

Succeed with EQIP

A guide to help specialty crop growers successfully apply to the Environmental Quality Incentives Program to support their use of conservation practices

Farmers understand better than most people the value of farming practices that conserve natural resources and protect the environment. They also know 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. One of the programs 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. Among the practices for which growers can receive payments are integrated pest management, erosion control, conservation of water resources, wildlife habitat protection and nutrient management.

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 to applying for EQIP payments.

In this guide you will find:

- The basic steps of the application process
- Copies of the forms you will need
- A list of qualifying practices for which you may receive payments under EQIP
- A list of key contacts to help you complete your application
- A list of Internet resources describing the program and past experiences of specialty crop growers

Overview of basic steps

- 1) Contact your NRCS office in your local USDA Service Center
- 2) Work with NRCS to complete a site specific conservation plan for your farm
- 3) Complete the application
- 4) Submit application to NRCS

Step One – Contact the nearest NRCS office and tell them you want to apply for EQIP

They will schedule a time for you to meet with NRCS staff to start your application. The application process is confidential. As part of this initial step, the NRCS District Conservationist or a conservation planner will help you fill out a pre-application form to see if you are eligible for the program. The pre-application form asks basic questions about your farm. You fill in your name, county and the date. Then you circle the correct answers to the seven questions on the form. Be sure to submit the pre-application form directly to the District Conservationist as soon as possible, because the date of submission will be used as part of the selection process if more funds are requested than are available.

Locations of NRCS offices at USDA Service Centers

Traverse City Service Center
1501 S Cass St
Traverse City, MI 49684-4187
(231) 941-0951

Cadillac Service Center
7192 34 Rd
Cadillac, MI 49601-9057
(231) 775-7681

Bear Lake Service Center
8840 Chippewa Hwy
Bear Lake, MI 49614-9400
(231) 889-9666

Scottville Service Center
862 W US Highway10
Scottville, MI 49454-9601
(231) 757-3707

Shelby Service Center
1064 Industrial Park Dr
Shelby, MI 49455-9202
(231) 861-5600

Locate more Michigan USDA Service Centers at this NRCS web site:

<http://www.mi.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip2003.html>

Click on the "Find a Service Center" option along the left side of the screen.

Step Two- Work with NRCS to complete a site-specific conservation plan for 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. You and the planner will develop a plan outlining conservation practices to implement. The goal is to work together to design a plan that makes sense for your farm, both for resource conservation and maintaining farm production.

For your meeting you will want to have available:

- Pest and nutrient management records from the past three years
- A farm layout or aerial photo of the farm
- A list of areas where you have conservation concerns
- A list of crops and rotation schedules, if applicable

The District Conservationist will help you identify practices that make sense for your farm and will help you identify 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.

Here are some practices in fruit and vegetable production to consider for your conservation plan. You may think of other practices that will also qualify.

Fruit production

Pest management
Nutrient management
Ag pesticide containment facility
Field border
Critical area planting
Shelterbelt establishment
Windbreak renovation
Riparian buffer/filter strips
Heavy use area protection

Vegetable production

Pest management
Nutrient management
Ag pesticide containment facility
Field border
Irrigation water management
Riparian buffer/Filter strips
Stripcropping
Residue management
Shelterbelt establishment

Windbreak restoration
Heavy use area protection
Crosswind strips
Cover crops

Step Three - Complete the application

Once you have developed the conservation plan for your farm, 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.

Step Four - Submit the application to NRCS

When your application is complete, it will be ranked with others in the state based on the number of points it has received. The District Conservationist will contact you about whether or not your application is funded. If your application has been accepted, you will complete and sign a contract stating the payments and your obligations.

Useful resources on the Internet

For more information about EQIP and integrated pest management (IPM), visit:
<http://www.ipm.msu.edu/farbill.htm>

Read about growers' experiences with this program at: <http://www.ipm.msu.edu/farbill/growers.htm>

For the latest information on how minor crop producers can benefit from participation in the conservation programs authorized in the 2002 Farm Bill, see: <http://www.agcenter.org/progfarmbill.html>

Acknowledgements: This guide was developed by Larry Elworth, Center for Agricultural Partnerships; Joy Landis and Michael Brewer, MSU IPM Program. Information in this document was identified by working with USDA NRCS, MSUE, and commodity group representatives. This document is a product of the Putting the Farm Bill to Work Project, a joint activity of the Center for Agricultural Partnerships, Michigan State University IPM Program, Cherry Marketing Institute, Michigan Asparagus Advisory Board, Gerber Products and Project GREEN. November 2003.