



THE DEPUTY SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE  
WASHINGTON, D.C.  
20250-0100

**DATE:** January 21, 2011

**FROM:** USDA Deputy Secretary Kathleen A. Merrigan

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Kathleen A. Merrigan".

**SUBJECT:** **Harnessing USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Programs to Support Local and Regional Food Systems**

When we launched the *Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food* initiative, I asked each agency to take a realistic look at their programs for opportunities to better support farmers trying to access local and regional markets. Last winter I was excited to launch a new **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)** interim practice standard for high tunnels, commonly known as hoop houses, with Chief Dave White of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). In order to demonstrate the benefits hoop houses provide for a farmer's land, Chief White and I even constructed a few at the White House vegetable garden.

Farmers have worked with soil and water since the first seed was planted in the ground, and every year work to become more efficient and produce more food, fuel, and fiber on every acre. EQIP is a voluntary conservation program that provides financial and technical assistance to eligible farmers and ranchers to address threats to soil, water, air, and other natural resource on their lands. Through EQIP, NRCS works with landowners to implement environmentally beneficial and cost-effective conservation practices according to a conservation plan. EQIP supports dozens of specific practices, and can be used to help producers improve their irrigation systems, build an anaerobic digester or composting pad, install buffers to reduce erosion and protect wildlife, and much more. It also provides assistance in complying with Federal, State, and local environmental regulations and reduces the administrative burden on producers by consolidating and simplifying conservation planning and implementation. As of the end of last year, EQIP has over \$2.5 billion obligated to help farmers protect 46 million acres—an area almost twice the size of Ohio.

The hoop house pilot, which is part of the EQIP program, helps farmers build simple structures that allow them to protect their crops from extreme weather and pests, thereby reducing water use, cutting the need for costly inputs such as pesticides, protecting soil, and extending their growing season. While we initially planned to offer the pilot in 32 States, the response was overwhelming and we have since expanded its availability to 47 States. After one year, I am so proud to announce that through the pilot we have helped farmers install 2,422 hoop houses that are helping producers protect their soil and water, increase their yields, and earn a living through increased profit from an extended growing season. To learn more, check out the video about the pilot that we recently posted online: <http://kyf.blogs.usda.gov/2011/01/11/hoop-house-hoopla>.

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In their first year, many high tunnels have already demonstrated success in engaging farmers and communities in resource conservation and sustainable agriculture, promoting local consumption, and creating new economic opportunities. For example, a family beef operation in Morgan County, Utah, was immediately able to grow tomatoes, peppers, herbs, watermelons, and sweet corn thanks to their new high tunnels. The family has set up a roadside stand, with their children selling the produce as 4-H and Future Farmers of America projects—bringing delicious, locally grown food to their neighbors and providing a new generation with some skills and experience to go into agriculture someday. Seeing the family's success, other farmers in the community are now exploring setting up their own hoop houses, and the high tunnel is prompting interest in Utah's "buy local" campaign.

But the hoop house pilot is just one of many ways that NRCS is able to support local and regional food systems. For instance, the **Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D)** program is a voluntary program that helps communities protect and develop their economic, natural, and social resources in the 375 designated RC&D areas across the country.

The RC&D councils pull together people, businesses, local governments, tribes, and non-profit groups that are committed to revitalizing and sustaining their community. The councils are active in supporting their communities by establishing cooperatives and farmers markets, connecting farmers to school lunch programs and local restaurants, developing value-added products and agri-tourism opportunities, and promoting agricultural product marketing and labeling efforts. RC&D councils also assist producers with on-farm energy conservation and production, along with other conservation activities. And, because they are managed locally, the RC&D councils are powerful tools to help bring together farmers, consumers, local government, and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) to build local food systems. To connect with your local RC&D, contact your local NRCS office or visit: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/rcd>.

Across the country, RC&D councils have been critical supporters of local and regional food systems. In New England, RC&D councils are now working to develop a regional system that benefits both producers and consumers. In Wisconsin, they participated in developing a Farm Fresh Atlas (available online at: <http://www.farmfreshatlas.org>) as marketing tools for healthy, locally produced food.

Another important NRCS program is the **Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP)**. Across the country, farmland is disappearing and one of the biggest challenges many new and small producers face is keeping their working lands in production. FRPP works with States, local groups, and volunteer landowners to purchase conservation easements and make sure farms threatened by development pressures can afford to keep farming.

For example, the Bushy Hill Orchard in Granby, Connecticut, had been farmed for more than 30 years by the same family. When the family could no longer maintain the 70-acre farm, they wanted to ensure that it would remain in agriculture. Using FRPP, USDA and the Connecticut Department of Agriculture partnered with the Town of Granby and the Granby Land Trust to purchase the development rights to the land.

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This made it possible for Allen and Becky Clark, the owners of a nearby small farm who grew flowers, pumpkins, and corn stalks, and raised goats to sell milk, cheese, and soap to expand. Acquiring Bushy Hill Orchard has allowed them to add apples, peaches, pears, raspberries, and blueberries, offer pick-your-own opportunities, and build a kitchen to create baked goods, cider, and other added-value products to sell locally. In addition, they are continuing Bushy Hill's tradition of offering agricultural education tours and lectures to schools and other groups in the area. Located within 25 miles of both Hartford, Connecticut, and Springfield, Massachusetts, the farm is now a viable local business that offers the metropolitan population a broad range of fresh products and the opportunity to know the farmers producing their food.

The **Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA)** program, which NRCS manages with the Agricultural Marketing Service and Risk Management Agency, provides financial assistance to agricultural producers to address water management, water quality, and erosion control issues by incorporating conservation into their farming operations in 18 States. With AMA funds, producers can build or improve irrigation structures; plant trees for windbreaks or to improve water quality; and mitigate their risk by diversifying what they grow or by adopting conservation practices. To find out if you are eligible and apply online, you can go to: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/ama>.

How does a conservation program support local and regional food systems? Appleton Farms in Ipswich, Massachusetts is committed to being both an education center and an economically viable farm. Establishing a community supported agriculture (CSA) program was essential to achieving both these goals. In a CSA program, a farmer grows food for a group of local residents (shareholders) who commit to purchasing part of the farm's crop, thereby providing working capital to the farm in exchange for a regular supply of fresh, high quality produce.

Appleton Farms and the local NRCS office developed a conservation plan to establish a reliable supply of irrigation water to meet their growth. With AMA support, the farm installed 2,000 feet of underground mainline to provide drip irrigation to 15 acres of vegetables. Over the past couple years, the number of annual CSA shares increased from the initial 100 to 550. When no rain fell for nearly 3 months last year, it was the irrigation system that helped save the CSA. Together, USDA, Appleton Farms, and the community have ensured local families regularly received fresh produce while also learning about farming, nutrition, and local agricultural issues, and one of the oldest farms in the country has been rejuvenated.

NRCS has many other resources that can help farmers, ranchers, and communities build local and regional food systems, including:

- The **Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA)** program, NRCS's oldest program functions as the catalyst that allows all other NRCS programs to work. Through the CTA program NRCS is able to provide technical assistance to a broad array of customers, including landowners, soil and water conservation districts, Tribes, States, local jurisdictions, and others. That assistance can include conservation planning, help with understanding regulatory requirements, analysis of soil and other natural resources, and more. For more information you should contact your local NRCS office (details below).

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- The **Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)** encourages producers to address resource concerns in a comprehensive manner by undertaking additional conservation activities and improving, maintaining, and managing existing conservation activities. CSP is a voluntary program and can support a wide range of activities, including helping a farm convert to use farm inputs such as feed and fertilizer that are produced locally and to sell its product to local consumers. For additional information, including eligibility and application information, visit [http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/new\\_csp/csp.html](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/new_csp/csp.html).
- The **EQIP Organic Initiative** helps producers plan and implement conservation practices to improve upon the environmental sustainability of their operations. A young Iowa farmer is using Organic Initiative resources to implement conservation practices that help transition the farm he recently took over from conventional row crop farming to growing vegetables organically. He grows soybeans, potatoes, lettuce, broccoli, carrots, and parsnips, and has plans to transition the rest of his land with a crop rotation of cover crops and organic corn, along with about 20 acres of forage. In the first year, he sold primarily to a local farmers market and to a producer cooperative that markets to schools and restaurants. However, his output has grown so rapidly that he now also markets his produce regionally. Applications for the EQIP Organic Initiative are accepted on an ongoing basis, with the next round of assistance distributed for applications received through March 4, 2011.
- **Soil Surveys** are detailed reports on the soils of an area. They include maps with soil boundaries, photos, and information on soil properties, suitability, and limitations, as well as on the production potential of the various soils. Soil surveys are an important tool for agricultural planning, including the development of local and regional food systems. NRCS has conducted soil surveys on more than 90 percent of the Nation's land – urban and rural areas. Analyses for soil surveys may also include testing for heavy metal content in addition to more common physical and chemical analyses. With information about an area's soil, small as well as large producers can make better management decisions. For additional information, visit <http://soils.usda.gov/survey>.
- The **Grassland Reserve Program (GRP)** is administered jointly by NRCS and the Farm Service Agency. With financial and technical assistance from GRP, volunteer landowners and operators are able to protect grassland, rangeland, pastureland, and shrubland from conversion to other uses, as well as to restore and enhance eligible land through conservation easements, rental contracts, and restoration agreements. The program emphasizes enrolling high-quality land, protecting biodiversity, maintaining viable ranching operations, and preventing conversion to nonagricultural uses. For additional information, including eligibility and application information, visit <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/GRP>.
- The **Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP)** is a voluntary program that helps participants to develop fish and wildlife habitat on private agricultural land, nonindustrial private forest land, and Tribal land. It provides technical and financial assistance to

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enable participants to develop wildlife habitat in an environmentally beneficial and cost effective manner. WHIP practices can enhance farm profitability by improving grazing conditions, reducing management expenses, and producing non-crop income from the lease of rights to harvest and observe wild game and fish. WHIP can also help control invasive species, reestablish native vegetation, and protect, restore, develop, or enhance unique habitats. For more information, visit <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/whip>.

This memorandum includes only a handful of our programs that can help support the growth of local and regional food systems. I encourage you to also check out NRCS' Web site, <http://nrcs.usda.gov>, or visit <http://nrcs.usda.gov/findoffice>, to connect with one of our 2,000 local offices across the country.