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Message from RI State Conservationist, Phou Vongkhamdy

Greetings Rhode Island!

As we move into February, our NRCS staff and conservation partners have been putting in extra effort to help more Ocean State farmers and forest landowners than ever before through our increased funding from the Inflation Reduction Act and Farm Bill. We have more opportunities to help farm and forestland operations of all sizes put conservation on the ground and become more climate resilient. NRCS is accepting applications for all of our conservation programs - check out the resources below to see if any are of interest to you.



To help us meet the opportunity we have been given with this increased funding, we are looking for ways to work smarter and streamline our work. One way we are doing that is by implementing a new Act NOW process - see more information below.

We are also reaching out to cities and towns across the state to offer assistance through our Emergency Watershed Protection program to mitigate flood damages from recent storms. We encourage municipalities impacted by flooding to submit letters requesting assistance through this program.

We can't help our clients without the dedication and hard work of our staff and partners and their knowledge and creativity to make our programs the best they can be. Thank you for all that you do each day to help farmers and land owners meet their conservation goals. We got this!

Regards,

R. Phou Vongkhamdy, State Conservationist

Farm Service Agency

USDA to Issue \$306 Million in Final Payments to Producers Impacted by 2020 and 2021 Natural Disasters

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is issuing final [Emergency Relief Program](#) (ERP) payments totaling approximately \$306 million to eligible commodity and specialty crop producers who incurred losses due to natural disasters in 2020 and 2021. USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) will begin issuing these additional payments to eligible producers this week.



Recipients of the additional payment are limited to those producers who received ERP Phase One payments from FSA that were calculated based on crop insurance indemnities. Initially,

ERP Phase One payments to producers who were indemnified through Federal crop insurance, were subject to a 75% payment factor. FSA has since determined that adequate funding exists to provide an additional 3.5% ERP Phase One payment to producers who had crop insurance increasing the overall payment factor to 78.5%. These additional ERP Phase One payments are subject to FSA payment limitation provisions as outlined in the [ERP Phase One fact sheet](#).

Because ERP Phase One payments to producers of noninsured crops covered by FSA NAP policies were originally paid at 100%, there will be no additional payments issued to these producers for 2020 and 2021 losses.

The *Extending Government Funding and Delivering Emergency Assistance Act, 2021* (P.L. 117-43) provided \$10 billion in assistance to agricultural producers impacted by wildfires, droughts, hurricanes, winter storms and other eligible disasters experienced during calendar years 2020 and 2021. In 2022, FSA implemented ERP Phase One, which delivered \$7.5 billion in payments to commodity and specialty crop producers. For Phase One, ERP used a streamlined process with pre-filled application forms, leveraging crop insurance indemnities or Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP) payments on file with USDA.

Separately, through the Disaster Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2023 (P.L. 117-328) Congress allocated approximately \$3.2 billion in funding to cover necessary expenses related to losses of revenue, quality or production losses of crops. Enrollment is ongoing for ERP 2022, which covers losses to crops, trees, bushes and vines due to qualifying, calendar year 2022 natural disaster events including wildfires, hurricanes, floods, derechos, excessive heat, tornadoes, winter storms, freeze (including a polar vortex), smoke exposure, excessive moisture, qualifying drought and related conditions.

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USDA Invests Approximately \$11.5 Million in Composting and Food Waste Reduction Projects in 23 States, Including Rhode Island

USDA is investing approximately \$11.5 million in 38 cooperative agreements that support innovative, scalable waste management plans to reduce and divert food waste from landfills. This includes the **North Providence School Department's Get Food Smart** project in Rhode Island. The

Composting and Food Waste Reduction (CFWR) cooperative agreements, which are funded by the American Rescue Plan Act, are part of USDA's broad support for urban agriculture. The CFWR program is jointly administered by USDA's Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (OUAIP) and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA).



[Learn more about the projects.](#)

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Farmers Can Now Enroll for the Agriculture Risk Coverage and Price Loss Coverage Programs the 2024 Crop Year

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced that agricultural producers can now enroll in the Farm Service Agency's (FSA) [Agriculture Risk Coverage \(ARC\) and Price Loss Coverage \(PLC\)](#) programs for the 2024 crop year. Producers can enroll and make election changes for the 2024 crop year starting Dec. 18, 2023. The deadline to complete enrollment and any election change is **March 15, 2024**.



More Information

For more information on ARC and PLC, producers can visit the [ARC and PLC webpage](#) or contact the Rhode Island FSA County Office at 401-828-3120 Option 1. Producers can also make elections and complete enrollment [online with level 2 eAuth](#).

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Reminder: Insurance Linkage Requirements for Payments Received Through the Emergency Relief Program

Producers who received an Emergency Relief Program (ERP) payment need to meet ERP insurance linkage requirements by purchasing crop insurance or Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP) coverage at the 60/100 level or higher for the next two available crop years, which will be determined from the date you received an ERP payment and may vary depending on the timing and availability of coverage. The insurance coverage requirement applies to the physical location of the county where the crop was located and for which an ERP payment was issued.

Contact your crop insurance agent or local FSA county office as soon as possible to ask about coverage options. Producers who do not obtain the applicable coverage by the sales/application closing date will be required to refund the ERP benefits received on the applicable crop, plus interest. To determine which crops are eligible for federal crop insurance or NAP, visit the [RMA website](#).

For more information, contact the RI FSA County Office at 401-828-3120 Option 1 or visit fsa.usda.gov.

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USDA Microloans Help Farmers Purchase Farmland and Improve Property

Farmers can use USDA farm ownership microloans to buy and improve property. These microloans are especially helpful to beginning or underserved farmers, U.S. veterans looking for a career in farming, and those who have small and mid-sized farming operations. Microloans have helped farmers and ranchers with operating costs, such as feed, fertilizer, tools, fencing, equipment, and living expenses since 2013.



Microloans can also help with farmland and building purchases and soil and water conservation improvements. FSA designed the expanded program to simplify the application process, expand eligibility requirements and expedite smaller real estate loans to help farmers strengthen their operations. Microloans provide up to \$50,000 to qualified producers and can be issued to the applicant directly from the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA).

To learn more about the FSA microloan program, contact the Rhode Island FSA County Office at 401-828-3120 Option 1 or visit fsa.usda.gov/microloans.

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Natural Resources Conservation Service

USDA announces second conservation program signup for Rhode Island farmers and forest landowners



NRCS announces additional financial assistance opportunities for fiscal year 2024 for Rhode Island farmers and forest landowners. Through conservation programs, NRCS helps farmers

and forest landowners make conservation improvements on their land that benefit natural resources and build resiliency.

NRCS has opened a second ranking signup period for [Inflation Reduction Act \(IRA\)](#) climate-smart agriculture and forestry funding under the [Conservation Stewardship \(CSP\)](#) and [Environmental Quality Incentives \(EQIP\)](#) programs, and General Farm Bill program funding under the [EQIP](#), [CSP](#), [National Water Quality Incentives \(NWQI\)](#), [Agricultural Management Assistance \(AMA\)](#) and [Regional Conservation Partnership \(RCP\)](#) programs.

While NRCS accepts applications for these programs year-round, farmers and landowners should apply by the following state-specific ranking dates to be considered for this year's additional ranking opportunities.

Program ranking dates:

- **IRA Climate-Smart:** IRA EQIP and IRA CSP – **March 15, 2024**
- **General Farm Bill Programs:** General EQIP, NWQI, AMA and CSP Classic – **March 15, 2024**
- **RCP:** [RI Statewide Natural Systems Demonstration \(2036\)](#) and RCP Farm Plan Implementation – **March 15, 2024**

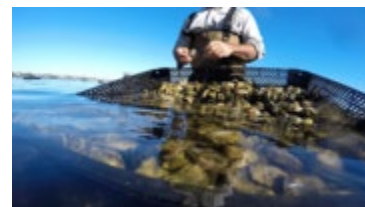
“NRCS conservation programs are good for Rhode Island’s natural resources and for your operation’s bottom line,” said Phou Vongkhamdy, NRCS State Conservationist in Rhode Island. “Whether this is your first time working with NRCS or you want to take conservation to the next level on your land, we encourage you to contact your local NRCS field office to learn more.”

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USDA Conservation Program Signup Extended for Rhode Island Oyster Farmers

NRCS is extending our FY2024 signup #1 to **February 23** for Rhode Island oyster farmers under the Oyster Reef Restoration Initiative. Anyone who applied by the initial Dec. 15 cutoff date or who applies by the extended deadline of Feb. 23 will be considered for this first signup.

The [RI Oyster Reef Restoration Initiative](#) is a partnership between NRCS and the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management and Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) to reverse the effects of overfishing and habitat change to restore oyster reefs in protected water bodies across the Ocean State.



Program Options

NRCS provides financial assistance through the [Environmental Quality Incentives Program \(EQIP\)](#) for oyster growers to produce *spat-on-shell* (oyster larvae attached to empty shells)

that is deployed over man-made reefs built from clean shell, called **cultch**. The Rhode Island EQIP Oyster Restoration Initiative has several phases, including setting oyster larvae at the hatchery, spat-on-shell grow-out on a participants' lease, oyster deployment at the restoration site, and several years of monitoring the constructed oyster reefs. [Learn more...](#)

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USDA Encourages Rhode Island Farmers to Apply for NRCS Organic Transition Assistance by March 15th

NRCS encourages Rhode Island farmers and ranchers interested in participating in our Organic Transition Initiative (OTI) to apply for assistance by **March 15, 2024**.

The [Organic Transition Initiative \(OTI\)](#) is a USDA department-wide effort to support farmers and ranchers interested in becoming organic.



“If you’re growing organic, it means you’re probably growing with conservation in mind, which means our conservation programs are probably a good fit for your farm. Farmers transitioning to organic are a natural fit for us,” Rhode Island Conservationist, Phou Vongkhamdy, said. “The Organic Transition Initiative can also help farmers gain organic knowledge through education and mentoring. Right now is a great time to apply for conservation assistance as we have additional funding for our popular programs from the Inflation Reduction Act.” [Learn more...](#)

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Rhode Island Producers can ACT NOW for NRCS Funding

In support of the Agency focus on customer service and streamlining procedure, Rhode Island NRCS will offer two initiatives using the Act Now process to deliver conservation contracting faster. This will include IRA and Classic Combustion System and Energy Initiatives (CSEI) and the Streamlined Conservation Planning Activities Initiative.



[NRCS-RI Environmental Quality Incentives Program \(EQIP\)](#) Fiscal Year 2024 applications will be put into ranking pools:

- **IRA-EQIP Combustion System and Energy Initiative**
 - Combustion System Improvement (CPS 372)
 - Pumping Plant (CPS 533)

- Energy Efficient Agricultural Operation (CPS 533)
- Energy Efficient Lighting System (CPS 670)
- Energy Efficient Building Envelope (CPS 672)
- **EQIP Classic Combustion System and Energy Initiative**
 - Combustion System Improvement (CPS 372)
 - Pumping Plant (CPS 533)
 - Energy Efficient Agricultural Operation (CPS 533)
 - Energy Efficient Lighting System (CPS 670)
 - Energy Efficient Building Envelope (CPS 672)
- **Streamlined Conservation Planning Activities**
 - Conservation Planning Activities ([CPAs](#))
 - Design and Implementation Activities ([DIAs](#))
 - Conservation Evaluation and Monitoring Activities ([CEMAs](#))

[Learn more...](#)

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Forest Landowners in Rhode Island eligible for funding to permanently protect their land

The **RI Forest Health Works Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Project** is accepting applications for funding for fiscal year 2024. It is an agreement between NRCS, RI DEM Division of Forest Environment & 10 partners to leverage over \$3.9 million in 5 years to protect critical forests. This year project partners will offer separate application ranking cutoff dates for our two different program options.



Program options

The [RI Forest Health Works Project](#) provides financial and technical assistance to help conserve forest lands and their related benefits through two distinct paths for land protection:

- **Entity-Held Easements** help private and tribal landowners, in partnership with land trusts or other entities like state and local governments, to protect forestlands by placing conservation easements. Applications can be submitted through the **March 29, 2024**, ranking cut-off.
- **U.S.-Held Easements** allow eligible landowners to enter into producer contracts to place conservation easements on their land to protect critical forest lands. Applications can be submitted through the **March 1, 2024**, ranking cut-off.

Applications will be ranked according to their contribution to the RCPP project goals of protecting forest land, water quality, and wildlife habitat. [Learn more...](#)

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USDA Offers Disaster Assistance to Rhode Island Communities through the NRCS Emergency Watershed Protection Program

Rhode Island NRCS State Conservationist, Phou Vongkhamdy, State Engineer, Darrell Moore, and engineering staff have been touring the state this past month to assess flooding impacts from recent Dec. and Jan. storms. They've met with city, town, and state decision-makers, along with congressional staff and conservation partners, to view flooding damage and encourage municipalities to apply for Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) and Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations (WFPO or PL-566) assistance from the agency.



The NRCS EWP Program offers technical and financial assistance to repair post-storm sites that pose an imminent threat to life and property. The PL-566 program provides long-term watershed planning and flood mitigation assistance.

While NRCS may fund projects on private and public land through the EWP Program, a public sponsor (usually the town or city) is required to cover 25% of the eligible construction costs and operation and maintenance of the site post-installation. **Sponsors must submit a formal request for assistance within 60 days of the disaster occurrence, or 60 days from the date when access to the sites becomes available.** [Learn more...](#)

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USDA Celebrates Black History Month



National Black History Month provides an opportunity to celebrate the vast contributions of generations of Black Americans whose courage, advocacy, and patriotism have enriched our communities and strengthened our country. As Americans, we must recognize that Black

history is American history and pay homage to Black culture and triumphs that create so much of what we stand for as a Nation.

USDA's 2024 Black History Month [theme](#) "African Americans and the Arts: A Legacy Steeped in Civil Rights and Social Justice," allows us to reflect on the tremendous contributions and strides made by Blacks in America and simultaneously acknowledges that there is still much work to be done. Historians and academics, and most Americans know and acknowledge that the United States would not be the Nation it is without the contributions of Black Americans to our economy, our defense, and our culture. We cannot overstate the contributions of Black Americans to the agricultural economy including the introduction of new foods. They constructed many of our most prestigious landmark buildings (like the U.S. Capitol), defended our democracy in every war fought in or by the United States, and made numerous other contributions that shape who we are and where we are as a Nation today.

We encourage our staff, clients and partners to take some time to appreciate and learn more about the contributions of Black Americans and their artistic legacy. Learn more from the [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#).

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Risk Management Agency

Crop Insurance Deadline Nears in Rhode Island for Corn, Fresh Market Sweet Corn, Potatoes, and Whole-Farm Revenue Protection

The USDA's Risk Management Agency (RMA) reminds Rhode Island corn, fresh market sweet corn, and potato growers that the final date to apply for crop insurance coverage for the 2024 crop year is March 15. Growers also have until March 15 to apply for coverage under the [Whole-Farm Revenue Protection](#) policy. Current policyholders who wish to make changes to their existing policies also have until March 15 to do so.

Federal crop insurance is critical to the farm safety net. It helps producers and owners manage revenue risks and strengthens the rural economy. Coverage for corn, fresh market sweet corn, and potatoes is available in select counties. Additional information can be found on the [Actuarial Information Browser](#) page on the RMA website.

Growers are encouraged to visit their crop insurance agent soon to learn specific details for the 2024 crop year. Additional crops may be eligible for coverage under a written agreement. Crop insurance coverage decisions must be made on or before the sales closing date.

RMA is authorizing additional flexibilities due to coronavirus while continuing to support producers, working through Approved Insurance Providers (AIPs) to deliver services, including

processing policies, claims and agreements. RMA staff are working with AIPs and other customers by phone, mail and electronically to continue supporting crop insurance coverage for producers. On farmers.gov, you can find more information on [USDA's response and relief for producers](#) and use other tools and resources.

Crop insurance is sold and delivered solely through private crop insurance agents. A list of crop insurance agents is available at all USDA Service Centers and online at the [RMA Agent Locator](#). Learn more about crop insurance and the modern farm safety net at [rma.usda.gov](#).

USDA touches the lives of all Americans each day in so many positive ways. Under the Biden-Harris Administration, USDA is transforming America's food system with a greater focus on more resilient local and regional food production, fairer markets for all producers, ensuring access to safe, healthy and nutritious food in all communities, building new markets and streams of income for farmers and producers using climate smart food and forestry practices, making historic investments in infrastructure and clean energy capabilities in rural America, and committing to equity across the Department by removing systemic barriers and building a workforce more representative of America. To learn more, visit [usda.gov](#).

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Rhode Island USDA

60 Quaker Lane
Warwick, RI 02886

Rhode Island Farm Service Agency (FSA)

RI FSA County Office, Suite 49:

401-828-3120 Option 1

County Committee

Joseph Polseno, Chairperson

John Sousa, Vice Chairperson

Erin Cabot, Member

William Coulter, Member

Gilbert Rathbun Jr., Member

Dawn M Spears, SDA Member

The County Committee meets the third Thursday of every month subject to change.

*To confirm meeting dates, please contact the office. *

RI FSA Farm Loan Team, Suite 62:

401-828-3120 Option 2

RI FSA State Office, Suite 62:

401-828-3120 Option 3

State Committee

Al Bettencourt, Member

Maggie Cole, Member

Albert Brandon, Member

Cristina Cabrera, Member

Michelle Garman, Member

The State Committee meets the second Wednesday of every month subject to change.

*To confirm meeting dates, please contact the office. *

Rhode Island Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
www.RI.nrcs.usda.gov

Eastern RI NRCS Field Office

Ghyllian Alter, NRCS District Conservationist
401-822-8835 or Ghyllian.Alger@usda.gov

Eastern RI Conservation

District Serving Newport and Bristol
counties Office: 401-934-0842
info@easternriconservation.org

Northern RI NRCS Field Office

Kate Bousquet, NRCS District Conservationist
401-822-8814 or Kate.Bousquet@usda.gov

Northern RI Conservation

District Serving Providence County
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0840 mallard.nricd@gmail.com

Southern RI NRCS Field Office

Jameson Long, NRCS District Conservationist
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Southern RI Conservation

District Serving Kent and Washington
counties
Office: 401-661-
5761 sricd.info@gmail.com

Risk Management Agency (RMA)

Risk Management Agency:

919-875-4880

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