and vegetables.

BEGINNING FARMER/RANCHER

If you have been farming for 10 years or less you are considered a beginning farmer by USDA. USDA has a new website for beginning farmers with a lot of great resources and information: newfarmers.usda.gov

This site features a discovery tool that allows you to input information about you and your farm so that you can learn more about additional farm programs.

newfarmers.usda.gov/discovery

SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED

The funding pool for farmers of color, indigenous farmers, and farmers with limited financial resources. In order to qualify for this you must make sure you have self-identified yourself as socially disadvantaged with both NRCS and the Farm Service Agency. USDA technically shouldn't ask you if you qualify as socially disadvantaged in order to respect anti-discrimination rules. See the MIFFS publication, A Farmer's Guide: Working with USDA for more information about how to do this.

TWO PRACTICES YOU SHOULD ALWAYS ADD TO EQIP APPLICATIONS

1. NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT

This practice allows you to work with NRCS to develop a nutrient management plan for your farm and offers a payment for you to follow that plan. It requires you to consider all nutrient inputs on your farm including: conventional and organic fertilizer, compost, soil amendments, and manure. In order to be eligible for the practice you must take soil samples for your fields and have nutrient analysis complete for all inputs. This is an area where your MAEAP technician can help. They can show you how to take a soil sample and tell you where to send it for analysis. Typically it will go to a soil lab or university such as Michigan State University. They can also help you test manure and compost for nutrient analysis. The environmental risks this practice reduces are:

- Groundwater and surface water pollution
- Nitrogen pollution
- Phosphorous pollution – this is a very common environmental risk that is overlooked by many sustainable farmers. Phosphorus comes from organic soil inputs just as much as it does conventional inputs and it needs to be managed with great care in order to protect the Great Lakes



2. INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT

This in real, is not true integrated pest management, rather it is pesticide risk mitigation. In order to be eligible you must provide the names or labels of pesticides you use. NOTE: this includes organic pesticides! A pesticide is any treatment you use to treat a weed, insect or disease. Any treatment that has an EPA registration number and a pesticide label can be submitted in order to prove eligibility. NRCS will then run those products through a risk mitigation tool and require you to keep pesticide application records moving forward. Like Nutrient Management you receive a costshare payment to keep records and follow the environmental regulations that are attached to the pesticide. MAEAP Technicians can help determine if you are using pesticides and what best practices you should follow when using them to protect the environment. NRCS will offer guidance on this as well. The environmental risks this practice reduces are:

- Groundwater and surface water pollution
- Pesticide drift
- Air pollution
- Toxicity to people, fish, animals and pollinators

Practice Contract Requirements– Product inventory, application & scouting records



COMMONLY REQUESTED EQIP PRACTICES

BRUSH MANAGEMENT

You can apply for this practice to remove woody plants (shrubs and saplings) or manage woody invasive species on your farm. Environmental risks this practice addresses include:

- Degradation of fish and wildlife habitat
- Degradation of native plant communities
- Reduction of ecological diversity
- Increased fuel consumption
- Reduction in forage quality for livestock
- Pesticide pollution



CONSERVATION COVER



This practice can include anything from pollinator habitat to buffer and filter strips. This practice may require you have a lease, ownership or document stating that you have control of the property for 5 years. Environmental risks this practice address

- Reduction of stormwater runoff
- Soil erosion
- Wildlife and pollinator habitat degradation
- Nutrient pollution
- Soil health degradation

COMMONLY REQUESTED EQIP PRACTICES

CONSERVATION CROP ROTATION

This practice covers crop rotation for improved soil health and pest and disease control. Environmental risks this practice addresses include:

- Reduction of stormwater runoff
- Soil erosion
- Wildlife and pollinator habitat degradation
- Nutrient pollution
- Soil health degradation
- Pesticide risks
- Disease and pest suppression



COVER CROPS

Cover crops are plants you install after harvest to protect soil health, reduce erosion, and improve water quality. There are many benefits of cover crops that NRCS and Conservation Districts can teach you about. Environmental risks this practice addresses include:

- Reduction of stormwater runoff
- Soil erosion
- Wildlife and pollinator habitat degradation
- Nutrient pollution
- Soil health degradation
- Pesticide risks
- Pest and disease suppression
- Pollution of groundwater and surface water



COMMONLY REQUESTED EQIP PRACTICES

FIELD BORDERS

This practice allows you to install various plants that can serve as buffer strips, increase plant diversity, provide habitat and improve soil and water quality. Environmental risks this practice addresses include:

- Reduction of stormwater runoff
- Soil erosion
- Wildlife and pollinator habitat degradation
- Nutrient pollution
- Soil health degradation
- Pesticide risks
- Pest and disease suppression
- Pollution of groundwater and surface water



FOREST MANAGEMENT PLANS

Landowners with woodlots can apply for Conservation Activity Plans (CAPS) to have a Forest Management Plan created for sustainable timber harvests. These plans are created by a forester and are designed to meet landowner objectives for wildlife and habitat management as well as invasive species control. Environmental risks this practice addresses include:

- Soil and stream bank erosion
- Ground and surface water pollution
- Habitat degradation
- Invasive species issues

COMMONLY REQUESTED EQIP PRACTICES

HEAVY USE AREA PROTECTION (HUAP)

HUAPS are areas of gravel, concrete or geotextiles that can be installed where there is a lot of traffic from farm equipment, people or animals. Environmental risks this practice addresses include:

- Soil erosion
- Groundwater and surface water pollution

HERBACEOUS WEED CONTROL

This practice is essentially weed management of invasive species that are non-woody plants. Environmental risks this practice addresses include:

- Degradation of fish and wildlife habitat
- Degradation of native plant communities
- Reduction of ecological diversity
- Increased fuel consumption
- Reduction in forage quality for livestock
- Pesticide pollution



COMMONLY REQUESTED EQIP PRACTICES

HIGH TUNNEL SYSTEM

High tunnels are also known as hoophouses. They are metal structures, covered with plastic, that extend the growing season for fruit and vegetable producers. They do this by capturing and containing heat from the soil and the sun. Environmental risks this practice addresses include:

- Groundwater and surface water protection
- Soil erosion
- Pesticide pollution
- Nutrient pollution



IRRIGATION

NRCS offers costshare and technical assistance for several types of irrigation systems. Typically you must already have some sort of irrigation in place in order to prove there is an environmental risk and be eligible for the practice. Environmental risks this practice addresses include:

- Soil erosion
- Groundwater and surface water pollution from nutrients and pesticides
- Overuse of water and energy for irrigation

COMMONLY REQUESTED EQIP PRACTICES

PRESCRIBED GRAZING

This practice helps you manage pastures and harvest forages for livestock. There are several accompanying practices that can be implemented alongside this including: Rotational Grazing and Pasture Improvement Plantings. Environmental risks this practice addresses include:

- Degradation of fish and wildlife habitat
- Degradation of native plant communities
- Reduction of ecological diversity
- Increased fuel consumption
- Reduction in forage quality for livestock
- Pesticide pollution
- Nutrient pollution



STREAM BANK AND SHORELINE PROTECTION

NRCS can offer guidance to install a variety of practices to improve land adjacent to lakes, rivers, and streams and ponds. Environmental risks this practice addresses include:

- Degradation of fish and wildlife habitat
- Soil erosion
- Degradation of native plant communities
- Reduction of ecological diversity
- Increased fuel consumption
- Pesticide pollution
- Nutrient pollution



COMMONLY REQUESTED EQIP PRACTICES

STREAM CROSSING

If you have rivers or streams on your farm that livestock cross or have access to this is a great practice to consider. It also helps you comply with environmental laws and Right to Farm standards. Environmental risks this practice addresses include:

- Degradation of fish and wildlife habitat
- Soil erosion
- Degradation of native plant communities
- Reduction of ecological diversity
- Increased fuel consumption
- Pesticide pollution
- Nutrient pollution
- Water pollution

UNDERSTANDING CONTRACT REQUIREMENTS

ALWAYS ASK NRCS TO EXPLAIN ANY CONTRACT
REQUIREMENTS FOR EACH PRACTICE YOU APPLY FOR!

EQIP is a program that is funded by taxpayer money; USDA is tasked with ensuring that money is spent responsibly. Therefore USDA has rules that must be followed in order to be eligible to receive USDA Funds. If you break the rules, USDA may deny payment on a contract or require the producer to reimburse USDA for payments that have already been made.

Conservation Compliance

You should always ask NRCS to explain Conservation Compliance to you before signing a contract. USDA has strict rules to prevent farmers receiving USDA funds from disturbing wetlands and highly erodible lands (often referred to as swamp-busting and sod-busting). USDA's rules may be stricter than environmental compliance rules set by the state environmental agencies. If you want to receive USDA financial assistance you must follow USDA's rules

Practice Compliance

Each EQIP practice you apply for has a Job Sheet that explains the contract compliance rules for that practice. Always make sure to ask NRCS staff to walk you through the Job Sheet and explain any rules you should be aware of for that practices.

Additional Things You Should Know

EQIP is a financial assistance program, not a grant.
EQIP Cost Share=Financial Assistance Payments

Costshare/Financial Assistance Payments are made AFTER practices are completed and installed. As a farmer you will need to pay to install all of the practices in your contract up front. Once they are installed NRCS will "certify" the practice and then submit paperwork to have your payment issued.

NRCS can sometimes makes special arrangements to help limited income producers pay for practices and talk to your local staff about your options!

MICHIGAN FOOD AND FARMING SYSTEMS

MIFFS is dedicated to supporting the many faces of farming, particularly our beginning and historically underserved farmers. These farmers grow diversified crops and raise animals, they live in rural and urban areas, and they farm individually, in groups, on incubator farms, and as cooperatives.

Mission: Connecting beginning and historically underserved farmers to each other and resource opportunities; ensuring social justice, environmental stewardship, and profitability.

Vision: MIFFS is playing a critical role in making smaller-scale farming an attractive and viable livelihood.

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CONTACT US

VISIT US ONLINE: WWW.MIFFS.ORG

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WOMEN-IN -AG NETWORK WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/GROUPS/MIFFSWOMENINAG/
TILIAN FARM DEVELOPMENT CENTER WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/TILIANFARM/

