



Message from RI State Executive Director J. Eric Scherer

“Keep your eyes on the stars, keep your feet on the ground.”

- Theodore Roosevelt Jr, 26th President of the United States of America

I am not going to tell you anything that you don't know already, it's been a year for the record books. Extreme weather, rising prices, supply line issues, health concerns and more. We do what we can and hope to stay ahead of things and not fall behind. Our staff at the State and County offices have wrapped up our fiscal year, hoping we have some breathing room for 2023!



We are in the middle of taking applications for the drought that happened this summer, looking for livestock owners who are grazing and ran out of water, orchard and/or vineyard owners whose irrigation systems did not keep up with the demand and need help with improving these systems. Call County office (contact information below) if you have any questions or need to apply for assistance. We have a deadline to receive applications by mid-January!

The County Committee elections are wrapping up and we hope to have results out soon, thanks to those of you who participated in this important process.

Help Us Spread the Word: 2022 Ag Census Is Here!

Census data is critical in helping us make strategic decisions about how we deliver our programs and service to agricultural producers and rural communities, not just today, but well into tomorrow. The 2022 Ag Census is one of the Department's most powerful tools to help gather this information. Last month, the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) mailed invitations to respond online to the [2022 Census of Agriculture](#) to all known agricultural producers across the nation. Starting this week, NASS will mail paper questionnaires to those producers. The deadline to respond is Feb. 6, 2023. I hope you will help spread the word and [encourage participation](#). NASS's [Partner Tools](#) site has resources for outreach, including ads for newsletters, banners for web pages and email signatures, videos and web ads for social media, flyers for printing, posters, and more.

2023 Rhode Island Women in Ag Conference

This coming Spring the Women in Agriculture Conference will be held on March 7, 2023, at the Crowne Plaza Hotel located in Warwick, RI from 8:00 am to 4:30 pm. For more information on this exciting and important gathering, and to purchase your tickets, please visit [2023 Rhode Island Women in Agriculture Conference Tickets, Tue, Mar 7, 2023 at 8:00 AM | Eventbrite](#).

Stay safe!

Eric Scherer

RI State Executive Director, USDA, FSA

Biden-Harris Administration Announces \$3.1 Billion Investment for Climate-Smart Agriculture and Support for Underserved Farmers and Ranchers

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced that the Biden-Harris Administration, through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is investing an additional \$325 million for 71 projects under the second funding pool of the [Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities](#) effort, bringing the total investment from both funding pools to over \$3.1 billion for 141 tentatively selected projects. Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities is working to expand markets for American producers, especially small and underserved producers, who have the most to gain from growing market demand for climate-smart commodities. Learn More: [<link to USDA Press Release>](#)



USDA Releases Nationwide Farmer, Rancher and Forest Manager Prospective Customer Survey

You can now take a nationwide survey to help the USDA improve and increase access to its programs and services for America's farmers, ranchers, and forest managers. The survey includes new and existing customers. USDA encourages all agricultural producers to take the survey, especially those who have not worked with USDA previously. The survey gathers feedback on programs and services available through USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Risk Management Agency (RMA).



The survey is available online at farmers.gov/survey, and you should complete it by March 31, 2023. Stakeholder organizations are also encouraged to share the survey link through their networks. The survey is available in 14 different languages including Arabic, Chinese, English,

French, Hmong, Korean, Navajo, Punjabi, Somali, Spanish, Tagalog, Thai, Urdu and Vietnamese.

In addition to the online survey, the FPAC Business Center, which is administering the survey, will also mail 11,000 printed surveys to various local state stakeholder organizations and farmers markets.

USDA Offers Options for Signing and Sharing Documents Online

Farmers and ranchers working with USDA's Farm Service Agency or Natural Resources Conservation Service can now sign and share documents online in just a few clicks. By using Box or OneSpan, producers can digitally complete business transactions without leaving their homes or agricultural operations. Both services are free, secure, and available for multiple FSA and NRCS programs.

Box is a secure, cloud-based site where FSA or NRCS documents can be managed and shared. Producers who choose to use Box can create a username and password to access their secure Box account, where documents can be downloaded, printed, manually signed, scanned, uploaded, and shared digitally with Service Center staff. This service is available to any FSA or NRCS customer with access to a mobile device or computer with printer connectivity.

OneSpan is a secure eSignature solution for FSA and NRCS customers. Like Box, no software downloads or eAuthentication is required for OneSpan. Instead, producers interested in eSignature through OneSpan can confirm their identity through two-factor authentication using a verification code sent to their mobile device or a personalized question and answer. Once identity is confirmed, documents can be reviewed and e-signed through OneSpan via the producer's personal email address. Signed documents immediately become available to the appropriate Service Center staff.

Box and OneSpan are both optional services for customers interested in improved efficiency in signing and sharing documents with USDA, and they do not replace existing systems using eAuthentication for digital signature. Instead, these tools provide additional digital options for producers to use when conducting business with FSA or NRCS.

USDA Service Center staff are available to help producers get started with Box and OneSpan through a few simple steps. Please contact the Rhode Island FSA County office at 401-828-3120 option 1 to let staff know you're interested in signing and sharing documents through these new features. In most cases, one quick phone call will be all that is needed to initiate the process.

Visit farmers.gov/mydocs to learn more about Box and OneSpan, steps for getting started, and additional resources for conducting business with USDA online.

USDA Announces Assistance for On-Farm Food Safety Expenses for Specialty Crop Growers

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) plans to provide up to \$200 million in assistance for specialty crop producers who incur eligible on-farm food safety program expenses to obtain or renew a food safety certification in calendar years 2022 or 2023. USDA's new [Food Safety Certification for Specialty Crops](#) (FSCSC) program will help to offset costs for specialty crop producers to comply with regulatory requirements and market-driven food safety certification requirements, which is part of USDA's broader effort to transform the food system to create a more level playing field for small and medium producers and a more balanced, equitable economy for everyone working in food and agriculture.



Specialty crop operations can apply for assistance for eligible expenses related to a 2022 food safety certificate issued on or after June 21, 2022, beginning June 27, 2022. USDA is delivering FSCSC to provide critical assistance for specialty crop operations, with an emphasis on equity in program delivery while building on lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and supply chain disruptions. Vilsack made the announcement from Hollis, N.H., where he toured a local, family-owned farm and highlighted USDA's efforts to help reduce costs for farmers and support local economies by providing significant funding to cut regulatory costs and increase market opportunities for farmers in New Hampshire and across the nation.

Program Details

FSCSC will assist specialty crop operations that incurred eligible on-farm food safety certification and related expenses related to obtaining or renewing a food safety certification in calendar years 2022 and 2023. For each year, FSCSC covers a percentage of the specialty crop operation's cost of obtaining or renewing their certification, as well as a portion of their related expenses.

To be eligible for FSCSC, the applicant must be a specialty crop operation; meet the definition of a small business or very small business; and have paid eligible expenses related to the 2022 (issued on or after June 21, 2022) or 2023 certification.

Specialty crop operations may receive assistance for the following costs:

- 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 category of eligible costs. A higher payment rate has been set for socially disadvantaged, limited resource, beginning and veteran farmers and ranchers. Details about the payment rates and limitations can be found at farmers.gov/food-safety.

Applying for Assistance

The FSCSC application period for 2022 is June 27, 2022, through January 31, 2023, and the application period for 2023 will be announced at a later date. FSA will issue payments at the time of application approval for 2022 and after the application period ends for 2023. If calculated payments exceed the amount of available funding, payments will be prorated.

Interested specialty crop producers can apply by completing the FSA-888, Food Safety Certification for Specialty Crops Program (FSCSC) application. The application, along with other required documents, can be submitted to the Rhode Island FSA County office by mail, fax, hand delivery or via electronic means.

Producers can visit farmers.gov/food-safety for additional program details, eligibility information and forms needed to apply.

NRCS Participates in National Intertribal Agriculture Council Conference in Las Vegas

The national [Intertribal Agriculture Council's \(IAC\) Annual Conference](#) was held Dec. 4-8 in Las Vegas, NV, and included the highest number of NRCS participants ever, reflecting NRCS Chief Terry Cosby's focus to build on our past tribal relations efforts.



NRCS participation in the IAC annual conference aims to help improve relationships with tribal representatives and organizations, promote NRCS tribal partnerships and programmatic opportunities, and improve NRCS staff situational awareness regarding how NRCS tribal relations operates and is perceived by tribal partners. NRCS's participation in this year's conference also sought to make progress on issues brought forth during the March 2021 and April 2022 National NRCS Tribal Consultations.

NRCS met with tribal representatives in two breakout sessions focusing on Alternative Funding Arrangements for Federally Recognized Tribes and on ways Tribal Nations, organizations and NRCS can work together to develop and implement climate change adaptation solutions.

NRCS RI State Conservationist, Phou Vongkhamdy, Management & Strategy ASTC Walter Marshall, State Engineer Darrell Moore, State Resource Conservationist Cassius Spears and Outreach Coordinator Julie Wright participated in the conference. SRC Spears, a member of the Narragansett Tribe, also delivered a breakout session presentation on Three Sisters Planting using NRCS Conservation Practice Standards.

NRCS and partners kickoff new RI Forest Health Works partnership project

On Nov. 28, NRCS and partners met in Matunuck to kick off our new [RI Forest Health Works](#) partnership project to preserve important RI Forestland using conservation easements. Lead project partner, Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM) Division of Forest Environment, was awarded \$4,033,450 to permanently protect over 2,000 acres of critical, privately owned forest lands to combat fragmentation and improve wildlife habitat through NRCS's [Regional](#)



[Conservation Partnership Program \(RCPP\)](#). RCPP leverages collaborative efforts by conservation organizations with federal dollars to increase the impact of conservation on the ground.

“RCPP is public-private partnership working at its best,” said Phou Vongkhamdy, NRCS State Conservationist in Rhode Island. “This new project will harness the power of partnerships to help bring about solutions to natural resource concerns in Rhode Island while supporting our efforts to combat the climate crisis.”

Partners will access \$2.9 Million for forest conservation easements over five years through RCPP and partner matching funds. This will be matched by an additional \$2.9 Million in forest conservation projects and in-kind services by partner organizations, with the goal of conserving over 2,000 acres of forest state-wide. By leveraging the value of the important conservation work that partner organizations are already doing, the funding available for the permanent protection of important forestlands in RI doubles. Partners are also involved in the technical aspects of project selection and will sit on a Technical Steering Committee to create the ranking system for selecting projects.

Background

Rhode Island forests provide many benefits to state residents (humans AND wildlife), including clean air and water, wildlife habitat, economic benefits, climate change mitigation, and overall human health and wellbeing. Each forest value is important, but the sum of the values is greater than any individual value. Although over 56% of RI is forested, forests are increasingly threatened by development and permanent conversion. An estimated 68% of Rhode Island's forests are privately owned, and funding sources to protect forests are limited. One resource for landowners seeking funding to permanently conserve their land are conservation easements. As conservation organizations, the state government, and landowners are realizing the importance of forest conservation as a strategy for climate change resiliency, improving wildlife habitat, and improving water quality across the board, the time to act on permanent conservation is now.

More Information

Project partners include RIDEM Divisions of Forest Environment and Planning & Development, Audubon Society of Rhode Island, Northern RI Conservation District, Providence Water, RI Forest Conservators Organization, RI Land Trust Council, RI Natural History Survey, RI Woodland Partnership, South Kingstown Land Trust, and The Nature Conservancy. The project will be rolled out in early 2023.

Through RCPP, conservation partners work in collaboration with NRCS to help farmers, ranchers and forest landowners throughout the nation to implement systems that conserve water and soil resources, improve the health of wildlife habitats and increase climate resilience. RCPP partners offer value-added contributions to amplify the impact of RCPP funding. These projects offer impactful and measurable outcomes. Throughout its history, RCPP has leveraged partner contributions of more than \$1 for every \$1 invested by USDA, resulting in nearly \$3 billion collectively invested in natural resource conservation on private

lands. See the interactive map of all [awarded RCPP projects nationwide here](#). Since inception, RCPP has made 589 awards involving over 3,000 partner organizations. Currently there are 401 active projects, with at least one active project in every state and area. For more information, [visit the RCPP website](#).



Rhode Island USDA

60 Quaker Lane

Warwick, RI 02886

RI FSA County Office:	401-828-3120 Option 1
RI FSA Farm Loan Team:	401-828-3120 Option 2
RI FSA State Office:	401-828-3120 Option 3
RI NRCS Field Office:	401-828-1300
Risk Management Agency:	919-875-4880

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