



#FridaysOnTheFarm: Advanced Payments Help Extend the Season

Each Friday meet farmers, producers, and landowners through our [#FridaysOnTheFarm](#) stories. Visit local farms, ranches, forests, and resource areas where USDA customers and partners *do right and feed everyone*.

This Friday meet Alisha Utter and Kyle Bowley, of [Arbor Farmstead](#) in Grand Isle, Vermont. The seven-acre farm grows diversified perennial fruit alongside restorative woodland.

Extending the Season

Alisha and Kyle, a woodworker, have owned and operated the farm since 2016, driven by their mission to support biodiversity and nutritious food production. They both have off-farm jobs and Alisha is currently completing her Ph.D. in plant and soil science at the University of Vermont with a focus on veganic agriculture.

Alisha and Kyle worked with their local [USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) staff to install two [high tunnels](#) through the [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#). High tunnels are an increasingly popular conservation practice for farmers, especially in cold weather climates, like Vermont, where growing conditions and relatively short growing seasons can be challenging.

The high tunnels at Arbor Farmstead have not only helped to extend the growing season, but also improved their plant and soil quality, and reduced nutrient transportation.

“The high tunnels allow us to be more experimental,” Alisha said. As a student and researcher, she is particularly interested in exploring the suitability of season extension for perennial fruit crops. “These tunnels allow us to take risks. And then we want to share what we are learning.”

Alisha and Kyle use veganic management practices, which excludes inputs such as synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, genetically modified organisms, and farm animal-derived inputs, such as blood, feather, fish meals, bone char, and manure.

High Tunnels are Key

The most recent high tunnel structure is now planted with fall blackberries, bedded with compost and woodchips. They have also planted experimental crops along the perimeter of the structure, including gourmet French everbearing strawberries and winter greens.

Alisha says that many of the chefs at the restaurants she markets to are excited about the unique varieties of crops she is experimenting with, and that without the high tunnel, this wouldn't be possible.



“We couldn’t risk growing these specialty crops without protection from pressures, such as bird predation, so the high tunnel is the ideal place for them,” she said.

She also emphasized that the insect netting they customized the tunnel with is key. Spotted wing drosophila, an invasive fruit fly that targets soft fruit jeopardizes the fruit crop, but the controlled environment of the high tunnel can help reduce this potential threat. Instead of investing in off-farm inputs, such as insecticides, Alisha emphasized, “We are focused on soil and plant health to produce healthy crops.”

Advance Payment Option

Arbor Farmstead constructed their first high tunnel last year where they grow eight different varieties of fall-bearing raspberries and everbearing strawberries. In July, they constructed their second tunnel, taking advantage of EQIP’s advance payment option. Typically, farmers participating in EQIP receive a payment after implementation of a conservation practice. This means that farmers must often put up their own money or apply for a loan before being reimbursed, which can be cost prohibitive for many farmers.

As [new and beginning farmers](#), Alisha and Kyle were eligible for the special advance payment option, which offered 50 percent of the payment to install the high tunnel up-front. [Historically underserved](#) farmers are also eligible for a higher payment rate within EQIP.

According to Alisha, the advance payment was essential in their ability to secure their second high tunnel. “The NRCS representatives were very communicative and they were helpful with the paperwork that’s involved,” she said.

Alisha and Kyle are planning to install a third high tunnel next year. “Having the money up front helped us make critical investments elsewhere on the farm. Because we are a perennial system, having that offset at the right time was so important,” she said.

Alisha encourages other farmers to establish a relationship with their local NRCS conservationists and to learn more about special incentives for new and beginning farmers, such as the EQIP advance payment.

“Starting the dialogue is the first step,” she said. “After a relationship is established, the resources start to flow, and we are so grateful for the assistance from NRCS.”

More Information

USDA offers a variety of risk management, disaster assistance, loan, and conservation programs to help agricultural producers in the United States weather ups and downs in the market and recover from natural disasters as well as invest in improvements to their operations. [Learn about additional programs.](#)



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