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## USDA Builds Pandemic Support for Certified Organic and Transitioning Operations

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will provide pandemic assistance to cover certification and education expenses to agricultural producers who are certified organic or transitioning to organic. USDA will make \$20 million available through the new [Organic and Transitional Education and Certification Program \(OTECP\)](#) as part of USDA's broader [Pandemic Assistance for Producers](#) initiative, which provides new, broader and more equitable opportunities for farmers, ranchers and producers.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, certified organic and transitional operations faced challenges due to loss of markets, and increased costs and labor shortages, in addition to costs related to obtaining or renewing their organic certification, which producers and handlers of conventionally grown commodities do not incur. Transitional operations also faced the financial challenge of implementing practices required to obtain organic certification without being able to obtain the premium prices normally received for certified organic commodities.

### Eligible Expenses

OTECP funding is provided through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act). Certified operations and transitional operations may apply for OTECP for eligible expenses paid during the 2020, 2021 and 2022 fiscal years. For each year, OTECP covers 25% of a certified operation's eligible certification expenses, up to \$250 per certification category (crop, livestock, wild crop, handling and State Organic Program fee). This includes application fees, inspection fees, USDA organic certification costs, state organic program fees and more.

Crop and livestock operations transitioning to organic production may be eligible for 75% of a transitional operation's eligible expenses, up to \$750, for each year. This includes fees

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charged by a certifying agent or consultant for pre-certification inspections and development of an organic system plan.

For both certified operations and transitional operations, OTECP covers 75% of the registration fees, up to \$200, per year, for educational events that include content related to organic production and handling in order to assist operations in increasing their knowledge of production and marketing practices that can improve their operations, increase resilience and expand available marketing opportunities. Additionally, both certified and transitional operations may be eligible for 75% of the expense of soil testing required under the National Organic Program (NOP) to document micronutrient deficiency, not to exceed \$100 per year.

### **Applying for Assistance**

Signup for 2020 and 2021 OTECP will be Nov. 8, 2021, through Jan. 7, 2022. Producers apply through their local Farm Service Agency (FSA) office and can also obtain one-on-one support with applications by calling 877-508-8364. Visit [farmers.gov/otecp](https://farmers.gov/otecp) to learn more.

### **Additional Organic Support**

OTECP builds upon USDA's Organic Certification Cost Share Program (OCCSP) which provides cost share assistance of 50%, up to a maximum of \$500 per scope, to producers and handlers of agricultural products who are obtaining or renewing their certification under the NOP. This year's application period for OCCSP ended Nov. 1, 2021.

Additionally, USDA's Risk Management Agency announced improvements to the Whole-Farm Revenue Program including increasing expansion limits for organic producers to the higher of \$500,000 or 35%. Previously, small and medium size organic operations were held to the same 35% limit to expansion as conventional practice producers. Also, producers can now report acreage as certified organic, or as acreage in transition to organic, when the producer has requested an organic certification by the acreage reporting date.

To learn more about USDA's assistance for organic producers, visit [usda.gov/organic](https://usda.gov/organic).

As USDA looks for long-term solutions to build back a better food system, the Department is committed to delivery of financial assistance to farmers, ranchers and agricultural producers and businesses who have been impacted by COVID-19 market disruptions. Since USDA rolled out the Pandemic Assistance for Producers initiative in March, the Department has provided support to America's farmers and ranchers including:

- \$18 billion in [Coronavirus Food Assistance Program 2](#) payments, including a fourfold increase in participation by historically underserved producers since the program reopened in April 2021.
- Over \$35 million in assistance for those who had to depopulate livestock and poultry due to insufficient processing access (<https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2021/07/13/usda-provide-pandemic-assistance-livestock-producers-animal-losses>).
- Over \$7 million to date for the logging and log hauling industry ([Pandemic Assistance for Timber Harvesters and Haulers](#)). Final payments are being calculated to be disbursed soon.

- \$1 billion to [purchase healthy food for food insecure Americans and build food bank capacity](#).
- \$350 million in [additional dairy assistance related to market volatility](#).
- [\\$500 million deployed through existing USDA programs](#).

For more details, please visit [www.farmers.gov/pandemic-assistance](http://www.farmers.gov/pandemic-assistance).

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## USDA Climate Hubs

The USDA Climate Hubs translate climate science into action, putting USDA research and resources into practice. The Hubs develop and deliver science-based, region-specific information and technology to natural resource and agricultural managers to help you make climate-informed decisions that reduce agricultural risk and build resilience to climate change. Our useful tools can help you plan for and manage weather- and climate-related risks.

The Climate Hubs offer a variety of resources to help you manage weather and climate-risks, including tools and technology, outreach and education, and risk assessments:

- Tools and technology to help you respond effectively to climate change impacts including drought, extreme weather events, and changing growing seasons. We provide coordinated technical support to enhance USDA program delivery, especially to underserved and vulnerable communities.

The following tools can help you make informed management decisions on your operation:

- [Adaptation Workbook](#): A flexible process to consider the potential effects of climate change and design land management and conservation actions to prepare for changing conditions.
- [Grass-Cast](#): A grassland and forage productivity forecast for ranchers and rangeland managers.
- [AgRisk Viewer](#): A new platform to access, analyze, and visualize historical crop insurance loss data to inform risk management efforts.
- [Seedlot Selection Tool](#): A web-based mapping application that uses current or future climates to match seedlots and planting sites.
- Outreach, education, and technical support on innovative ways to help lower barriers to adaptation, mitigation, and resilience-building:
  - [Hurricane preparedness and recovery commodity guides](#): Guides to help producers prepare for and recover from hurricane events.
  - [‘As If You Were There’ 360 Demonstrations](#): A unique collection of virtual field tours to experience how others are adapting to and mitigating extreme weather and climate-driven events.
  - [Pacific Northwest Biochar Atlas](#): Science-based guidance regarding biochar and its benefits, decision-support tools for biochar application, and case studies from early adopters.

- [Regional assessments of risk and vulnerability](#) and user-friendly information and data to support risk management and climate change response.

The Climate Hubs are a unique collaboration that connects USDA research and program agencies like the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Farm Service Agency (FSA), Risk Management Agency (RMA), Economic Research Service, and Foreign Agricultural Service, among others.

We support USDA stakeholders by providing vulnerability assessments, curating decision-making tools, and facilitating stakeholder outreach on climate change and its impacts on working lands.

The Climate Hubs also amplify the work of other USDA agencies to ensure USDA is meeting the needs of customers like you.

- For example, the Southwest Climate Hub worked with RMA to provide more accessible, discoverable, and usable crop insurance data through the [AgRisk Viewer](#).
- Our Northern Plains Climate Hub developed a grassland and forage productivity model and [rangeland drought dashboard](#) working closely with agencies and partners.
- At our Northeast Climate Hub, the NRCS liaison developed a [webinar training](#) titled “Helping farmers help the land through climate-smart farming” highlighting NRCS resource concerns and practices.

There are 10 regional Climate Hubs across the nation co-located at Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) research units. To find your regional Climate Hub contacts visit [climatehubs.usda.gov/contact](https://climatehubs.usda.gov/contact). For more information on the Climate Hubs, visit [climatehubs.usda.gov/](https://climatehubs.usda.gov/). We are happy to help connect producers, USDA staff, and stakeholders to each other and to the best resources USDA has to offer.

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## The Importance of Responding to NASS Surveys

USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) conducts hundreds of surveys every year and prepares reports covering virtually every aspect of U.S. agriculture.

If you receive a survey questionnaire, please respond quickly and online if possible.

The results of the surveys help determine the structure of USDA farm programs, such as soil rental rates for the Conservation Reserve Program and prices and yields used for the Agriculture Risk Coverage and Price Loss Coverage programs. This county-level data is critical for USDA farm payment determinations. Survey responses also help associations, businesses and policymakers advocate for their industry and help educate others on the importance of agriculture.

NASS safeguards the privacy of all respondents and publishes only aggregate data, ensuring that no individual operation or producer can be identified.

NASS data is available online at [nass.usda.gov/Publications](http://nass.usda.gov/Publications) and through the searchable [Quick Stats database](#). Watch a video on how NASS data is used at [youtube.com/watch?v=m-4zjnh26io&feature=youtu.be](https://youtube.com/watch?v=m-4zjnh26io&feature=youtu.be).

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## Obtaining Payments due to Deceased Producers

In order to claim a Farm Service Agency (FSA) payment on behalf of a deceased producer, all program conditions for the payment must have been met before the applicable producer's date of death.

If a producer earned a FSA payment prior to his or her death, the following is the order of precedence for the representatives of the producer:

- administrator or executor of the estate
- the surviving spouse
- surviving sons and daughters, including adopted children
- surviving father and mother
- surviving brothers and sisters
- heirs of the deceased person who would be entitled to payment according to the State law

For FSA to release the payment, the legal representative of the deceased producer must file a form FSA-325 to claim the payment for themselves or an estate. The county office will verify that the application, contract, loan agreement, or other similar form requesting payment issuance, was signed by the applicable deadline by the deceased or a person legally authorized to act on their behalf at that time of application.

If the application, contract or loan agreement form was signed by someone other than the deceased participant, FSA will determine whether the person submitting the form has the legal authority to submit the form.

Payments will be issued to the respective representative's name using the deceased program participant's tax identification number. Payments made to representatives are subject to offset regulations for debts owed by the deceased.

FSA is not responsible for advising persons in obtaining legal advice on how to obtain program benefits that may be due to a participant who has died, disappeared or who has been declared incompetent.

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## Ask USDA available to answer questions about FSA programs

Ask USDA is now available as a tool for FSA customers to ask questions about FSA programs and services.

Ask USDA, available at [ask.usda.gov](http://ask.usda.gov) is similar to AskFSA, which was decommissioned Sept. 21, but it also provides information for all USDA programs. Ask USDA allows USDA customers to search for and read answers about FSA programs and services in the same location as they read about other USDA programs and services.

Customers are able to submit questions through email, chat, and phone if they need more information. This improved customer service approach further builds on Secretary Sonny Perdue's OneUSDA vision and provides the customer a one-stop shopping experience that covers all of USDA's many programs.

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