



In This Issue:

- [Message from RI County Executive Director Sheryl Michener](#)
- [USDA Develops Simplified Direct Loan Application to Improve Customer Service](#)
- [Gear Up for the 2023 Hurricane Season](#)
- [Apply by June 15th for FY 2023 Organic Transition Initiative funding](#)
- [USDA grants available to spur innovative conservation technologies in Rhode Island](#)
- [Apply Now for Regional Conservation Partnership Program Funding](#)
- [Tribal Information Session - Regional Conservation Partnership Program](#)
- [Local teens take top honors at the 29th Rhode Island Envirothon](#)

Message from RI County Executive Director Sheryl Michener

It's a good time to grow organic in Rhode Island! With so many new USDA programs to support organic and transitioning to organic producers, the RI FSA office is here to help you. We will ensure all your supporting paperwork is up to date for you to be prepared to take advantage of these latest opportunities.

FSA is especially happy that the [Organic Certification Cost Share Program \(OCCSP\)](#) now covers up to 75% of eligible certification costs, up from 50% in 2022. Eligible costs include application fees, inspection costs, fees related to equivalency agreement/arrangement requirements, travel/per diem for inspectors, user fees, sales assessments, and postage. Expenses for the 2023 program year must be accrued from Oct. 1, 2022, through Sept. 30, 2023.

FSA works closely with our state partner, the RI Department of Environmental Management, to administer OCCSP. To request an application for OCCSP, please contact Matt Green with the RIDEM Division of Agriculture Organic Certification Program at (401) 222-2781 ext. 2774516. If you have questions about



what USDA programs are available for your organic operation, give us a call at (401) 828-3120 option 1.

RI Small Business Hub - free resource for small businesses

I wanted to flag this for you in case this this may be of interest to any small businesses you have contact with. RI Small Business Hub has been established with state and federal funds to provide free technical assistance to small businesses. Entities are eligible for up to \$10K of free technical assistance for services such as legal (contract development, reviewing lease and funding agreements, etc.), accounting and bookkeeping, marketing and communications, and website development, among other services.

This is a link to the RI Small Business Hub: <https://www.risbhub.com/>

And here is a link to the online application: <https://www.risbhub.com/ri-rebounds>.

Please feel free to share this with anyone you think may be interested!

USDA Develops Simplified Direct Loan Application to Improve Customer Service

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has developed a simplified direct loan application to provide improved customer experience for producers applying for loans from the Farm Service Agency (FSA). The simplified direct loan application enables producers to complete a more streamlined application, reduced from 29 to 13 pages. Producers will also have the option to complete an electronic fillable form or prepare a traditional, paper application for submission to their local FSA farm loan office. The paper and electronic versions of the form will be available starting March 1, 2023.



Approximately 26,000 producers submit a direct loan application to the FSA annually, but there is a high rate of incomplete or withdrawn applications, due in part to a challenging and lengthy paper-based application process. Coupled with the Loan Assistance Tool released in October 2022, the simplified application will provide all loan applicants access to information regarding the application process and assist them with gathering the correct documents before they begin the process. This new application will help farmers and ranchers submit complete loan applications and reduce the number of incomplete, rejected, or withdrawn applications.

In October 2022, USDA launched the Loan Assistance Tool, an online step-by-step guide that provides materials to help an applicant prepare their farm loan application in one tool. Farmers can access the Loan Assistance Tool by visiting farmers.gov/farm-loan-assistance-tool and clicking the 'Get Started' button. The tool is built to run on any modern browser like Chrome, Edge, Firefox, or the Safari browser. A version compatible with mobile devices is expected to be available by the summer. It does not work in Internet Explorer.

The simplified direct loan application and Loan Assistance Tool are the first of multiple farm loan process improvements that will be available to USDA customers on farmers.gov in the future. Other improvements that are anticipated to launch in 2023 include:

- An interactive online direct loan application that gives customers a paperless and electronic signature option, along with the ability to attach supporting documents such as tax returns.
- An online direct loan repayment feature that relieves borrowers from the necessity of calling, mailing, or visiting a local Service Center to pay a loan installment.

USDA provides access to credit to approximately 115,000 producers who cannot obtain sufficient commercial credit through direct and guaranteed farm loans. With the funds and direction Congress provided in Section 22006 of the Inflation Reduction Act, USDA took action in October 2022 to [provide relief to qualifying distressed borrowers](#) while working on making transformational changes to loan servicing so that borrowers are provided the flexibility and opportunities needed to address the inherent risks and unpredictability associated with agricultural operations.

Soon, all direct loan borrowers will receive a letter from USDA describing the circumstances under which additional payments will be made to distressed borrowers and how they can work with their FSA local office to discuss these options. Producers can explore all available options on all FSA loan options at fsa.usda.gov or by contacting the Rhode Island Farm Service Agency Farm Loan Team at 401-828-3120 Option 2.

Gear Up for the 2023 Hurricane Season

Hurricane season is officially underway, and it lasts until November 30. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) predicts that the 2023 hurricane season will be near normal in the Atlantic and produce 12 to 17 named storms, of which five to nine could become hurricanes, including one to four major hurricanes.

USDA is encouraging producers to take precautions to prepare and protect their family and agricultural operations.



1. **Develop an Emergency Plan** - Ensure your household and employees know your hurricane plan, including meeting points, emergency contact lists, and alternate evacuation routes in case infrastructure is damaged.
2. **Remove Debris and Secure Large Objects** - Clean out culverts, ditches, and other drainage areas, especially before and during peak hurricane season to reduce water damage. Most injuries to animals, people, or structures during a hurricane are caused by flying objects. To lessen the risk, minimize the presence of equipment, supplies, and debris that may become airborne during high winds or encountered in floodwaters.
3. **Secure Important Records and Documents**- Pre- and post-hurricane documentation is extremely important for insurance compensation and recovery assistance. You'll

want to have thorough records of damages and losses sustained on your farm as well as documentation of your cleanup and recovery efforts.

- It is critical to document inventory of farm buildings, vehicles, equipment, and livestock before a disaster occurs. Take photos, videos, or make written lists with descriptions. Keep copies of this inventory in multiple places: computer, off-site in a safe location, and on a cloud-based server where information is transmitted and saved weekly.
4. **Know Your Insurance Options-** Regularly review your insurance policies with your agent to be sure you have adequate coverage, including flood insurance, for your facilities, vehicles, farm buildings, crops and livestock. Note, there are limitations on how soon insurance coverage will take effect. Generally, insurance policies will not cover damage if the policy was not in place before a disaster.
 5. **Gather Supplies** - Have drinking water, canned food, a generator, batteries, a flashlight, and fuel available in case you lose power. For widespread outages, credit and debit cards may not work, so have cash handy.
 6. **Access Real-time Emergency Information-** Download the FEMA app for free on the App Store and Google Play for safety tips on what to do before, during, and after disasters. Subscribe to our [text message and email service](#) to receive real-time, local operational and recovery information from the Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service and Risk Management Agency.

On farmers.gov, the [Hurricane Webpage](#), [Disaster Assistance Discovery Tool](#), [Disaster-at-a-Glance fact sheet](#), and [Loan Assistance Tool](#) can help producers and landowners determine program or loan options. For assistance with a crop insurance claim, producers and landowners should contact their [crop insurance agent](#). For FSA programs, contact the Rhode Island Farm Service Agency County Office at 401-828-3120 Option 1.

Apply by June 15th for FY 2023 Organic Transition Initiative funding

NRCS State Conservationist for Rhode Island, R. Phou Vongkhamdy, announces the fiscal year 2023 sign-up to help Rhode Island farmers and forest landowners transition to organic production. This sign-up is part of USDA's multi-agency [Organic Transition Initiative \(OTI\)](#) to provide technical and financial assistance to help farmers adopt a new organic management standard and support conservation practices required for organic certification.



“Producers transitioning to organic can count on NRCS for assistance through the process,” said Vongkhamdy. “By strengthening our technical proficiency and providing technical and financial assistance through new tools and practices, we can better support farmers through the challenges they may have transitioning to organic production.”

How to Apply

Eligible farmers, forest landowners, and other agricultural producers beginning or in the process of transitioning to organic certification should apply through NRCS at their

local [USDA Service Center](#) by **June 15, 2023**, to be eligible for this year's funding. [Learn more...](#)

[^ back to top](#)

USDA grants available to spur innovative conservation technologies in Rhode Island

Up to \$170,000 available; apply by June 24, 2023!

Phou Vongkhamdy, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) State Conservationist in Rhode Island, announces up to \$170,000 in funding available for eligible individuals, local and state governments, non-governmental organizations and tribes through [Conservation Innovations Grants \(CIG\)](#).



CIG is intended to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies while leveraging federal investment in environmental enhancement and protection. The deadline to submit CIG applications is 11:59 pm EDT on June 24, 2023. To apply, visit [Grants.gov](#) for the **2023 Announcement of Program Funding**, funding opportunity number [USDA-NRCS-RI-CIG-23-NOFO0003101](#).

Learn more about [Rhode Island State Conservation Innovations Grants](#).

[^ back to top](#)

Apply Now for Regional Conservation Partnership Program Funding



The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service is now accepting applications for the [Regional Conservation Partnership Program \(RCPP\)](#). RCPP leverages a voluntary approach to conservation that expands the reach of conservation efforts and climate-smart agriculture through public-private partnerships. In addition to the funding opportunity, NRCS has embarked on a concerted effort to streamline and simplify RCPP and improve the experience for partners, farmers and employees.

RCPP has two different types of projects: Classic and Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFA). RCPP Classic projects are implemented using NRCS contracts and easements with farmers, landowners and communities, in collaboration with project partners. Through RCPP AFA, the lead partner must work directly with farmers to support the development of new conservation structures and approaches that would not otherwise be available under RCPP Classic.

Interested parties are urged to contact **Brunilda Velez**, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, at 401-828-8820 or brunilda.velez@usda.gov early in the application process so that we can provide support. [Learn more...](#)

[^ back to top](#)

Tribal Information Session - Regional Conservation Partnership Program



Tribal Information Session: Regional Conservation Partnership Program IRA Funding for Partnerships Addressing Natural Resources Concerns

Wednesday, June 21, 2023
3:00 - 4:30 pm ET

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.



Save the date for **Wednesday June 21, 2023, from 3:00 to 4:30 p.m. ET** for a Tribal Information Session about IRA funding through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program.

Details:

- The Inflation Reduction Act doubles funding available to the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program.
- The purpose of the meeting is to encourage participation in RCPP
- This meeting will give tribal leadership, tribal natural resources and agriculture staff and NRCS staff to discuss these opportunities.
- USDA [recently announced](#) that up to \$500 million will be awarded this year, including up to \$50 million targeted for Tribal governments to implement tribally led projects.
- Come learn about these this exciting funding opportunity, as well as other unique elements of RCPP.
- Tribal Nations and other eligible partners can apply until **August 18, 2023**, for this round of RCPP funding.

[^ back to top](#)

Local teens take top honors at the 29th Rhode Island Envirothon



For the past school year, Rhode Island high school students studied aquatics, forestry, soils and land use, wildlife, and researched a current environmental issue in their own home communities and across the Ocean State. They demonstrated their knowledge at the 29th annual Rhode Island Envirothon competition held Friday, May 19, at Goddard Park in Warwick, RI.

Approximately 55 students from six Rhode Island communities tested their knowledge of the area's soils, forests, water, and wildlife as part of the competition. At this outdoor event, teams rotated through four stations where they answered written questions and engaged in hands-on activities such as soil analysis, wildlife habitat assessment, tree identification, and water quality testing.

At the fifth station, the Environmental Issue, each team gave a 10-minute presentation on "Adapting to a Changing Climate" to a panel of judges. Teams researched the Environmental Issue in their own community in preparation for their presentation. Each panel of judges included concerned citizens and environmental professionals from government agencies, non-profit organizations, academia and private industry. Teams were asked to explore the growing, harvesting, and distribution of food in their own home communities and across Rhode Island.

This year's teams represented Coventry High School, Davies Career Tech High School in Lincoln, Narragansett High School, Mary's Academy Bay View in East Providence, The Greene School in West Greenwich, and The Wheeler School in Providence. The 2023 top scoring teams were:

Overall Winner:

1. The Wheeler School, Team 1
2. The Greene School, Team 1
3. Narragansett High School, Team 1

[See the full list of winners...](#)

[^ back to top](#)



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 Offices:	401-828-1300
RI NRCS State Office:	401-822-8813
Risk Management Agency:	919-875-4880

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