



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

# USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Veterans Webinar Series



**May 14, 2025, 2:00 – 4:30pm Eastern**

**May 15, 2025, 2:00 – 4:00pm Eastern**





United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Each day we will cover different topics, including:

**Wednesday, May 14, 2025**

1. **USDA Key Personnel Introduction and Overview**
2. **Veterans and the USDA, with Michael Sherman**  
Introduction to USDA's definition of military veteran farmer and rancher and how it differs across agencies.
3. **How to Get Started, with Michael Sherman**  
Guidance on how to prepare for a successful appointment at the local Service Center.
4. **Credit Worthiness, with Amanda Robertson**  
Learn the factors FSA Loan Officers use to determine credit worthiness.

**Thursday, May 15, 2025**

1. **Value-Added Producer Grants (VAPG), with Carlos Contreas and DeLea Taylor**  
Overview of grant program to help with value-added production and sales.
2. **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), with Floyd Nauls**  
Learn how to integrate conservation practices into working land.







U.S. Department of Agriculture-Rural Development  
Rural Business Cooperative Service (RBS) New  
Mexico



Value Added Producer Grant

# Value Added Producer Grant (VAPG)



# Value Added Producer Grant (VAPG)

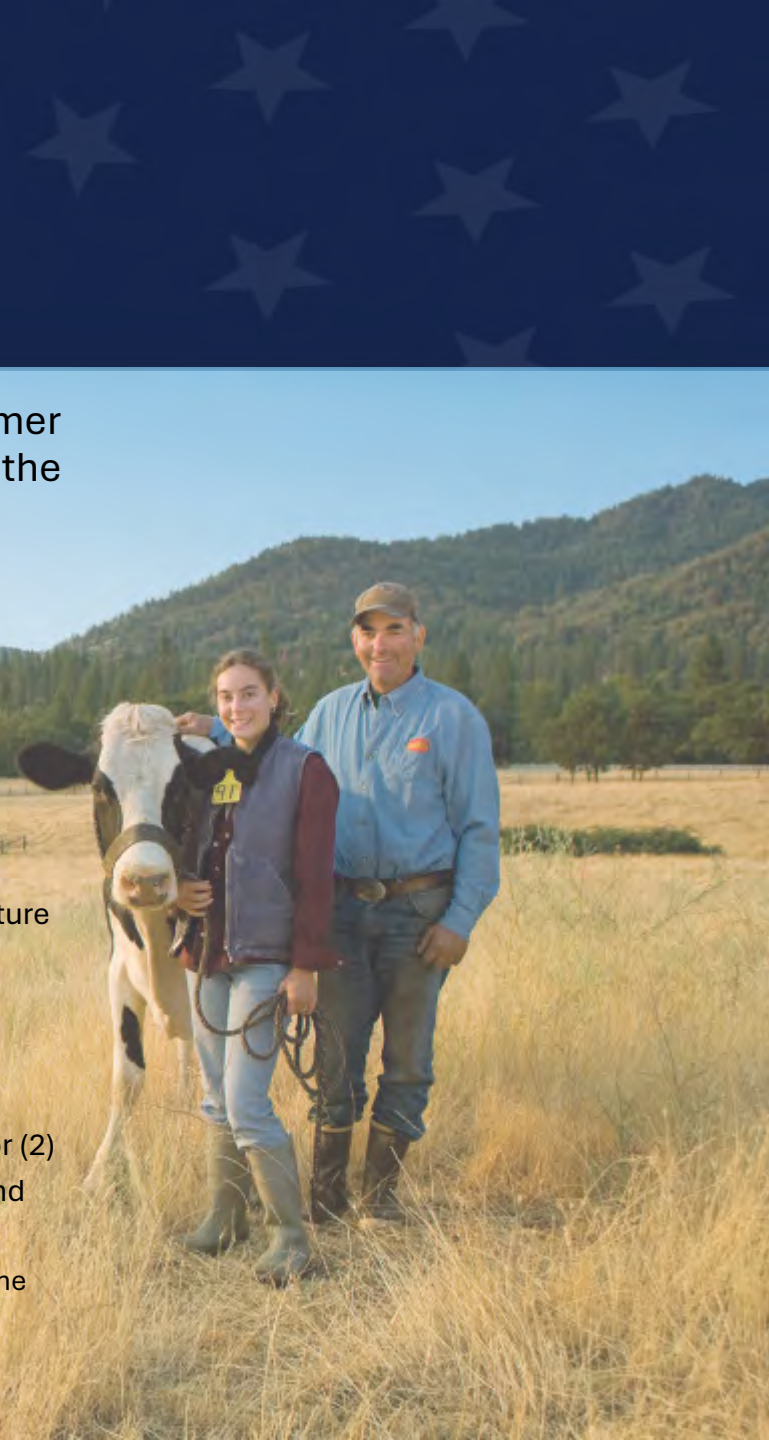
A competitive grant program used to assist Agricultural Producers to increase their customer base and revenues through the development of value-added agricultural products or the marketing of locally grown/ distributed agricultural commodities.

## Program Purpose

Provides funds for economic planning activities or eligible working capital expenses to enable viable for-profit Agricultural Producers to develop businesses that produce and market Value-Added Agricultural Products and to create marketing opportunities for such businesses.

- **Planning Grant (max \$75,000):** To facilitate economic planning activities to determine the viability of a value-added venture and may include costs for an independent feasibility study and development of a marketing and/or business plan.
- **Working Capital Grant (max \$250,000):** For operational costs directly related to the processing and/or marketing of the value-added product. Requires a third-party feasibility study and business plan to implement the project, with two exceptions: (1) Feasibility study and business plan requirement waived for any applicant requesting less than \$50,000; or (2) Feasibility study requirement waived for Independent Producer applicants requesting any amount who propose to expand the market for an existing value-added product they have produced and marketed successfully for two years or more.

**Note:** a grantee can only submit one application per cycle. Additionally, a single project may only receive one working capital and one planning grant.



# VAPG Funding



- 1:1 Match is required for all applicants
  - Cash or eligible in-kind contribution to be used only for eligible project purposes. Overmatching is allowable. Evidence of all expenses for both match and grant are required for reimbursement (if awarded).
- Grant period is up to 36 months, dependent on the project complexity.
- This is a National competition FY 2025 Available Funding: \$30 Million (estimated based on FY 2024 numbers)
- All projects must demonstrate
  - An increase in customer base
  - Greater portion of revenue derived from the value-added process returned to the producer.



# Noisy Water – Ruidoso Village, New Mexico, Lincoln County

2016 REAP - Rural Development funds were used to assist farmers, ranchers, and rural small businesses in developing renewable energy systems, and in making energy-efficiency improvements to their operations. This project purchased and installed a 34 kW solar photovoltaic system for the winery's testing and bottling facility. It replaced over 100% of the current usage and the system was expected to generate 60,443 kWh or enough electricity to power over 5 homes.

2020 VAPG – Rural Development funds were used for working capital to change the raw commodity of grapes into wine and add berry and mango flavoring. The line of wines are called Jo Mammass Mango Tango and Jo Mammass Very Berry Good. Noisy Water has contracts with distributors in 12 states with this new line of wines. Seven jobs were created by this grant.



# Purpose

## What VAPG is NOT:

- A job training program
- Intended to teach people how to farm
- A technical assistance program
- For Research & Development
- A loan program
- Intended as a continuous stream of capital



## Reserved Funds – 7 CFR 4284.916 & .923

Reserved Funds ensure that a minimum of 10 percent of total funds are available for awards to applicants from these categories.

- Beginning & Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers (Includes Veteran Farmers)
- Mid-Tier Value Chains
- Persistent Poverty Counties
- Food Safety – New starting FY 2025

## Reserved Funds - Continued

### **Food Safety Reserved Fund (NEW)–**

If the Applicant is applying for Food Safety reserved funds, the Applicant must describe the need or requirement for training, certifications, and/or supplies and equipment.

This reserve is for Applicants where more than 50 percent of the Project Cost is for post-harvest Food Safety purposes related to the processing and/or marketing of a Value-Added Agricultural Product.

Examples of eligible expenses:

- Food safety training for post-harvest related activities and value-added processing
- Audit/certification training for eligible applicants and/or designated employees
- USDA GAP audit or certification expenses performed by USDA or third-party certifying organization
- Other voluntary programs by an identified third-party certifying organization
- Food Safety related equipment up to \$6500 of the grant amount (more on this later in the presentation)

# Food Safety Expenses

Examples of ineligible expenses:

- Infrastructure improvements, construction (including walk-in coolers)
- Any processing, packing or packaging equipment requiring plumbing, electrical, or other facility alterations or upgrades.
- Preharvest or harvest activities
- Soil and irrigation water testing (including instruments)



# What is needed to get started ...

## **SAM Registration-**

- At the time of application, each Applicant must have an active registration in SAM before submitting its application in accordance with 2 CFR part 25. This registration must remain current, accurate and complete at all times during which the Applicant has an active Federal award or an application under consideration. The Applicant must also obtain a UEI through [SAM.gov](https://sam.gov).

## **Legal Authority-**

- Applicants must certify that they have the legal authority to carry out the purpose of the grant, and/or their business is in good standing in the State where it is incorporated and/or in the State that is the primary location of an applicant's business operations for the VAPG Project.

- *See 7 CFR 4284.920 for more info on SAM and Legal Authority requirements*

# Applicant Types

Applicants must meet the definition for one of these types:

- Agricultural Producer
- Agricultural Producer Group
- Farmer or Rancher Cooperative
- Majority-Controlled Producer-Based Business

## Agricultural Producers

- ***Agricultural Producer, Independent Producer or Producer*** means a for-profit agricultural business, or entity that is 100 percent owned and controlled by an individual, entity or Family Farm that produces an Agricultural Commodity through participation in the day-to-day labor, management, and field operations; or that has the legal right to harvest an Agricultural Commodity that is the subject of the VAPG Project.
- **Family Farm** means a Farm or Ranch whose owner(s) are primarily responsible for daily physical labor, business and/or strategic management; whose hired help only supplements family labor; and whose owners are related by blood or marriage or are Immediate Family.
- Note: there are no population requirements as long as you are an Agriculture Producer



## All applicant types must be Agricultural Producers

Remember, the definition for Agricultural Producer is the basis for which all Applicant Types are established.

“An individual, entity, or Family Farm that produces an Agricultural Commodity **through participation in the day-to-day labor, management, and field operations...**”

## Agricultural Producers can also be...

- **Steering committees** is an unincorporated group comprised wholly of specifically identified Agricultural Producers in the process of organizing into one of the program eligible Applicant Types. If selected for award, Applicants who applied as a Steering Committee must form an eligible legal entity prior to execution of the Financial Assistance Agreement (grant agreement).

**Harvesters** is an individual or entity that demonstrates the legal right to harvest more than 50 percent of the primary (wild) Agricultural Commodity for the Project; but does not cultivate or raise the Agricultural Commodity. Applicants may not merely glean, gather, or collect residual commodities that result from an initial harvesting or production of a primary Agricultural Commodity produced by others.

# Agricultural Producer Group

Formal **nonprofit** membership organization that represents eligible **Agricultural Producers** and operates with a mission that includes working on behalf of their members.

The majority of the applicant's membership meet the definition of Agricultural Producer. The majority of the applicant's board of directors meet the definition of Agricultural Producer.



## Farmer or Rancher Cooperative:

Is a business owned and controlled by **Agricultural Producers** that is incorporated or otherwise identified by the State in which it operates, as a cooperatively operated business.

\*Note: that agricultural Harvesters do not meet the definition of a farmer or rancher and therefore are not eligible to apply as Farmer or Rancher Cooperatives.

# Majority-Controlled Producer-Based Business

Majority Controlled Producer-Based Business venture means a venture greater than 50 percent of the ownership and control of which is held by-

- (i) 1 or more producers; or
- (ii) 1 or more entities, 100 percent of the ownership and control of which is held by 1 or more producers.

The term 'entity' means-

- (i) A partnership;
- (ii) A limited liability corporation;
- (iii) A limited liability partnership; and
- (iv) A corporation

\*Only 10 percent of available funds be awarded to eligible applicants in category .

## All four applicant types must...

Currently produce and own more than 50 percent of the Agricultural Commodity that will be used for the Value-Added product.

Own the product from its raw Agricultural Commodity state through the production of the Value-Added product during the Project.

*Please note:* All Applicants applying for Working Capital Grant funds must document the quantity of each Agricultural Commodity that will be used for the Value-Added Agricultural Product, expressed in an appropriate unit of measure (pounds, tons, bushels, etc.) to demonstrate the scale of the Applicant's Project.



## Additional Applicant Eligibility Requirements

- **Citizenship** - An Applicant must certify that it is more than 50 percent owned by individuals who are either a citizen or national of a State or reside in the United States after legal admittance for permanent residence.
- **Multiple grants** - An Applicant must submit only one application in response to a solicitation and may have only one active VAPG award at any given time unless the Applicant is also applying as a member of a Farmer or Rancher Cooperative or an Agricultural Producer Group. Applicants cannot receive another grant for the same Project.
- **Current VAPG award** - If an Applicant has a current VAPG award at the time of subsequent competition, the Applicant must exhaust all VAPG award funds and submit final financial and performance reports to the Agency by the application submission deadline for the subsequent VAPG competition.

## Applicants are ineligible for assistance if they...

- Have been debarred or suspended or is otherwise excluded from Federal assistance programs;
- Have outstanding judgements obtained in Federal court (other than U.S. Tax Court);
- Are delinquent on payment of Federal income taxes or is delinquent on Federal debt;
- Have been convicted of a felony criminal violation under a Federal law within the past 24 months;
- Have unpaid Federal tax liability that has been assessed, for which all judicial and administrative remedies have been exhausted or have lapsed, and that is not being paid in a timely manner.

# VAPG Product Eligibility

Applicants must use one of the following methodologies, as defined in the definition of Value-Added Product:

- Change in physical state - An irreversible processing activity that alters the raw agricultural commodity and enhances its value and is something other than post harvest commodity for later sale
  - \* Milk into cheese
  - \* Wheat into flour
  - \* Wool into clothing or rugs
  - \* Livestock into packaged meat
- Produced in a manner that enhances the value of the agricultural commodity
- Physical segregation
- Farm- or ranch-based renewable energy
- Locally-produced agricultural food product

# Ineligible use of funds

Ineligible uses of grant and Matching Funds awarded include, but are not limited to:

- Purchase of land, buildings, or equipment
- Preparation of the grant application
- Research and development, architectural, or engineering design work
- Expenses for the production, harvesting or delivery to a processing facility of any agricultural commodity or product
- Any application with over 10% of the total project cost allotted to an ineligible expense will be ineligible to compete for the grant

# Rural Development New Mexico Business Programs

- Business and Industry Guaranteed Loans (B&I)
- Energy Programs
  - Renewable Energy for America Program (REAP)
    - Renewable Energy Systems (RES)
    - Energy Efficiency Improvements (EEI)
    - Energy Audit & Renewable Energy Development Assistance (EA/REDA)
  - Higher Blends Infrastructure Incentive Program (HBIIP)
  - Biorefinery, Renewable Chemical, and Biobased Product Manufacturing Assistance Program (9003)
  - Rural Economic Development Loan/ Grant Program (REDLG)
- Rural Business Development Grants (RBDG)
- Value Added Producer Grants (VAPG)
- Rural Cooperative Development Grants (RCDG)
- Intermediary Relending Program (IRP)
- Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program (RMAP)
- Rural Innovation Stronger Economy (RISE)
- Small Socially Disadvantaged Group Grant (SDGG)
- Fertilizer Production Expansion Program (FPEP)



# Business & Cooperatives

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Natural Resources Conservation Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



# Natural Resources Conservation Service

Floyd Nauls Jr., Texas NRCS BFR Coordinator

FARM PRODUCTION AND CONSERVATION  
FSA | NRCS | RMA | Business Center

# Who We Are

- The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is a federal agency under the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

## NRCS

**Mission:** We deliver conservation solutions so agricultural producers can protect natural resources and feed a growing world.

**Vision:** A world of clean and abundant water, healthy soils, resilient landscapes, and thriving agricultural communities through voluntary conservation.





# What We Do

- NRCS employees work directly with farmers, ranchers, forestry landowners and urban ag producers to provide technical expertise and financial assistance to meet their unique conservation and business goals.





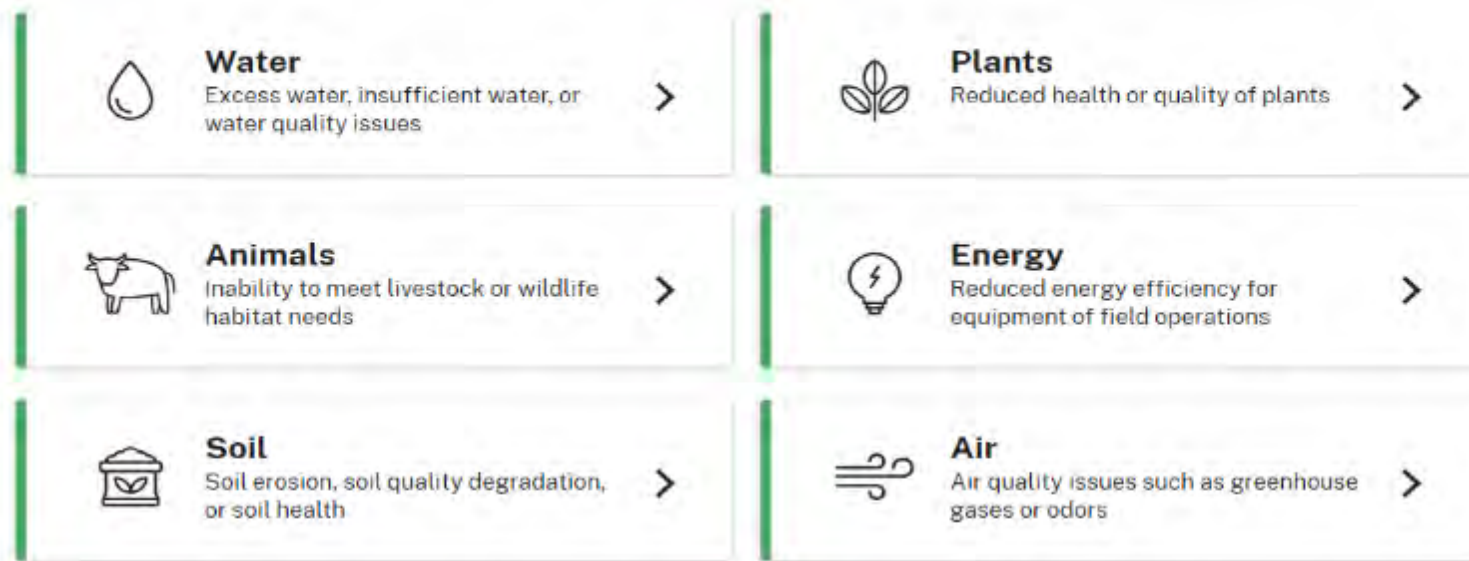
# Starts with a Visit



# Prior to Field Visit

- Check out what resource concerns you have on your land
- <https://www.farmers.gov/conservation/concerns-tool>

You can also build a list of concerns to discuss with a local USDA conservation specialist.



# NRCS Terminology

## Natural Resources:

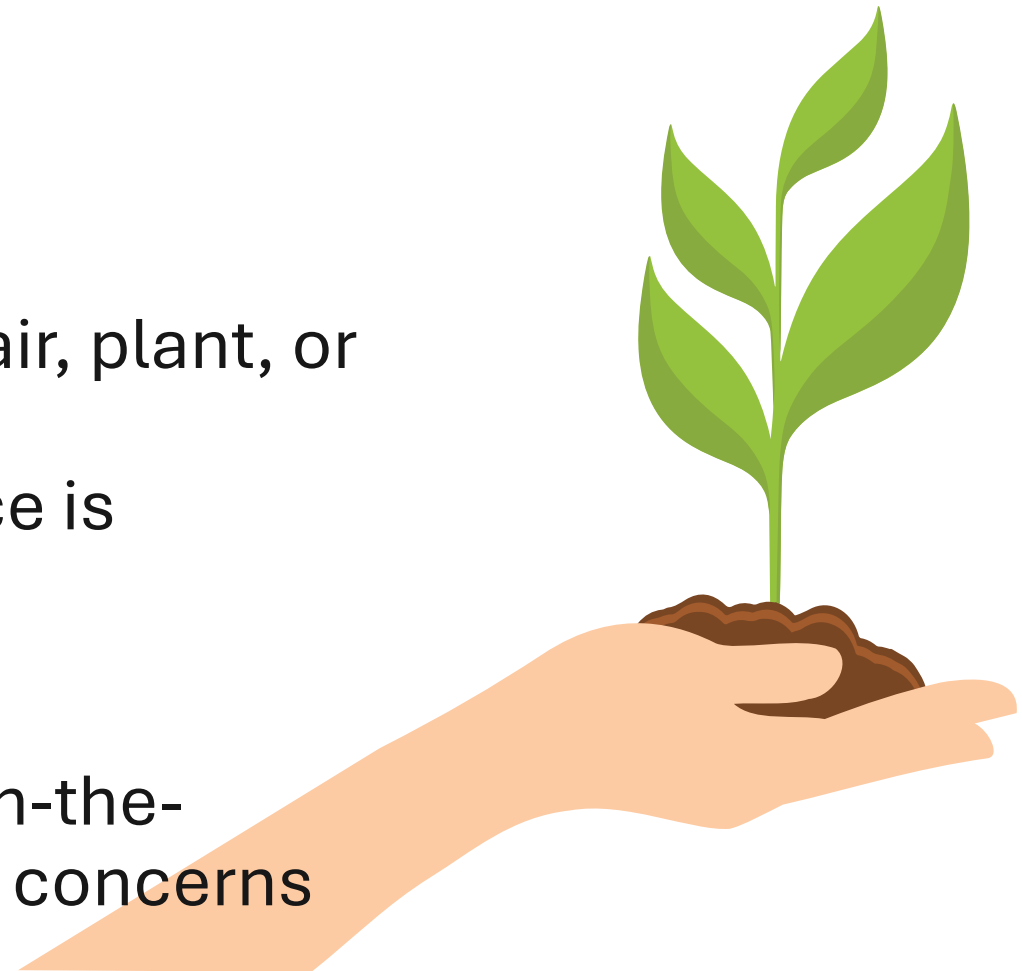
- Soil, water, air, plants, animals (SWAPA)

## Resource Concern:

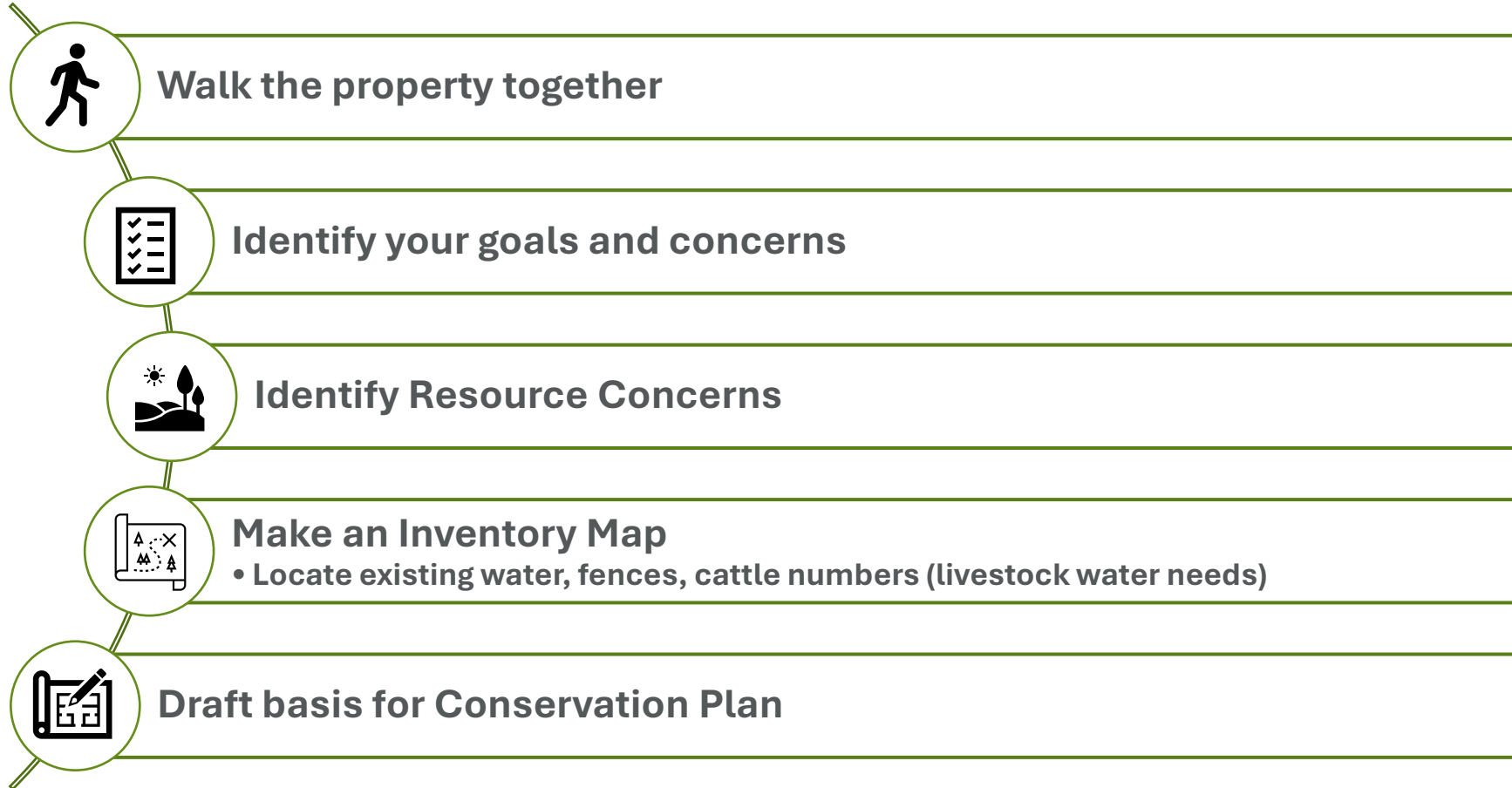
- An expected degradation of the soil, water, air, plant, or animal resource base to the extent that the sustainability or intended use of the resource is impaired.

## Conservation Practice:

- Activities that landowners can implement on-the-ground to improve specific natural resource concerns



# Field Visit



# What is a Conservation Plan?

## Guidance

A clear, step-by-step plan that meets each farmer or rancher's needs and goals.

01

## Any one can request

Request a conservation plan even if you are not applying for financial assistance.

03

## Suited to you

Farmers and ranchers choose conservation practices that suit their circumstances and time schedule.

02

## No fee service

A conservation plan is **NOT** a contract, implemented on a voluntary basis.

04





# Conservation Plan can include:



**USDA** Natural Resources Conservation Service  
1600 N. Service Center  
600 N. Service Center  
1600 N. Service Center  
1600 N. Service Center

**Conservation Plan**

OBJECTIVE(S)

Small: No conservation practice, enhancement, or activity according to the implementation requirements, design, construction plan, or other documents that constitute the applicable NRCS conservation plan. If you do not have any information, contact your local office before starting to install your conservation practice, enhancement, and activity.

Practice:

**Conservation Crop Rotation (229)**  
Crop Rotation - Plan a sequence of crops grown on the same ground over a period of time to maintain or increase soil health, organic matter content, reduce erosion losses and reduce water quality degradation.

Field	Planned Rotation	Months	Year	Applied Rotation	Date
1	0.1 Ac	01	2025	—	—
Total	0.1 Ac	—	—	—	—

**High Tunnel System (225)**  
High Tunnel - Install a High Tunnel System to cover and protect crops from sun, wind, excessive rainfall, or cold to extend the growing season in an environmentally sustainable manner.

Field	Planned Rotation	Months	Year	Applied Rotation	Date
1	1000 (0.00 Ac)	01	2024	—	—
Total	1000 (0.00 Ac)	—	—	—	—

The client agrees to maintain records for the NRCS and the NRCS will maintain records for the client.

**Schedule**

**Soils Inventory Report**

Tract	Land Unit	Map Unit Symbol	Map Unit Name	Acres	Percent
	1	BrA	Branyon clay, 0 to 1 percent slopes	8.5	84%
	1	BrB	Branyon clay, 1 to 3 percent slopes	1.6	16%
<b>Total</b>				<b>10.1</b>	<b>100%</b>
				<b>10.1</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Soils Report**

**USDA** United States Department of Agriculture  
Natural Resources Conservation Service

**Practice Specification  
Prescribed Grazing (Code 528)**

**General Use**  
Application of this practice will prescribe the rest period, intensity, frequency, duration and season of grazing to promote ecologically and economically stable plant communities that meet both the land manager's objectives and the resource needs. All grazing plans shall be designed with flexibility to reduce risk. Removal of herbage will be in accordance with site production limitations, rate of plant growth and the physiological stage of forage plants and grazing objective.

Manage kind of animal, number of animals, grazing distribution, utilization, and/or timing of use for maintenance or restoration of desired vegetation.

Manage grazing animals to maintain adequate vegetative cover on sensitive areas (i.e. riparian, wetland, habitats of concern, karst areas) to insure the degree of utilization of key species (Refer to Appendix 1 & 3).

Refer to Brush Management for information on woody plants.

**Practice Specifications**

# Two Types of Assistance:

## Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA)

- The **personalized advice** and information, based on the latest science and research, to help farmer and rancher's make informed decisions.
- CTA may be in the form of resource assessment, practice design, resource monitoring, or follow-up of installed practices.

## Financial Assistance

- Contract duration are typically between 1 and 5 years.
- Practices will be planned and certified to meet NRCS standards and specifications.
- Payments will be made on a partial **reimbursement basis** after practice completion and certification.



# Common Conservation Practices



**Brush Management**



**Cross Fence**



**Range or Pasture Planting**



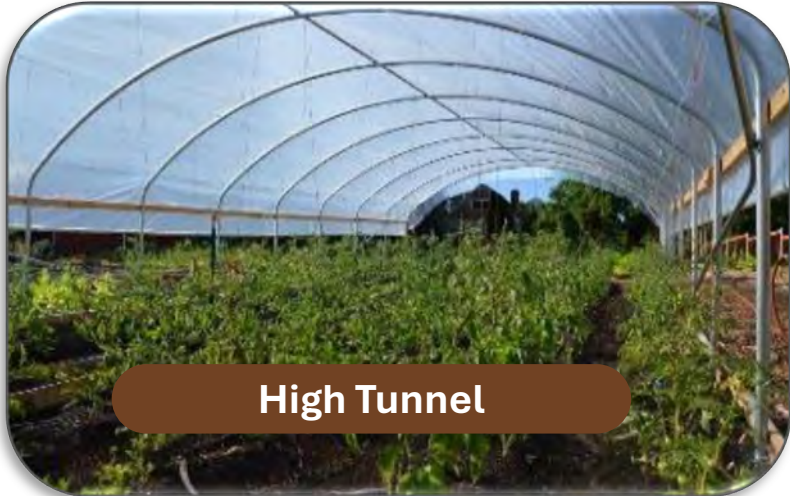
**Prescribed Grazing**



**Livestock Pipeline**



# Common Conservation Practices



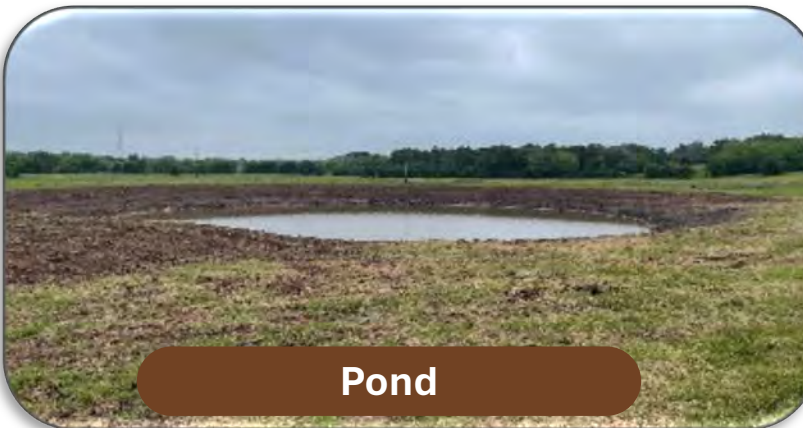
High Tunnel



Urban Garden



Cover Crops



Pond



Tree Planting

# Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)



Producers receive financial assistance in exchange for the successful implementation of certain practices.



Incentive payments for conservation practices are reviewed and set each fiscal year.



# Example of EQIP Application Cost

Practice Name	Scenario	Practice Code	Unit Type	Payment Rate	Estimated Practice Extent (units)	Estimated Contract Payment
Brush Management	Mechanical Treatment for >51% Canopy Cover	314	Ac	337.01	20	\$6,741
Brush Management	Mechanical Treatment for 11-30% Canopy Cover	314	Ac	119.03	5	\$596
Range Planting	Native Plants with Standard Seedbed Preparation	550	Ac	145.51	25	\$3,638
Total Estimated Cost:						\$10,975

☐ Payment Rates change based on scenario
☐ NRCS pays for what is installed and subject to change
☐ NRCS pays after practice is certified and it meets specifications
☐ Cost list for Fiscal Year 2024 and subject change

**NRCS Payments**

# Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

## Program

- **Increase** your level of conservation by adopting additional conservation activities called enhancements and maintain the baseline level of conservation.
- Contract is 5 years.

## Requirements

- Enrolls your entire operation into the program, not just one specific field or tract.
- **Minimum Criteria:** Meet at least two priority resource concerns on every land use included in the operation. Must also agree to meet at least one additional resource concern by the end of the contract on at least one land use.

## Payments

- Annual Payments - paid after October 1 of each fiscal year
- Minimum Annual Payments are \$4,000

# EQIP Conservation Incentive Contract (CIC)

## Program

- A “**stepping stone**” between EQIP and CSP to address priority resource concerns
- Contract has initial length of 5 years (CSP)

## Requirements

- Entire operation does not need to be enrolled, can enroll one field or tract (EQIP)
- Meet at least one priority resource concern during the contract period (CSP)

## Payments

- Uses EQIP payment rates
- Implementation Payments - paid after certification of the conservation practice (EQIP)
- Annual Payments – management practices paid after October 1 of each fiscal year (CSP)

# Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

## Agricultural Land Easements (ALE)

- Help private and tribal landowners, land trusts, and other entities protect croplands and grasslands on working farms and ranches by limiting non-agricultural uses of the land through conservation easements.

## Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE)

- Help private and tribal landowners protect, restore and enhance wetlands which have been previously degraded due to agricultural uses.

# What land is eligible in ACEP-ALE?

- **Agricultural land**
  - NRCS will prioritize applications that protect agricultural uses
- Cropland
- Rangeland
- Grassland
- Pastureland
- Nonindustrial private forest land



# Funding Pools for Applicants

## **Beginning Farmer and Rancher:**

- Has not operated a farm or ranch, or who has operated a farm or ranch for not more than 10 consecutive years. This requirement applies to all members of a legal entity, and who will materially and substantially participate in the operation of a farm or ranch.

## **Veteran Farmers and Rancher:**

- Meet beginning farmer/rancher criteria; and  
Served in the US Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, or Coast Guard, including the reserve components thereof; was released from the service under conditions other than dishonorable; and
- First obtained status as a veteran during the most recent 10-year period.



# Tips for Success

- Review the application and contract appendix
- Ask questions
- Check in occasionally with the local field office
- Understand Practice Standards/Specifications, Enhancement Requirements, and Required Documentation
- Have a plan - be ready to start work following obligation (schedule contractors, place orders for materials)
- Implement a planned item in the first 12 months
- Stick to the Planned Practice Schedule
- Understand the cost to you, talk to consultants, contractors, price items
- Ask for a Receipt for Service for your call or visit



# Tips for Success



# USDA NRCS Helping Veterans

USDA wants to ensure that veterans looking to return home or start a new career on a farm or in a rural community have the tools and opportunities they need to succeed.

USDA supports veterans involved in agriculture, urban agriculture and innovative production. Urban agriculture includes the cultivating, processing, and distributing of agricultural products in urban and suburban areas. Tribal communities and small towns may also be included.



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## **USDA Service Center Locator**

Contact your local NRCS office to schedule  
your next field appointment



# Thank you