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## Dates to Remember

Sept 30	Deadline to Purchase NAP for value loss crops and perennial forage
Oct 31	Acreage and Inventory Reporting Deadline for all value loss crops except Nursery Production
Oct 31	Organic Certification Cost Share Program (OCCSP) Deadline

## The Maine Message

As we head into the fall harvest season, FSA is wrapping up end of fiscal year responsibilities and preparing for the new year ahead. As new programs and opportunities for producers arise our employees are working hard to ensure the information is widely shared and available to

you. If you are hosting or attending an event where FSA presence would be helpful, please reach out and let us know!

As mentioned last month, Secretary Vilsack announced the **Enhancing Program Access and Delivery Farm Loans Rule**. This is the most significant change in Farm Service Agency farm loan policy in 40 years. The process of applying for a farm loan has been streamlined and FSA access and delivery rule has been updated to promote producer profitability and resilience. **All changes go in to affect on September 25, 2024.** Please click on the below links for additional information or contact your local office with questions:

<https://www.farmers.gov/blog/its-new-day-farm-financing>

[Enhancing Program Access Fact Sheet](#)

**Organic Certification Cost Share Program (OCCSP)** provides cost share assistance to producers and handlers of agricultural products who are obtaining or renewing their certification under the [National Organic Program](#) (NOP). Certified operations may receive up to 75 percent of their certification costs paid during the program year, not to exceed \$750 per certification scope. **The deadline to apply is October 31, 2024.** Interested producers should contact Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, Attn: Debbie Davis - Phone: (207) 287-3891 Fax: (207) 287-5576 or Email: [Debbie.Davis@maine.gov](mailto:Debbie.Davis@maine.gov).

FSA events this month include the Common Ground Fair and Fryeburg Fair. If you plan to attend these events, please take a few minutes to stop by our booth and introduce yourself and meet our staff!

As always, please reach out with any questions and concerns.

*Sherry Hamel*

Sherry Hamel, SED

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## FSA Offers Joint Financing Option on Direct Farm Ownership Loans

The USDA Farm Service Agency's (FSA) [Direct Farm Ownership loans](#) can help farmers and ranchers become owner-operators of family farms, improve and expand current operations, increase agricultural productivity, and assist with land tenure to save farmland for future generations.

There are three types of Direct Farm Ownership Loans: regular, down payment and joint financing. FSA also offers a [Direct Farm Ownership Microloan](#) option for smaller financial needs up to \$50,000.

Joint financing allows FSA to provide more farmers and ranchers with access to capital. FSA lends up to 50 percent of the total amount financed. A commercial lender, a State program or the seller of the property being purchased, provides the balance of loan funds, with or without an FSA guarantee. The maximum loan amount for a joint financing loan is \$600,000, and the repayment period for the loan is up to 40 years.

The operation must be an eligible farm enterprise. Farm Ownership loan funds cannot be used to finance nonfarm enterprises and all applicants must be able to meet general eligibility requirements. Loan applicants are also required to have participated in the business operations of a farm or ranch for at least three years out of the 10 years prior to the date the application is submitted. The applicant must show documentation that their participation in the business operation of the farm or ranch was not solely as a laborer.

For more information about farm loans, contact your County USDA Service Center or visit [fsa.usda.gov](https://fsa.usda.gov).

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## Amplifying Tribal Voices in USDA Farm Service Agency County Committee Elections



Nationwide, more than 7,700 dedicated members of the agricultural community serve on USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) county committees. The committees are made up of three to 11 members who serve three-year terms. Committee members are vital to how FSA administers disaster assistance, conservation, commodity and price support programs, advises county office employment and addresses other agricultural issues.

To hold office or vote in FSA county committee elections, there are specific provisions for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) citizens.

[Watch this video](#) to hear from agricultural producers, current and retired USDA staff and tribal government officials about the importance of tribal participation in FSA county committee elections.

### Nominations

Tribal nation leaders and farm and ranch organizations can nominate agricultural producers for County Committees serving tribal lands. Agricultural producers may be nominated for candidacy for the county committee if they:

- Participate or cooperate in a USDA program; and
- Reside in the [Local Administrative Area](#) that is up for election this year.

A cooperating producer is someone who has provided information about their farming or ranching operation to FSA, even if they have not applied or received program benefits. Individuals may nominate themselves or others and qualifying organizations may also nominate candidates.

### Voting

Since the 1990s, every member of an American Indian tribe is considered an agricultural landowner if the land on which the tribal member's voting eligibility is based is tribally owned or held in trust by the United States for the tribe, even if the individual does not personally produce an agricultural commodity on that land. Members of American Indian tribes holding agricultural land are eligible to vote in an FSA county committee election if the tribal member meets the age requirement of 18 years and older. Tribal agricultural landowner voting eligibility applies only to members of federally recognized Tribes.

### **How to Vote**

Tribal agricultural landowners 18 years and older can contact their USDA Service Center to register to vote with FSA. After providing FSA with contact information, including a current mailing address, tribal landowners will be updated as an [eligible voter in the FSA county committee election database](#).

### **Tribal Engagement**

Additionally, FSA can collaborate directly with Tribal Nations to obtain names and addresses of tribal members 18 years and older to get tribal membership registered in the FSA election system. [View FSA's 2024 call for tribal nominations](#).

### **Additional Information**

USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) and the USDA Office of Communications collaborated with the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council in Montana to highlight FSA opportunities for federally recognized tribal nations to expand USDA service, outreach and education in tribal communities nationwide.

The national outreach and education project includes aerial footage of the 1.5 million-acre Blackfeet Indian Reservation in northwestern Montana and video interviews with agricultural producers, current and retired USDA staff and tribal government officials. This is part one of a two-part video series – part two will be released later in the year.

For more information, including a USDA Tribal Agricultural Landowner Voting Eligibility [poster](#), visit your local [USDA Service Centers](#), [fsa.usda.gov/elections](https://fsa.usda.gov/elections) and [farmers.gov/tribal](https://farmers.gov/tribal).

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## **USDA Expands Funding Opportunities for Specialty Crop Growers to Help Offset On-Farm Food Safety Expenses for 2024 and 2025**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is expanding the [Food Safety Certification for Specialty Crops \(FSCSC\) program](#) to now include medium-sized businesses in addition to small businesses. Eligible specialty crop growers can apply for assistance for expenses related to obtaining or renewing a food safety certification. The program has also been expanded to include assistance for 2024 and 2025 expenses. Producers can apply for assistance on their calendar year 2024 expenses beginning July 1, 2024, through Jan. 31, 2025. For program year 2025, the application period will be Jan. 1, 2025, through Jan. 31, 2026.

### **Program Details**

FSCSC assists specialty crop operations that incurred eligible on-farm food safety certification and expenses related to obtaining or renewing a food safety. FSCSC covers a percentage of the specialty crop operation's cost of obtaining or renewing its certification, as well as a portion of related expenses.

Eligible FSCSC applicants must be a specialty crop operation; meet the definition of a small or medium-size business and have paid eligible expenses related to certification.

- A small business has an average annual monetary value of specialty crops sold by the applicant during the three-year period preceding the program year of no more than \$500,000.
- A medium size business has an average annual monetary value of specialty crops the applicant sold during the three-year period preceding the program year of at least \$500,001 but no more than \$1,000,000.

Specialty crop operations can receive the following cost assistance:

- Developing a food safety plan for first-time food safety certification.
- Maintaining or updating an existing food safety plan.
- Food safety certification.
- Certification upload fees.
- Microbiological testing for products, soil amendments and water.

FSCSC payments are calculated separately for each eligible cost category. Details about payment rates and limitations are available at [farmers.gov/food-safety](https://farmers.gov/food-safety).

### **Applying for Assistance**

Interested applicants have until Jan. 31, 2025, to apply for assistance for 2024 eligible expenses. FSA will issue payments as applications are processed and approved. For program year 2025, the application period will be January 1, 2025, through January 31, 2026. FSA will issue 50% of the calculated payment for program year 2025 following application approval, with the remaining amount to be paid after the application deadline. If calculated payments exceed the amount of available funding, payments will be prorated.

Specialty crop producers can apply by completing the [FSA-888-1](#), *Food Safety Certification for Specialty Crops Program (FSCSC) for Program Years 2024 and 2025* application. The application, along with the [AD-2047](#), *Customer Data Worksheet* and [SF-3881](#), *ACH Vendor/Miscellaneous Payment Enrollment Form*, if not already on file with FSA, can be submitted to the FSA office at any USDA Service Center nationwide by mail, fax, hand delivery or via electronic means. Alternatively, producers with an eAuthentication account can apply for FSCSC [online](#). Producers interested in creating an eAuthentication account should visit [farmers.gov/sign-in](https://farmers.gov/sign-in).

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# Ask the Expert: A Q&A on Youth Loans with Tina Mellinger

In this *Ask the Expert*, Tina Mellinger answers questions about Farm Service Agency (FSA) Youth Loans. Tina is a Farm Loan Manager in Ohio and has worked for FSA for 37 years. Her FSA farm loan team makes an average of around 50 loans each year, with around five of those being Youth Loans. Her entire career has been centered around loan-making. At the beginning of her career, she worked for Rural Development making home loans.

Tina grew up on a 50-cow dairy farm in southeastern Ohio. She earned an animal science and ag education degree from the Ohio State University.

To read the full blog, visit [farmers.gov/blog/ask-expert-ga-on-youth-loans-with-tina-mellinger](https://farmers.gov/blog/ask-expert-ga-on-youth-loans-with-tina-mellinger).

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## Conduct Business Online Through the Farmers.gov Portal

Looking for ways to do business with USDA that saves you time? Look no further than [farmers.gov](https://farmers.gov).

When you create an [account](#) for the farmers.gov authenticated customer portal, you have access to self-service features through a secure login. Managing your business with [USDA's Farm Service Agency \(FSA\)](#) and [Natural Resources Conservation Service \(NRCS\)](#) is faster than ever. From e-signing documents, viewing, printing, and exporting maps and receiving notifications of payment disbursements, a farmers.gov authenticated account makes doing business with USDA easy and secure.

### What can you do with your farmers.gov account?

- View FSA Farm Loan information including interest payments, loan advances, payment history and paid-in-full/restructured loans.
- Make USDA direct farm loan payments using [the Pay My Loan feature](#).
- Access the [Online Loan Application portal](#).
- View, print and export detailed FSA farm records and farm/tract maps.
- Import precision agriculture planting boundaries, create labels containing crop information, and print both on farm tract maps.
- View and print your FSA-156EZ with farm details
- View and print your Producer Farm Data Report
- View NRCS Disbursements and Farm Loans financial activity from the past 180 days.
- View your land, access NRCS data on your conservation plans, contracts, and planning land units through the Conservation Land Area page.
- View, upload, download and e-sign NRCS documents.

- Request NRCS conservation and financial assistance, including submitting a program application.
- View detailed information on all previous and ongoing NRCS contracts, including the amount of cost- share assistance received and anticipated; and even request contract modifications, report practice completion and request practice certification.
- “Switch Profiles” to act on behalf of your entity or another individual when you have active representative authority on file

If you'd like to see the features in action and learn more about how to use them, check out the 3-5 minute [farmers.gov account video tutorials](#).

### How do you create a farmers.gov account?

Visit [farmers.gov/account](#) to access information about farmers.gov accounts and sign in to the site's authenticated portal. You will need a Login.gov account linked to your USDA customer record to access your farmers.gov authenticated site. Customers who are new to USDA should visit [Get Started at Your USDA Service Center](#), then go to [farmers.gov/account](#) to create a farmers.gov account.

To create a farmers.gov account you will need:

- A USDA individual customer record — A customer record contains information you have given to USDA to do business with them, like your name, address, phone number, and any legal representative authority relationships. Contact your local USDA Service Center to make sure you have an individual USDA customer record on file and your information is up to date.
- A Login.gov account — Login.gov is a sign-in service that gives people secure online access to participating government programs. You can create a Login.gov account linked to your customer record by following the directions on [gov/account](#).
- Identity Verification — You can choose to verify your identity with Login.gov or in-person at a USDA Service Center.

In addition to the self-service features, [farmers.gov](#) also has information on USDA programs, farm loans, disaster assistance, conservation programs and crop insurance.

## SCORE Matches Producers to Mentors

If you are a farmer or rancher, or have agricultural or business experience, join us in supporting the next generation and in investing in your local community. Your experiences and knowledge as a business owner, agricultural professional, or farmer can provide vital support to your community.

SCORE – score.org - the nation's largest network of volunteer, expert business mentors, is looking to expand the field of available agricultural mentors and provide free business mentoring to farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural and rural business owners.

SCORE is currently looking for volunteers with experience in an agriculture-related field who would like to become part of an extended field of volunteers. The organization's Orientation and Mentoring Certification program provides volunteers with everything needed to be a successful volunteer. Training includes background about SCORE's mission and services, as well as guidance on how to be a business mentor, including enhancement of listening, interviewing and problem-solving skills.

Current mentors have backgrounds in finance, accounting, marketing, operations, business and financial planning. The mentors provide local expertise and free one-on-one business mentoring to new and existing farmers and business owners. Together they work through the process of starting or maintaining agricultural and rural businesses. No matter what stage a business is in, SCORE volunteer mentors can help in developing business plans, navigating financing and legal issues, identifying new markets, and other topics, in order to help their clients succeed.

Learn more and sign up to become a mentor today at [score.org/usda](https://score.org/usda).

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## Update Your Records

FSA is cleaning up our producer record database and needs your help. Please report any changes of address, zip code, phone number, email address or an incorrect name or business name on file to our office. You should also report changes in your farm operation, like the addition of a farm by lease or purchase. You should also report any changes to your operation in which you reorganize to form a Trust, LLC or other legal entity.

FSA and NRCS program participants are required to promptly report changes in their farming operation to the County Committee in writing and to update their *Farm Operating Plan* on form CCC-902.

To update your records, contact your local County USDA Service Center.

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Persons with disabilities who require accommodations to attend or participate in any meeting/event/function should contact Mary Anne Coffin at 207-990-9140 or Federal Relay Service at 1-800-877-8339.



**Maine /USDA Service Center**



967 Illinois Avenue  
Bangor, ME 04401

**Farm Service Agency**

Sherry Hamel, 207-990-9140

State Executive Director  
sherry.hamel@usda.gov

Website: [www.fsa.usda.gov/me](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/me)

**Natural Resources Conservation Service**

Matt Walker, 207- 990-9585

State  
Conservationist [matt.walker@usda.gov](mailto:matt.walker@usda.gov)

Website: [www.me.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.me.nrcs.usda.gov)