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Message from RI State Conservationist, Phou Vongkhamdy

Greetings to all our clients, partners and staff, and happy Earth Month!

At NRCS we are celebrating Earth Month with a push to expand [climate-smart agriculture and forestry](#) across the Ocean State. We invite our farmers, forest landowners or managers, oyster growers and urban growers to partner with us to reduce the impacts of climate change, build climate resiliency and strengthen your operations.



Rhode Island farmers, ranchers, growers, and forest landowners have long been stewards of our lands and natural resources. This Earth Month, NRCS re-affirms our commitment to support and partner with you to build resilient food and forest systems to provide for local communities, sequester carbon, and address climate change.

In 2023, Rhode Island NRCS and our partners applied conservation practices impacting over 21,235 acres, including improving soil quality on 885 acres and improving wildlife habitat on 8,182 acres; provided emergency flood relief to local communities; and provided technical or financial assistance to 241 clients. These crucial efforts helped reduce soil erosion, improve water quality and mitigate floods, directly impacting watersheds and communities throughout the state.

Below you will find that we have opened a third signup for many of our flagship programs, and we encourage you to apply for these programs that can help you improve your resources, production and bottom line. I especially urge you to take a look at our [Act Now](#) opportunities, which can help replace high-emission diesel farm equipment with electric alternatives, amongst other energy efficiency practices. Learn more at www.RI.nrcs.usda.gov.

R. Phou “Pooh” Vongkhamdy
NRCS Rhode Island State Conservationist

Farm Service Agency

A Labor of Love

Jan and Michelle Eckhart are the owners and operators of Sweet Berry Farm in Middletown, Rhode Island. What began as a small farm primarily growing strawberries has turned into a labor of love. In addition to strawberries, the Eckhart's now grow cherries, cane berries, peaches, blackberries, pumpkins and more on their 100-acre farm.

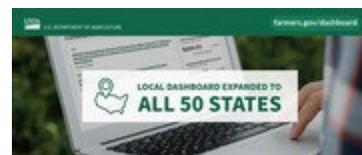


[Read more...](#)

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Farmers.gov Local Dashboard Now Available for Producers in all 50 States

Farmers in all 50 states can now access county specific farming data and USDA resources all in one place via the new [farmers.gov local dashboard](#). Your farmers.gov local dashboard includes farming data and USDA resources including USDA news, commodity pricing, weather forecasts, historical climate data, past storm events, USDA service center locator and additional state resources for your state and county. The dashboard transforms complex data sets into easy-to-read charts and graphs to help you quickly find information that matters to you.



Urban Producers, Public Invited to Attend April Meeting of Federal Advisory Committee for Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production

We're inviting urban producers, innovative producers, and other stakeholders to virtually attend a public meeting of the Federal Advisory Committee for Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production on April 10 from 2-4 p.m. Eastern.

Meeting details can be viewed in the [Federal Register Notice](#). Written comments can be submitted via UrbanAgricultureFederalAdvisoryCommittee@usda.gov by April 24 at 11:59 p.m. The Committee will deliberate and vote on proposed recommendations and address public comments during the meeting. USDA will share the agenda between 24 to 48 hours prior to the meeting on the [Committee's webpage](#).

The Committee is managed by the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production and was established through the 2018 Farm Bill and is part of a broad USDA investment in urban agriculture.

[Learn more or register.](#)

USDA Now Accepting Farm Loan Payments Online

USDA has announced that most farm loan borrowers can make payments to their direct loans online through the Pay My Loan feature on [Farmers.gov](https://farmers.gov). Pay My Loan is part of a broader effort by USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) to streamline its processes, especially for producers who may have limited time during the planting or harvest seasons to visit a local FSA office; modernize and improve customer service; provide additional customer self-service tools; and expand credit access to assist more producers.



On average, local USDA Service Centers process more than 215,000 farm loan payments each year. Pay My Loan gives most borrowers an online repayment option and relieves them from needing to call, mail, or visit a Service Center to pay their loan installment. Farm loan payments can now be made at the borrower's convenience, on their schedule and outside of FSA office hours.

Pay My Loan also provides time savings for FSA's farm loan employees by minimizing manual payment processing activities. This new service for producers means that farm loan

employees will have more time to focus on reviewing and processing new loans or servicing requests.

The Pay My Loan feature can be accessed at Farmers.gov. To use the payment feature, producers must establish a USDA customer account and a [USDA Level 2 eAuthentication \(“eAuth”\) account or a Login.gov account](#). This initial release only allows borrowers operating as individuals to make online payments. For now, borrowers with jointly payable checks will need to continue to make loan payments through their local office.

FSA has a significant initiative underway to streamline and automate the Farm Loan Program customer-facing business process. For the over 26,000 producers who submit a Direct Loan application annually, FSA has made various improvements including:

- The [Online Loan Application](#), an interactive, guided application that is paperless and provides helpful features including an electronic signature option, the ability to attach supporting documents such as tax returns, complete a balance sheet, and build a farm operating plan.
- The [Loan Assistance Tool](#) that provides customers with an interactive online, step-by-step guide to identifying the direct loan products that may be a fit for their business needs and to understanding the application process.
- A [simplified direct loan paper application](#), which reduced loan applications by more than half, from 29 pages to 13 pages.

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Natural Resources Conservation Service

NRCS Announces Third Signup for Inflation Reduction Act Funding for Climate-Smart Agriculture in Rhode Island



NRCS announces additional funding opportunities for FY 2024 for Rhode Island farmers and forest landowners. NRCS is opening a third signup for [Inflation Reduction Act](#) (IRA) climate-smart agriculture and forestry funding under the [Environmental Quality Incentives Program \(EQIP\)](#).

Interested Ocean State farmers, forest landowners, and urban growers should apply by the **May 17, 2024**, ranking cutoff date. Through conservation programs, NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to help farmers and forest landowners make [climate-smart conservation](#) improvements on their land to benefit natural resources, build resiliency, and help combat the impacts of climate change.

“The Inflation Reduction Act provides a once-in-a-generation investment in conservation on working lands, and we want to work with Rhode Island farmers, forest landowners and urban growers to invest in climate-smart practices that create value and economic opportunity for our clients,” said Phou Vongkhamdy, NRCS State Conservationist in Rhode Island. “We know that agriculture plays a critical role in addressing climate change, and we’re using this funding to bolster our existing programs, maximize climate benefits, and foster other environmental benefits across the landscape.” [Learn more...](#)

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Save Rhode Island’s Farmland, Forestland and Wetlands with USDA Conservation Easements

NRCS in Rhode Island announces a third application sign up period for the **Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)** and the **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) RI Forest Health Works**.

ACEP helps landowners, land trusts, and other entities protect, restore, and enhance wetlands or protect farmland and ranchland through conservation easements. ACEP has two components:



- [Agricultural Land Easements](#) (ALE) help private and tribal landowners, land trusts, and state and local governments to protect croplands and grasslands on working farms and ranches through conservation easements.
- [Wetland Reserve Easements](#) (WRE) help private and tribal landowners protect, restore and enhance wetlands that have been previously degraded by agricultural uses.

The [RI Forest Health Works RCPP](#) aims to permanently protect over 1,300 acres of Rhode Island's critical, privately owned forest lands to combat fragmentation and improve wildlife habitat. The project is accepting applications to protect forestland through entity-held easements, where landowners contract with land trusts or other entities to place a conservation easement.

Easement applications that meet eligibility and ranking criteria in targeted areas that are received by **May 17, 2024**, will be considered for this third round of fiscal year 2024 funding. Applications received after this ranking date will be automatically deferred to the next funding period. [Learn more...](#)

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USDA conservation program third signup open for Rhode Island farmers and forest landowners

NRCS announces additional financial assistance opportunities for fiscal year 2024 for Rhode Island farmers and forest landowners under the Farm Bill's [Conservation Stewardship Program \(CSP\)](#), [National Water Quality Initiative \(NWQI\)](#) and [Regional Conservation Partnership Program \(RCPP\)](#).



Through conservation programs, NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to help farmers and forest landowners make conservation improvements on their land to benefit natural resources, build resiliency, and combat the impacts of climate change. While NRCS accepts applications for these programs year-round, farmers and landowners should apply by the **May 17, 2024**, ranking date to be considered for this year's additional ranking opportunity.

"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." [Learn more...](#)

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Rhode Island Farmers and Forest Landowners can Act Now for NRCS Funding

In support of the Agency focus on customer service and streamlining procedure, Rhode Island NRCS is extending the application deadline for the EQIP-IRA Combustion System & Energy Initiative through the Act Now process to **May 17**.

NRCS is using the [Act Now](#) process to deliver conservation contracting faster. [Act Now](#) allows NRCS to quickly approve and obligate a ranked application in a designated ranking pool when an eligible application meets or exceeds a state-determined, minimum threshold, ranking score. [Act Now](#) allows qualifying applications to be automatically approved and move forward in the process without waiting for all applications to be ranked during a given period.



Through Act Now, eligible applications will be batched and processed in the order they're received, with selections made weekly. Applications eligible for the **IRA-EQIP Combustion System and Energy Initiative** ranking pool will be accepted on a continuous sign-up basis until **May 17, 2024**, or until funds have been expended. [Act Now](#) practices include:

- 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)

[Learn more...](#)

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Risk Management Agency

USDA Hosts Informational Workshops on Newly Expanded Nursery Insurance Option

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has [expanded its Nursery Value Select \(NVS\) crop insurance](#) program to all counties in all states, and the USDA Risk Management Agency (RMA) is encouraging interested nursery producers to learn more about the program through upcoming informational workshops. These sessions will be valuable for producers in the newly expanded areas and especially for the Nursery Field Grown and Container (FG&C) crop insurance program, which ends beginning with the 2026 crop year.

Nursery Value Select is a pilot program that enables nursery producers to select the dollar amount of coverage that best fits their risk management needs. Its expansion is part of RMA's efforts to provide insurance options for a broader group of producers, including specialty crop producers.

There are three Nursery Value Select workshops - two on April 18, one on July 18. [See more details here.](#)

RMA has administered the Nursery FG&C crop insurance program for nearly 30 years. However, the program relies on a partnership between RMA and a private contractor to update and maintain the Eligible Plant List and Plant Price Schedule and associated software packages. The private contractor will be closing after providing all necessary contractual obligations for the 2025 crop year. Without access to the price schedule and associated software, the Nursery FG&C program will no longer be available to nursery producers beginning with the 2026 crop year.

Nursery Value Select will be able to offer comparable but improved risk management options for those who currently have coverage with the Nursery FG&C program, making RMA's informational workshops a valuable opportunity to learn more about Nursery Value Select and any required transitions.

Prior to the expansion, Nursery Value Select was only available in select counties in Alabama, Colorado, Florida, Michigan, New Jersey, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas and Washington. Beginning with the 2025 crop year, Nursery Value Select **will be available in all counties in all states**. The sales closing date for the 2025 crop year is May 1, 2024, or Sept. 1, 2024, as provided in the actuarial documents.

Nursery Value Select was first available in the 2021 crop year, and producers insured more than \$460 million in liabilities in crop year 2023.

More Information

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](#).

Producers can learn more about crop insurance and the modern farm safety net at rma.usda.gov or by contacting their [RMA Regional Office](#).

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Rhode Island Farm Service Agency (FSA)

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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, Chairperson

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)
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Southern RI Conservation

District Serving Kent and Washington
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Risk Management Agency (RMA)

Risk Management Agency:

919-875-4880

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