

# Increasing Drought Resilience Through Conservation Practices: Opportunities With Federal Conservation Programs

**T**his guide summarizes eligibility requirements, program objectives and benefit information for six federal conservation programs that can help a farm operation become more drought resilient:

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)
- General Conservation Reserve Program (General CRP)
- Continuous Conservation Reserve Program (Continuous CRP)
- Grassland Conservation Reserve Program (Grassland CRP)
- Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE)

## Improving drought resilience through conservation practices

A cropping operation depends on water availability and soil and plant health. Although you cannot influence or change the weather, you can implement conservation practices that make your operation more resilient to drought. Conservation practices are techniques that conserve, protect and improve natural resources such as soil, water, air, plants and animals.

Below are some examples of conservation practices that can make your farm more resilient to drought.

### Soil health

Practices such as conservation tillage, cover cropping and conservation crop rotation that includes high residue crops prevent soil erosion, increase organic matter, and improve soil structure and water retention. Healthy soils with increased organic matter are better able to absorb

and retain water during dry periods, providing a more reliable water supply for crops and ecosystems.

### Plant health

Practices such as drought-resistant plant use, agroforestry, rotational grazing and riparian buffer strips make systems more resistant to drought stress, enhance water infiltration and quality, and reduce runoff. Through such practices, you can safeguard your water resources and obtain resilient productivity.

### Water availability

Many conservation practices focus on reducing water usage and improving water efficiency in agricultural, urban and natural settings. Techniques such as drip irrigation, mulching and precision irrigation help minimize water waste and optimize water use, allowing farmers to make the most of limited water resources during a drought.

## About federal conservation programs

Federal conservation programs are voluntary U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA) that provide technical and financial assistance to implement or improve conservation practices on a farm. To participate:

1. Establish farm records and begin the conservation planning process to determine if financial assistance is right for you.
2. Develop a conservation plan with a conservation planner and verify your eligibility if you are applying to EQIP, CSP or Continuous CRP.
3. Prepare documentation and submit your application.
4. If approved and if you are applying for WRE, Grassland CRP or General CRP, develop a conservation plan with a conservation planner after approval and before signing the contract agreement.

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**Table 1. Features of current federal conservation programs.**

**(continued on next page)**

	<b>Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)</b>	<b>Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)</b>
<b>Objective</b>	Adopt conservation practices	Build on existing conservation efforts
<b>Eligible persons</b>	Individuals, legal entities, Indian Tribes, Alaska Native corporations, or joint operations with signature authority that engage in agricultural production or forestry management or have an interest in the operation associated with the land offered for enrollment	Individuals, legal entities, joint operations, Indian Tribes, or water management entities that own or operate land, share in the risk of producing a crop, and will be in control of the land for at least 5 years
<b>Income limits</b>	Adjusted gross income less than \$900,000 <sup>2</sup> for all programs	
<b>Eligible land</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agricultural land and nonindustrial private forest land, as well as one of the following: privately owned; publicly owned that is a working component of the operation and is under the control of the participant; or Indian land</li> <li>• Land currently enrolled in CRP is ineligible</li> </ul>	Private agricultural land, agricultural Indian lands, nonindustrial private forest land, associated agricultural lands, farmstead, public land that is a working component of the operation and is under the control of the applicant
<b>Sign-up period</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Year-round</li> <li>• Ranking dates change annually</li> </ul>	
<b>Competitive bidding</b>	No	No
<b>Ranking</b>	Yes, based on national, state and/or local natural resource priorities	
<b>Contract length</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least 1 year for General EQIP</li> <li>• At least 5 years for Conservation Incentive Contracts</li> </ul>	5 years with possibility of renewing for an additional 5 years
<b>Technical help</b>	Available for all programs	
<b>Cost-share</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• Cap for organic producers of \$140,000 over four years</li> </ul>	No cost-share offered
<b>Payments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementation and annual payments</li> <li>• Capped at \$450,000 during 5 years</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Payments to maintain and to implement conservation efforts, capped at \$200,000 during the contract period</li> <li>• \$4,000 minimum payment</li> </ul>

1. Exemptions apply if the new owner acquired the land due to the previous owner's death, the ownership change occurred due to foreclosure where the owner exercised a timely right of redemption in accordance with state law, or the circumstances of the acquisition present adequate assurance to FSA that the new owner did not acquire the land to place it in CRP.
2. Doesn't apply to Indian tribes, but individual tribal members are not exempt from this limitation. Additionally, specifically for CRP, the 2018 Farm Bill amendments provide authority for the Secretary to waive the income limitations on a case-by-case basis if the Secretary determines that environmentally sensitive land of special significance would be protected due to the waiver.

**Table 1. Features of current federal conservation programs.**

**(continuation)**

	Conservation Reserve Programs			Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE)	
	General	Continuous	Grassland	30 years	Permanent
<b>Objective</b>	Retire environmentally sensitive land		Graze, harvest hay, and seed while maintaining existing permanent cover	Restore and protect wetlands and provide habitat to wetland-dependent wildlife	
<b>Eligible persons</b>	Producers who have owned, rented or operated the land for at least 12 months <sup>1</sup> and will be in control of such eligible land for the full term of the contract period			Private and tribal landowners	
<b>Income limits</b>	Adjusted gross income less than \$900,000 <sup>2</sup> for all programs				
<b>Eligible land</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cropland planted or considered planted to an agricultural commodity four of the six crop years from 2012 to 2017</li> <li>• Marginal pastureland</li> </ul>		Established cover containing forbs or shrubs, with no more than 5 percent tree canopy	Farmed or converted wetlands that have been previously altered for agricultural production	
<b>Sign-up period</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Year-round</li> <li>• Ranking dates change annually</li> </ul>	Continuous	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Year-round</li> <li>• Ranking dates change annually</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Year-round</li> <li>• Ranking dates change annually</li> </ul>	
<b>Competitive bidding</b>	Yes	No	Yes	No	
<b>Ranking</b>	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
<b>Contract length</b>	10 to 15 years	10 to 15 years	10 to 15 years	30-year easement, 30-year contracts and term easements	Permanent easement
<b>Technical help</b>	Available for all programs				
<b>Cost-share</b>	Up to 50 percent of the reimbursable cost of installing the practice		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Up to 50 percent of the reimbursable cost of installing approved infrastructure</li> <li>• Boundary fences are not eligible</li> <li>• 50 to 75 percent of the restoration costs</li> </ul>	100 percent of costs associated with recording in the local land records office	75 to 100 percent of the restoration costs for permanent easements
<b>Payments</b>	Capped at \$50,000 per year by participant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May not exceed \$300 per acre</li> <li>• Capped at \$50,000 per year by participant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimum rate of \$13 per acre</li> <li>• Capped at \$50,000 per year by participant</li> </ul>	50 to 75 percent of the easement value	100 percent of the easement value

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2. Doesn't apply to Indian tribes, but individual tribal members are not exempt from this limitation. Additionally, specifically for CRP, the 2018 Farm Bill amendments provide authority for the Secretary to waive the income limitations on a case-by-case basis if the Secretary determines that environmentally sensitive land of special significance would be protected due to the waiver.

5. Sign a contract agreement.
6. Implement the practices and maintain and monitor them.

The application and evaluation process of applicants in some programs might involve bidding and ranking. Bidding happens specifically for General CRP and Grassland CRP, two programs that pay an annual rental rate for acres enrolled. When submitting a bid offer to FSA for General CRP or Grassland CRP, the producer proposes a rental payment value for their land, which will impact the likelihood of having their application approved. Ranking happens for most federal conservation programs and involves classifying producer applications according to the expected environmental benefits they will provide.

Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of EQIP; CSP; General, Continuous and Grassland CRP; and WRE.

## **Conservation and drought resilience: Federal programs at work**

Each federal conservation program has specific objectives. If your application is approved, the program will offer technical and financial support for the implementation of a conservation plan. A specialist will develop the conservation plan to accomplish the objectives of the program. The key to combining conservation efforts with drought resilience is to determine which resource concerns are impacted when a drought happens in your location and which programs target practices that approach those resource concerns.

By aligning the resource concerns in your area — such as soil erosion, water availability or declining vegetation — with the objectives and practices of the appropriate program, you can create a tailored conservation strategy that enhances both environmental benefits and drought resilience. For instance, if water scarcity is a major issue, programs like EQIP can help fund water management practices such as efficient irrigation systems or water harvesting structures. Similarly, the CSP incentivizes advanced practices such as cover cropping and improved grazing management, which improve soil health and water retention, critical factors during drought conditions.

To maximize program benefits, it is essential that you collaborate with local USDA representatives or professionals to identify practices that address your specific challenges. Combining the financial and technical assistance from these programs can amplify their impact, enabling you to adopt sustainable practices that not only mitigate drought effects but also improve the long-term productivity and resilience of your land.

## **Frequently asked questions**

### ***What is the first step to participating in a conservation program?***

Contact your local USDA service center and establish your eligibility as a producer or landowner with the Farm Service Agency (FSA).

### ***How do I apply for CRP?***

To apply for CRP, you must submit an offer to your local USDA FSA office. The offer process includes providing information about your land, conservation goals, and the desired conservation practices.

### ***How do I apply for EQIP, CSP or WRE?***

If you want to apply for EQIP, CSP or WRE, contact your local USDA NRCS office. A NRCS conservation planner will contact you and schedule a visit to your property. During the first visit, they will walk the land with you and review any resource concerns. Following the visit, they will develop a conservation plan.

### ***How can I strengthen my application?***

Conservation programs aim to maximize the environmental benefits of each financial dollar provided to farmers. NRCS and FSA define priority resource concerns for a location, and applications that address these concerns rank higher. The best strategy is to talk to the USDA representative about the priority resource concerns for your county and, if possible, propose to address them in your application. For General CRP and Grassland CRP applications, lower bids receive additional priority points to rank higher.

### ***What if I apply for a program but decide I no longer want to participate?***

Your application approval does not impel your participation. In other words, you can withdraw your application any time before signing the contracts and agreements without any penalty.

### ***Can I enroll in multiple programs at once?***

It depends. If you are eligible for multiple programs, you can, but you usually are not allowed to receive multiple payments for the same practice or activity on the same parcel of land, and practices funded under one program cannot conflict with practices funded under another. Additionally, programs such as WRE and CRP might place land-use restrictions that could affect eligibility for other programs. The best strategy is to coordinate your plans with USDA representatives and ensure you comply with their rules.

### ***Is there an application fee?***

No, there is no application fee to enroll in the EQIP, CSP, General CRP, Continuous CRP, Grassland CRP, or WRE programs. However, be aware that your participation will be associated with implementation and maintenance costs, and there are penalties for noncompliance with your contract terms. Your conservation plan might include cost estimates, and the contract will outline responsibilities and penalties for noncompliance.

### ***If I receive cost-share assistance, do I receive it before or after implementing the practices?***

In cost-share programs, you pay the costs for implementing practices and are then reimbursed for a portion of those costs via direct deposit after certification that the work has been completed according to the contract specifications. This timing means you will need to be financially prepared to maintain your cash flow pending reimbursement.

### ***Are there specific conditions for an underserved farmer's application and participation?***

According to the NRCS, an underserved farmer is an agricultural producer that has historically faced barriers to accessing USDA programs and services, including beginning farmers, socially disadvantaged farmers (such as those belonging to racial or ethnic minority groups), veterans and limited resource producers. If you are an underserved farmer, you receive priority consideration during the application ranking process, enhanced cost-share rates, and incentive payments for EQIP, CSP, CRP and WRE. If you apply for EQIP, you also qualify for advanced payment to receive at least 50 percent of the contract payments upfront. In this case, be aware that funds not spent up to 90 days after receipt should be returned to NRCS.

### ***How should an eligible tenant wanting to apply for CRP proceed?***

For CRP, the participation of an eligible landowner is also required. If an operator of eligible land seeks to participate without the owner's participation, that operator must have operated land for either at least 12 months prior to the close of the applicable sign-up period for enrollments under announced sign-up periods or for at least 12 months prior to submitting an offer under continuous sign-up periods. Further, the operator must provide satisfactory evidence that they have control of the eligible land for the full term of the contract period.

### ***How should an eligible tenant wanting to apply for EQIP or CSP proceed?***

For EQIP and CSP, before obligation, tenants must obtain and provide to NRCS written consent from the landowner to apply a structural or vegetative conservation practice or activity. Additionally, program applicants must comply with the provisions for protecting the interests of tenants and sharecroppers, including the provisions for sharing payments on a fair and equitable basis. To ensure that all parties having a share in the agricultural operation receive equitable treatment, written consent must be obtained from each identified tenant or sharecropper before excluding them from a contract. This determination is applicable before contract obligation and to all owner or operator changes during the term of the contract.

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This guide is based on agency guidance effective as of Nov. 22, 2024, and should not be considered a legal reference for decision-making. NRCS and FSA regulations may change over time. It is recommended to consult with your local USDA service center for the most up-to-date information.

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