

# Improving on and Increasing Access to Conservation Programs in the Next Farm Bill



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## ABOUT AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST

Founded in 1980, American Farmland Trust (AFT) is the only national organization that takes a holistic approach to agriculture, focusing on the land itself, the agricultural practices used on that land, and the farmers and ranchers who do the work. AFT has extensive experience with Farm Bill advocacy and played a leading role in championing many of today's conservation programs. AFT also works in close partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to help farmers adopt conservation practices across the nation.

## ABOUT AFT'S FARM BILL PROCESS

To support the development of AFT's 2023 Farm Bill agenda, AFT held 16 regional workshops across the U.S. to hear from farmers and ranchers, service providers, farm and environmental groups, land trusts, state departments of agriculture, researchers, and more about opportunities for the next Farm Bill. In the 8 conservation and climate-focused workshops, attendees discussed their experiences with extreme weather and their challenges overcoming barriers to conservation practice adoption. These conversations also explored what could be done in the next Farm Bill to support increased, long-term adoption of conservation practices that will build resilience to, and address, climate change while also improving soil health, water quality, and profitability.

Using these conversations as a foundation, AFT created a series of whitepapers to make recommendations for the next Farm Bill. To see the rest of the whitepapers, and learn more about AFT's Farm Bill platform, please visit us at [www.farmland.org/2023-farm-bill](http://www.farmland.org/2023-farm-bill).

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COVER PHOTO: Caro Roszell, AFT Soil Health Program Manager.  
Agroforestry tour at Big River Chestnuts in Massachusetts, which  
receives technical support from American Farmland Trust

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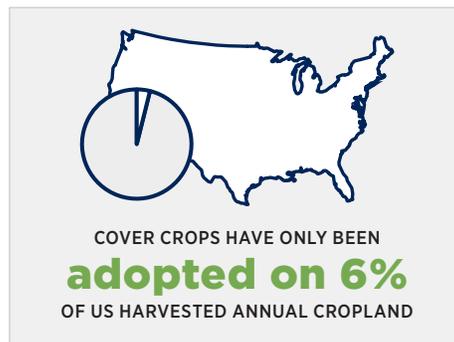
## Introduction: The Task Ahead

Farmers and ranchers manage roughly half of U.S. lands, making them the nation's most important allies in protecting the environment. In addition to producing food, feed, fiber, and fuel, their conservation actions improve water and air quality, create wildlife habitat, preserve biodiversity, increase soil health, and much more. Despite their important role, however, farmers' jobs are only getting more challenging and uncertain as they contend with multi-year droughts; unexpected floods; extended heatwaves; devastating wildfires; new invasives, pests, and diseases; and higher and unseasonable temperatures.

AFT has recently released three white papers addressing climate change: [Farms Under Threat 2040: Projected Climate Impacts on the Growing Conditions for Rainfed Agriculture in the Contiguous United States](#); [A Brief Overview of Changes that May Help Farmers Protect Rainfed Acres](#); and [Building Climate Resilience with State and Federal Farm Policy](#). Together, these papers provide a clear picture of how extreme weather events—like intense storms and devastating droughts—are not only impacting farmers today, but also how they will impact farmers into the future. The papers include specific models of how climate change will threaten the production of key crops through 2040, and personal stories from farmers and ranchers across the nation who are *already* losing money, time, and a sense of security to extreme weather. Such stories include a Washington grain grower who lost 90% of her 2021 crop to heat and drought, a New York vegetable farmer who had to abandon land due to continuous flooding, and a Connecticut livestock producer experiencing increased anxiety over extreme weather that is impacting his ability to make daily farm decisions. These experiences and challenges are even more pronounced for small and mid-sized growers, historically marginalized producers, those growing in financially divested communities, and others who have been on the fringe of support.

AFT's recent climate papers make a strong and urgent case for continuing to address resource concerns while taking additional actions to support producers in building the resilience they need to adapt to, and remain viable in the face of a changing climate. They also make a strong and urgent case for reducing societal greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, including providing producers with the resources to reduce on-farm emissions. The good news is that the program infrastructure and networks needed to provide this support at USDA-NRCS, state and local agencies, non-governmental organizations, and in the private sector are primed to expand with the right policies. Furthermore, recent congressional action provided historic funding to help producers adopt conservation practices. **The next Farm Bill presents a critical and timely opportunity to build on these successes and provide more effective and equitable support to help all producers meet their conservation and economic goals while feeding their communities.**

Conservation practices, especially those that build soil health, provide multiple benefits to farmers and society. For example, planting cover crops in the off-season and reducing tillage of the soil builds on-farm resilience to extreme weather like intense storms and drought, sequesters carbon in soils, and improves water quality and quantity for their neighbors, all while boosting profitability. However, to date, most of these in-field conservation practices have only been adopted on a small percentage of acres. For example, as of 2017, cover crops were only planted on 6% of potential acres. Although these and other conservation practices are highly beneficial, farmers and ranchers face real barriers to adopting them, including:



- Cost in time and money for equipment, capital projects, and annual expenses,
- Risk of yield and revenue loss (both perceived and real), especially during the first several years of transition to new management systems,
- Insecure land tenure disincentivizing investment in strategies with longer-term payoffs, and
- Insufficient knowledge, technical assistance, or community support to transition.

Even though existing federal and state programs provide critical financial and technical assistance to overcome these hurdles, these programs can have service gaps or such challenging application processes that they are ultimately not able to help producers overcome barriers to adoption.

**During the winter of 2022, AFT held eight regional workshops focused specifically on conservation and climate. These were an opportunity to hear from farmers and ranchers about the barriers they face in adopting conservation practices, the strengths of USDA-NRCS conservation programs, and the opportunities for programs improvements to help producers overcome these barriers.**

Grounded in these conversations, this white paper focuses on how to improve programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) so that they: 1) provide equitable access to technical and financial support; 2) increase access to trusted experts; 3) continue to provide reliable information; 4) fill service gaps; and 5) de-risk the transition process so that practice adoption is incorporated into the farm's long-term management. These steps will position these programs to continue their important work of locally-led conservation while better helping farmers adopt conservation practices increasingly vital to farm viability in the face of a changing climate.

The ultimate goal of this work is to build on past successes and set achievable goals for growth.

**Key to this will be equitably providing financial and technical support to the innovators—the small percentage of farmers and ranchers who are leading the way toward a resilient future—to adopt climate-smart and resilient practices and systems, and then to enable those leaders to help others in their community to do the same.** AFT has produced other Farm Bill white papers to advance the ability of crop insurance to reduce on-farm risk, to build more pathways to secure land tenure for producers—including through permanent farmland protection, and to develop a federal match for state and Tribal soil health programs. Taken together with this paper, AFT's Farm Bill recommendations are designed to empower more farmers and ranchers to meet the world's food needs while addressing the conservation goals critical to their, and our, very survival.

## **NRCS Programs Provide a Solid Foundation**

Farm Bill conservation programs like EQIP, CSP, RCPP, and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) are designed to support farmers and ranchers in addressing resource concerns and to improve the sustainability of their farms with financial and technical assistance. As a package, these programs provide a wide range of critical support and services to producers to achieve these goals.

The soil health practices supported by these programs (e.g., reducing tillage, planting cover crops or perennials, implementing rotational grazing, diversifying crop rotations) are particularly effective in addressing multiple resource concerns while supporting farm profitability and resilience to extreme weather. Soil health practices improve water holding capacity and soil aggregate stability, which help to stabilize yields in times of drought and flood. These practices can also simultaneously increase biodiversity, support water quality, and reduce erosion, and they may increase carbon sequestration—a critical strategy to achieving net-zero GHG emissions. Improved nutrient management, also supported by these programs, increases profitability by reducing input costs and

## Comparing USDA Conservation Programs

Program	Length of Contract	Purpose
<b>EQIP</b>	<p><u>Standard</u>: up to 10-year contracts, but most commonly 1–3-year contracts, for conservation practices in areas of the farm with resource concerns.</p> <p><u>EQIP-Conservation Incentive Contracts</u>: (EQIP-CIC) last 5+ years</p>	<p>Authorized in the 1996 Farm Bill, EQIP provides support to address locally-identified resource concerns and to assist producers in meeting or avoiding regulation through voluntary adoption of practices developed with NRCS's scientifically rigorous standards. The program currently includes a 50% funding set-aside for livestock operations, a 10% set-aside for wildlife practices, a 5% set-aside for socially disadvantaged producers, and a 5% set-aside for beginning farmers and ranchers. EQIP has changed over time; the #1 practice for 10 years was fencing, and now it is cover crops. The EQIP-CIC was authorized in the 2018 Farm Bill.</p>
<b>CSP</b>	<p>5-year contracts on the whole farm with potential to renew for an additional 5 years</p>	<p>CSP provides financial and technical assistance to adopt higher level conservation practice enhancements to advance whole farm conservation and systems changes. Some funding goes towards helping producers maintain existing conservation practices, and some to adopting new enhancements over time.</p>
<b>RCPP</b>	<p>Up to 5 years with the potential for a 1-year extension</p>	<p>RCPP was started in the 2014 Farm Bill to foster regional partnerships and flexibly use existing conservation programs to address regional concerns. It was amended in the 2018 Farm Bill to untether it from what had been donor programs of EQIP, CSP, and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program. Two funding pools exist within RCPP—Classic and Alternative Funding Arrangements. The program operates through partners who identify and address important resource concerns identified by the partners.</p>
<b>CRP</b>	<p>10–15 years for short-term land retirement, 30 years for Clear30</p>	<p>Administered through the Farm Service Agency (FSA) with technical assistance provided by NRCS, CRP supports the temporary retirement of environmentally sensitive land. The program was amended in the 2014 Farm Bill to allow some working lands options such as allowing grazing in CRP Grasslands Contracts.</p>

increasing efficiency while decreasing potent GHG emissions and improving water quality.

Farmers and ranchers are already adopting these and other conservation practices, but not yet at the

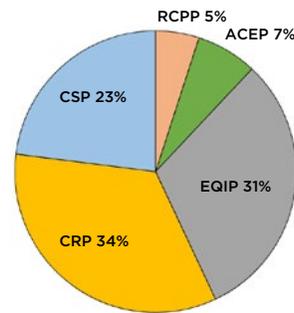
scale needed to fully address local, regional, and national resource concerns. For example, as of the 2017 USDA census of agriculture, only 6% of annual harvested cropland acres were planted with cover

crops, showing tremendous room for growth. On the other hand, decades of coordinated support, including from NRCS programs, has resulted in farmers reducing tillage on over 202 million acres—two-thirds of all eligible acres. This success may provide a blueprint for how to increase adoption of other underutilized conservation practices.

Generally, producers at AFT’s Farm Bill workshops agreed that the strengths of federal conservation programs were their scientific standards, their well-informed and helpful staff, and the financial and technical support they provide. Combined, these attributes help producers to adopt conservation activities that they would not be able to otherwise undertake, all while protecting farm viability.

Some workshop participants pointed out that EQIP, the most widely used NRCS conservation program, was very effective for providing cost share for structural projects, such as high tunnels in the Northeast, water management in California, and animal waste systems across the country. RCPP was also recognized as having the potential to advance locally-important conservation practices at a regional or watershed-scale, reducing competition for funding and increasing the local collaboration necessary to address these issues and meet shared goals. State agency representatives that participated in AFT’s workshops shared that they benefitted from an excellent working relationship with their NRCS offices. As a result, many have built a strong connection between their state conservation programs and these federal programs.

## 2018 Farm Bill Conservation Program Funding



## Recommendations to Improve Conservation Programs in the Next Farm Bill

Producers who attended AFT’s workshops also shared that they faced challenges in accessing or working with many Farm Bill conservation programs to solve environmental challenges on and off the farm. Building on program successes while addressing their shortcomings in the next Farm Bill will ensure that these programs meet their mission to deliver equitable conservation assistance, and that they continue to help producers overcome barriers to adopting conservation practices.

### Target Funding and Increase Support for Practices and Systems that Achieve Multiple Resource Benefits

USDA conservation programs are popular with producers and are highly oversubscribed. Historically, there has not been enough funding to help all those requesting financial assistance for conservation.

**According to USDA, between 2010 and 2020, just 30% of farmers who applied for EQIP and 42% of farmers who applied for CSP nationwide were awarded contracts.** Over that span, EQIP turned down 946,459 contracts and CSP denied 146,425 contracts, substantially due to lack of funding.<sup>1</sup>

Rejecting such a high percentage of applications not only denies assistance to those seeking it, but farmers in AFT’s workshops also pointed out that **this served as a deterrent to applying in the first place**—especially when the application process takes ample time and effort.

In addition, recent research reveals that between 2009–2018, at most only 27% of EQIP funding supported the adoption of in-field practices that provide the multiple benefits of improving soil health and water quality, building resilience to extreme weather, and sequestering carbon.<sup>2</sup> While this has changed in more recent years with cover crops being the most popular practice, more must be done to support soil health practice adoption.



The 2022 Inflation Reduction Act (IRA)<sup>a</sup> will increase the availability of funding to support soil health, since this funding is restricted to [climate-smart practices](#),<sup>b</sup> research, and partnerships. The challenge moving forward will be to ensure that these funds are equitably, efficiently, and effectively expended, and that producers have access to qualified technical assistance. It should also be noted that while the IRA provided a much-needed boost to these important programs, it was a one-time funding increase targeted to a critical, yet specific, purpose. Sustainably increasing funding to meet demand for long-term conservation activities is still needed.

**In order to ensure that funding is equitably and effectively expended, AFT recommends that Congress take the following actions in the next Farm Bill:**

1. Keep the IRA funding in conservation, ideally by folding it into the Farm Bill Conservation Title (Title II) baseline so that it can contribute to durable increased support for voluntary conservation activities.
2. Increase set-asides for socially disadvantaged producers and young and beginning farmers.
3. Increase technical assistance (TA) capacity at NRCS while also better enabling qualified organizations, advisors, and producers to provide TA (see Recommendation 3).
4. Increase emphasis on practices and systems of practices within Title II programs that build resilience to and mitigate climate change while also addressing multiple resource concerns.

### Streamline NRCS Programs Implementation

In AFT’s workshops, there was general agreement that conservation programs provide essential support for conservation practice adoption. **However, many producers shared that the volume of documentation and paperwork required to apply for programs—combined with onerous contracting processes, excessive reporting requirements, and low user-friendliness of the website—made it difficult to apply for and use these**

*“The application is especially hard for RCPP—but that is just the beginning. It was arduous to get funding on the ground. The program was not flexible. As a result, we only did ‘low-hanging-fruit’ practices, not what will be most impactful.”*

—AFT FARM BILL WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT, MIDWEST

a Under the Inflation Reduction Act, EQIP will receive an additional \$8.45 billion, RCPP an additional \$4.95 billion, CSP an additional \$3.25 billion, and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) an additional \$1.4 billion to support the reduction, sequestration, and avoidance of GHG emissions from FY 23 to FY26. This will alleviate some of this program backlog.

b Climate-Smart practices, as [defined by USDA-NRCS](#), are practices that reduce GHG emissions. In this paper, AFT also considers practices that help producers adapt to climate change to be “climate-smart.”

**programs, and often deterred producers from trying.** Some service providers also shared that they were judicious about which producers they encouraged to apply because the process takes so much time. And while part of the purpose for the new Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART) tool was to streamline conservation programs, assistance, and applications, there was near-universal acknowledgment that it is not yet fully living up to its potential.

RCPP was singled out by program applicants as being particularly burdensome, even after 2018 Farm Bill changes meant to address this issue. Several RCPP organizational applicants shared that they would not apply for more funding should the current onerous program application and implementation structure continue.

If all of these application processes are difficult for well-resourced producers and organizations, they are nearly impossible for small-scale and historically marginalized<sup>c</sup> producers, and small and under-resourced organizations. This means that streamlining program applications has added importance when seen through an equity lens.

**AFT recommends that Congress provide NRCS with authority and direction to streamline program applications to reduce wait times for financial and technical assistance, especially in light of new funding increases.** This will be especially important for applicants seeking assistance to implement urgently needed practices that will help them adapt to and/or mitigate climate volatility, and for helping historically marginalized and under-resourced producers for whom a time-consuming application with unknown likelihood of success or low amount of funding awarded is a deterrent. This can be accomplished by:

1. Building on current NRCS work and directing them to use a threshold<sup>d</sup> scoring system (e.g., ACT NOW) to rank applications, especially for urgently needed climate-smart practices. This would enable NRCS to immediately fund applications that are above the chosen threshold, as was done with USDA NRCS's 2021 Cover Crop Initiative, eliminating the current waiting, batching, and ranking process that adds months to the time spent applying for conservation assistance.
2. Directing NRCS to develop an entry-level application designed to be less time consuming for small-scale and historically marginalized producers and applicants interested in EQIP, CSP, and RCPP. Part of the goal of this effort should be to act as a gateway for historically marginalized producers to more easily enter the system and receive support.

### Ensure Adequate and Equitable Technical Assistance for Producers

In addition to overcoming costs and risks associated with transitioning to new farm management systems, one of the largest barriers for producers adopting new conservation practices is a lack of knowledge on how best to do so. Providing farmers with competent, trustworthy technical assistance and reliable information is the best, and only,

*“We expressed interest and months went by without a response. Sometimes it would take years to get an application in. Staff are very competent but completely overrun.”*

—AFT FARM BILL WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT, NEW YORK

<sup>c</sup> The term “historically marginalized producers” is used here to mean those that have been marginalized in society and from government support based on race and ethnicity, namely Black, Indigenous, and other producers of color (BIPOC). AFT uses this term to recognize that, though there are other producers marginalized in the U.S., racism in this country has perpetuated disadvantages for BIPOC producers and landowners in particular because of their race and ethnicity, and that important systemic work and changes are needed to address these inequities.

<sup>d</sup> These thresholds must be carefully chosen to avoid disadvantaging historically marginalized or small-scale producers from being competitive in receiving awards.

way to overcome this barrier. When supplemented by advice from other farmers who have already made a successful transition, this will produce lasting beneficial results. **However, many AFT workshop attendees discussed challenges with receiving information and technical assistance from NRCS, specifically long wait times and understaffing.** In one case, it took a farmer one and a half years to hear back from staff. In another, it took three and a half years from the time they started their application to the point when they received funding.

Many workshop attendees also noted that program administration can create high demands on

*"I have tremendous respect and appreciation for these folks, but it often seems like they can't get out of their own way. Seems to cost more to run the program than farmers get paid because of it."*

—AFT FARM BILL WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT,  
NEW ENGLAND

limited NRCS staff time. Some producers found program requirements too inflexible to meet the needs of their dynamic operations. For example, while science-based standards were lauded, there were examples of these well-formed standards not working for all operations, creating extra back and forth with NRCS staff. Additionally, administering the onerous application processes ties up the time of NRCS technical experts, *creating further bottlenecks in the process and delaying producer support.*

Workshop attendees also found that program implementation and services could differ significantly depending on who was assisting them. For example, in the case of RCPP, workshop participants pointed out that the program could either be easy to use and streamlined, or bureaucratic and confusing depending on their agent. In research investigating equity issues in conservation programs, alongside lack of outreach, inconsistency in program delivery was one of the most common issues creating inequitable program access.<sup>3</sup> In short, **while some subjectivity is inevitable, ensuring consistency in program implementation is essential both to providing clear and efficient assistance and services, and to ensuring equitable program access.**

Producers acknowledged that building relationships with local NRCS agents to learn how to navigate programs was a critical step to receiving financial assistance. But staff vacancies and turnover in local offices have posed problems in the past, creating further delays for producers who are then required to spend time initiating or re-forming relationships. This relationship-building can be especially challenging for new, beginning, and historically marginalized farmers who may have limited time, trust, or experience with USDA. In some cases, understaffing and turnover even resulted in appropriated funding that otherwise should have supported voluntary conservation efforts remaining unspent. In the Mid-Atlantic, for example, \$2 million in funding that was supposed to be available annually for shoreline stabilization was never awarded because there was no one at the NRCS office to implement it.

*"Everyone has a different interpretation of how programs work."*

—AFT FARM BILL WORKSHOP  
PARTICIPANT, SOUTHEAST

**The addition of IRA conservation funding makes it all the more critical that programs be streamlined and that there be additional technical assistance capacity. Alongside adequate financial assistance, AFT recommends that this next Farm Bill deploy an "all-hands-on-deck" approach to ensure ample, efficient, equitable, and ongoing technical assistance.** NRCS already employs many different strategies that could be built on to supplement its own trusted assistance and reduce producer wait times. For example, NRCS enters into cooperative agreements with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), conservation districts, private sector entities, and other qualified groups to

enable them to efficiently hire staff and deliver excellent technical assistance and services. Private consultants and experts are also able to become certified as Technical Service Providers (TSPs) to help implement these programs. All of these potential partners will need to work together with state and local agencies, experienced producers, and farmer-to-farmer support networks to get funding and information to producers and catalyze greater conservation adoption. **To achieve this “all-hands-on-deck” approach, AFT recommends that Congress provide adequate funding for technical assistance, increase focus on farmer-to-farmer learning and mentoring, and address challenges in the TSP program in both the next Farm Bill and subsequent appropriations bills.**

### ***Building up Farmer-to-Farmer Learning***

Farmer-to-farmer learning is one of the most effective ways to advance conservation activities in farming communities. Pairing NRCS’s trusted reputation for scientifically-sound, research-based knowledge with practical knowledge from other farmers on how best to *profitably* incorporate new practices into existing operations is key. In a recent survey, AFT New England found that more than 50% of farmer-respondents were getting their technical assistance and education directly from farmers they know (compared with 20% from NRCS), and over a third identified a consultation with an experienced farmer as one of the most helpful forms of technical assistance. Research findings have identified [Learning Circles](#), and the connected networks of women in agriculture they foster, as effective tools to empower and inspire women to support sustainability on their land.<sup>4, 5, 6</sup> Similarly, farmers of color often report a lack of trust and disinterest in engaging with government technical assistance due to gaps in cultural understanding, language barriers, and experiences of marginalization and bias.<sup>7</sup> However, they report comfort in receiving that support from a known and trusted person. But current funding and opportunities are not enough to realize the full potential of this transformational strategy.

Many producers at AFT’s workshops said that they were interested in receiving this type of assistance, but few knew where to look. **In order to make farmer-to-farmer opportunities available, AFT recommends that in the next Farm Bill, Congress:**

1. Include the [Farmer to Farmer Education Act of 2023](#) (S.2614) introduced in July 2023 by Senator Luján (D-NM) and Senator Moran (R-KS), to enable NRCS to enter cooperative agreements in each state and with Tribes to build the capacity and visibility of farmer-to-farmer conservation networking events and groups, train facilitators, and connect farmer-mentors with mentees. Learn more about AFT and National Young Farmers Coalition’s work on this [here](#).
2. Place special emphasis on farmer-to-farmer learning as an important strategy for practice adoption in Farm Bill programs and in report language.
3. Enable NRCS to provide CSP awardees and experienced EQIP awardees training and extra cost share (comparable to market-rate payment as consultants) to act as mentors for other farmers, providing advice, assistance, and/or guidance on practice implementation as well as potential programs mentees may apply for.
4. Provide funding for—or direct NRCS to increase—financial support for organizations and producers to cultivate new farmer-to-farmer learning opportunities through existing programs (e.g. RCPP), ensuring some of these opportunities require minimal match so small-scale organizations can participate.

### ***Improve the Technical Service Providers Program***

Another tool in the Farm Bill to supplement NRCS technical assistance is the TSP program. Farmer demand for TA has long outpaced NRCS’ ability to provide it, which led to the creation of the TSP program. The TSP program enables private actors to supplement federal technical assistance by getting certified to provide technical support to producers. This promising program expands the

## **Advance Conservation by Supporting Farmer-to-Farmer Learning in the Next Farm Bill**

Farmers face numerous barriers in adopting conservation practices, especially during the transition process, and the informational resources available online or through service providers are often too general to reflect the unique needs of an individual farm. **Farmer-to-farmer education provides a way to overcome many of these barriers by better communicating the benefits and challenges of practice adoption and addressing perceived risks to yield, labor costs, and product quality that can prevent farmers from trying a new practice.** It can also help reach new farmers already invested in implementing conservation practices who do not have access to traditional training networks. However, regular, coordinated farmer-to-farmer education exists in very few communities, and can be hard for many farmers to find and tap into. It also takes purposeful design to create successful farmer-to-farmer education networks.

**In the next Farm Bill, AFT and the National Young Farmers Coalition recommend the creation of a new technical assistance program that will augment existing farmer-led education networks and build capacity for new ones—particularly for communities historically marginalized from existing systems—as a key strategy to increase conservation practice adoption.** Through this program, NRCS in each state would enter into cooperative agreements with community-based organizations that are able to identify and build on established and burgeoning farmer-to-farmer networks, and/or create new ones. Each cooperative agreement holder would be responsible for connecting farmers with mentors or group learning opportunities and building network capacity within their defined area. Responsibilities could include:

- Creating networks, organizing events, providing referrals, and identifying and filling service gaps to boost farmer access to education that will increase long-term conservation practice adoption.
- Maintaining and promulgating a list of groups or contacts coordinating farmer-to-farmer events, networks, and educational opportunities. Facilitating mentor/mentee matchmaking.
- Coordinating peer-to-peer facilitation training (a specialized skill) and resources to build the skills of network leaders and members for effective education. Such training should emphasize bottom-up learning and cross-training from existing groups as well as research-informed approaches
- Administering regrants to facilitate the growth of existing and new education networks, with funding targeted to building up small-scale efforts that support historically marginalized producers without match requirements. These regrants could support:
  - Events and convenings to build farmer-to-farmer relationships and capacity for farmer-to-farmer learning in the state or region
  - Farmer stipends, at market rate, for participation in conservation trainings, educational skill-building activities, and for sharing expertise with their peers
  - Other locally identified activities and innovative approaches to increase conservation practice adoption and build farmer-to-farmer connections in the state or region

**To pilot this opportunity, AFT and Young Farmers recommend that Congress dedicate \$45 million annually to support this program in the next Farm Bill. This will empower USDA to enter into up to three cooperative agreements to build farmer-to-farmer learning in each state.**

reach of NRCS and allows producers to learn from providers who have local agronomic knowledge. However, there was near universal agreement in AFT's workshops that the process of becoming a TSP is very difficult, lengthy, and at times impossible. In some cases, required trainings were not offered, difficult to find, or offered only once per year or in another state. Even when individuals receive certification, many TSPs find that they are given little or no work, and that the payment rates for their work are insufficient and below that of other NRCS partners doing comparable work.

One workshop attendee shared that once they became a TSP, the only one in the state covering cropland, their phone never rang—leading them to believe that no one was being referred to them for help.

The Keith Campbell Foundation for the Environment recently commissioned [an assessment](#) exploring actions to address technical assistance constraints, which includes a series of recommendations to NRCS and the Congress to help the TSP program live up to its potential. **AFT is uplifting the following recommendations from the report as being especially well-poised to address NRCS's immediate needs based on feedback AFT received in its Farm Bill workshops:**

- Direct NRCS to expedite and simplify the TSP certification process, including recognizing state licensure and other state laws and/or requirements as well as private sector professional certifications as meeting the qualifications for TSP certification.
- Direct NRCS to reduce wait times (e.g., the 60-day review period for TSPs certified by an approved entity).
- Direct NRCS to increase TSP payment rates to be fair market value for the work. Producer-acquired TSP payment rates are paid through Financial Assistance funds which are generally capped at 75-to-90 percent of the actual costs. This means that either producers must pay the difference to the TSP or the producer-acquired TSPs must discount their rates in order to get work. Additionally, TSP payment rates vary widely between states, even for the same practice in adjacent states.
- Direct NRCS to examine current barriers to provider certification and deployment. Initiate a comprehensive review of existing NRCS policy and remove barriers to increasing the availability of additional technical service providers. Factors for evaluation should include course requirements as well as course availability.

## **Administrative Recommendations to Improve Equitable Technical Assistance**

Alongside congressional action in the next Farm Bill, the Administration can continue to build technical assistance capacity by:

1. **Hiring more staff**, especially BIPOC and multilingual service providers, and reviewing hiring practices and policies to ensure the agency is attracting, hiring, and retaining a diverse talent pool.
2. **Increasing cooperative agreements** with NGOs, conservation districts, and with BIPOC-led and -serving organizations, universities, and private sector entities. Fund community-based navigators to support historically underserved producers in applying for NRCS conservation programs and receiving timely technical assistance.

3. **Reestablishing the NRCS Training Center** and making it widely available to new and existing NRCS staff, partners, and TSPs. The previous Agency training program was subsumed into the Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) Business Center and is currently dormant. Training topics would include:
  - a. Cultural competency and bias related to race, gender, Tribal relations, farm size, and more. Training staff on issues of special importance to BIPOC and other underserved groups will help build trust between USDA and communities it has not served the past.
  - b. Conservation planning to increase consistency in program delivery and interpretation.
  - c. Soil health, extreme weather trends, climate adaptation and resilience strategies, and climate mitigation options for different producer types, including diversified operations.
  - d. Technical, hands-on training in structural and in-field management conservation practices.
4. **Providing program information in multiple languages** reflective of the local community makeup at the same time program details are released in English.
5. **Informing the public** about criteria, estimated resources available per program, and specifics on the decision-making process early and often. This includes accessible information on program carveouts and up-front payments for historically underserved producers.
6. **Building the staffing pipeline of the next generation of diverse conservation professionals** by cultivating relationships with 1890 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-serving institutions, Tribal Colleges, Tribal governments and Tribal-led organizations, community colleges, immigrant-led organizations, and other community-based organizations. Some strategies may include:
  - a. Developing an Agricultural Conservation Corps that pays a living wage and provides training to young people on agricultural conservation strategies.
  - b. Providing more funding for train the trainer programs.
  - c. Offering more NRCS apprenticeships and internships. A good model comes from NRCS in California, which has a Youth Corps that serves as a pipeline for many Tribal youth to get work experience with NRCS, often leading to jobs.
  - d. Partnering with land grants, agricultural vocational schools, Tribal colleges, Hispanic-serving institutions, community colleges, and HBCUs to develop STEM curriculum in agricultural conservation and conservation practices requiring math and engineering skills.

The bipartisan *Increased TSP Access Act of 2023*, introduced by Senators Mike Braun (R-IN), Roger Marshall (R-KS), and Michael Bennet (D-CO), and Representatives Jim Baird (R-IN), and Abigail Spanberger (D-VA), has been [endorsed by AFT alongside other agricultural and conservation stakeholders](#), includes many of these proposed reforms.

### **Help Farmers Achieve Long-Term Adoption of Systems of Climate-Smart and Resilient Practices**

Research shows that it takes several years to successfully incorporate new practices into farming systems, and that the transition can be volatile with benefits (e.g., yield stabilization, reduced need

for fertilizer) taking years to accrue. Therefore, financial and technical support during the 5-10 year transition period is essential to achieving successful, sustained implementation of these practices, and reaping their environmental and financial benefits. Insecure land tenure also makes long-term adoption of practices *much less likely* without tailored support and technical assistance.

**In order to equitably help more producers successfully integrate climate-smart and resilient practices that also address other environmental concerns into their operations, AFT recommends that in the next Farm Bill, Congress:**

1. Enable NRCS to provide higher cost share and/or up-front payments for climate-smart practices that build soil health—particularly those that achieve multiple benefits and are underutilized, like cover crops.
2. Target EQIP Conservation Incentive Contracts, which last 5-10 years, towards soil health and climate-smart management to account for the longer-term support needed to transition to new practices and experience their related benefits. The EQIP-CIC can serve as a bridge between EQIP and CSP and help farmers adopt soil health practices through difficult transition periods. Successful EQIP-CIC applications should be targeted towards practices that improve soil health, nutrient management, and others that will improve resilience to extreme weather while addressing other resource concerns, but which take 5-10 years to be successfully incorporated into the farm management system long-term and become profitable.
3. Increase Funding for EQIP Conservation Innovation Grants (CIGs), Soil Health Demonstrations, and other climate adaptation and mitigation research, and prioritize applications that measure soil health improvements and carbon sequestration.

### **Administrative Actions to Achieve Long-Term Adoption of Climate-Smart Practices**

USDA-NRCS has recently taken a leadership role in directing funding awards towards practices and enhancements that support multiple transformative benefits, including those related to climate (e.g., resilience, carbon sequestration, emissions reduction, biodiversity, soil health, water quality improvements). USDA can build on these efforts by:

- 1. Streamlining program applications, contracting, and verification.** NRCS can build on the new nutrient management and EQIP cover crop initiatives by fast tracking ranking and funding for all Climate-Smart Agriculture and Forestry (CSAF) practices and practices advancing resiliency as well as related bundles and enhancements.
- 2. Making soil health and climate action a national priority.** NRCS can encourage state offices to assign ranking points and take other actions that will strengthen applications with CSAF practices, including adopting national ranking criteria and/or questions to support applications for practices that improve resilience to extreme weather, and which help producers reduce emissions (particularly applications that address multiple resource concerns).
- 3. Publicly celebrating conservation leaders and early adopters.** NRCS can ramp up efforts to recognize outstanding leadership by conducting, or engaging with NGOs to conduct, national conservation championship contests with state or regional award winners opting into a national competition. This positive national reinforcement can inspire others to do the same.

**4. Prioritizing planning assistance.** For both historically marginalized producers and for those who do not have plans to address extreme weather or GHG emissions reduction on their farms, NRCS can provide priority assistance either through their staff or with qualified entities.

**5. Providing greater support for Climate Adaptation and CSAF-Enabling Practices.** While the focus on climate mitigation is important, producers need more support for climate adaptation and climate-smart enabling practices (e.g., fencing enables rotational grazing), and producers in drought-stricken areas need urgent help with water quantity issues.

**6. Prioritizing applications from farmers and ranchers on permanently protected land.** Only 1% of farm and rangeland in the U.S. is permanently protected, but this is the land that will be available for farming forever. NRCS should include priority ranking points in its instructions to NRCS State Offices for applicants seeking conservation cost-share assistance on protected lands. This modest change will help ensure that the benefits accrued through expending these taxpayer dollars are long-lived.

### Continue Building Equitable Access to NRCS Conservation Programs

Many historically marginalized producers have shared the unique challenges they have faced in accessing USDA programs. At the same time, many agroecological practices originated with Black, Indigenous, and other producers of color (BIPOC) who have been farming in regenerative ways for centuries. For example, some Indigenous land stewards have supported their communities with the “seventh generation” beyond them in mind, and many of the agroecological practices in use today, like planting leguminous cover crops to increase nitrogen availability, were developed by Black researchers in southern universities. Although this is changing with renewed USDA commitment to equity and inclusion, BIPOC producers have historically not had consistent access to USDA services. To this day, some BIPOC producers still struggle to access USDA programs or trust USDA, and some do not see themselves, or their ways of farming, reflected in the staff, program offerings, or practice standards at NRCS.

While there are important efforts underway at USDA to correct for these historic inequities and to address program barriers historically marginalized producers have faced, the data reminds us that there is much more work to be done to achieve equity or parity.<sup>8</sup> Although no clear data breakdown on program awardees has been provided based on race, in total, farmers of color were only awarded 245 CSP contracts (3.7%) and 2,158 EQIP contracts (6.4%) in 2020. According to the National Agricultural Statistics Service, there were over 240,000 farmers of color in 2017, meaning that 1% of farmers of color received EQIP and CSP contracts combined.<sup>9</sup>

In 2021, AFT conducted a literature review<sup>e</sup> of 20 recent papers that investigated equity issues in NRCS conservation programs. These papers identified that historically marginalized producers face the following barriers to accessing these programs: a lack of awareness or understanding of programs, inadequate payment rates, outright discrimination, regulatory hurdles related to paperwork and program flexibility,<sup>f</sup> and insecure land tenure.

<sup>e</sup> This literature review was conducted by Maddy Traynor, AFT’s 2021 Women for the Land Intern.

<sup>f</sup> For example, NRCS programs may seek one point person responsible for making conservation decisions on the land, however, tribal land ownership often does not follow this model, and they may not have the clear title paperwork these programs require.

A 2021 paper detailing interviews with experienced, well-connected Black farmers in the racially diverse farming state of Mississippi made clear that, even with USDA's recent efforts, program access barriers based on race and gender persisted. These barriers included a lack of outreach or knowledge about programs; programs being “hidden” or not transparent when producers visited offices and throughout the application and ranking process; a lack of uniformity across offices in program offerings, deadlines, and more; and instances of explicit racial discrimination. The paper called for increased targeted outreach, simpler application processes—including a limit to jargon—and, removing program gatekeeping power from the hands of local committees that may perpetuate historic racial and ethnic bias and discrimination.

*“Current conservation programs are a tool of risk management, and a provider of supplemental farm income... [and are] voluntary but encouraged. Because the ability to secure financial capital and mitigate risk is often difficult for producers, access to conservation program funding is extremely important for disadvantaged producers to be successful in their farming operations during periods of instability.”<sup>10</sup>*

Recognizing these unique challenges, many community-based organizations have stepped in to fill these gaps and help historically marginalized producers access conservation support. For example, in the Midwest, several African immigrant farmers started [Kilimo Minnesota](#) to help producers in their community access land as well as learn about and navigate government programs. This work includes helping producers in the community compile all of the paperwork necessary to apply—a feat that can take many years without assistance—so they may access USDA support. This kind of culturally-competent outreach from trusted community based organizations serves as a compelling model to build on that could make NRCS's (and other USDA) programs more inclusive.

Women have also faced unique barriers in accessing USDA support in the male-dominated industry of farming. Nationally, between 2015 and 2020, NRCS awarded just 16% of conservation contracts to women, while only 2% went to women of color making women—and particularly women of color—underrepresented as beneficiaries of USDA's conservation funding.<sup>11</sup>

**To continue to build greater equity in NRCS programs, AFT recommends that in the next Farm Bill Congress direct USDA to:**

1. Provide more targeted, culturally competent support and technical assistance to underserved communities by directing NRCS to:
2. Develop an entry level application designed to be easier and less time-consuming for small-scale and historically marginalized producers applying to EQIP and CSP as well as under-resourced or small-scale organizations applying to RCPP.
  - a. Build on the work NRCS has begun to fund more community-based navigators across the U.S. to support historically marginalized and under-resourced EQIP, CSP, and RCPP applicants in navigating the application process and in providing implementation assistance once a contract is awarded.
  - b. Take other actions to increase conservation program inclusion (e.g., translate applications into other languages, release materials in other languages at the same time that program information is released in English, remove program acronyms from promotion materials to reduce producer confusion).

3. Direct FSA to issue clear instructions on how to obtain a farm number and tract ID and provide outreach to ensure historically marginalized producers are aware of this requirement.
4. Increase transparency about NRCS program participation rates in order to help USDA and taxpayers track progress toward advancing equity and inclusion, and help NRCS set future goals. Without increasing paperwork burdens on producers or invading producer privacy, NRCS should regularly (e.g., annually) report to Congress on the following in aggregate:
  - a. Who received TA based on demographics and farm size.
  - b. Who applies for funding vs. who is awarded funding based on demographics, farm size, and practices applied for.
  - c. Who is awarded funding disaggregated by race, gender, farm size, and income level.

### Provide Targeted Support for Small-Scale Operations

The highly detailed and time-consuming application and contracting processes for EQIP, CSP, and RCPP is similarly challenging for small-scale producers. As women and BIPOC producers are generally more likely to operate small-scale operations, this is an important dynamic to investigate to ensure equitable program access.

Workshop attendees who operate small-scale farms and ranches discussed the unique hurdles that they faced in accessing NRCS programs. For



instance, some shared that it was difficult to get into the system, while others saw the same growers receive awards and contracts year after year while they themselves never received funding. Farmers who lease land shared that it was difficult to enter into longer-term contracts, or secure landowner support—particularly when applying for an FSA number—in order to be eligible for programs at all.

Additionally, current USDA systems, rules, and policies often unintentionally favor applications from large-scale farms. This includes the regional payment rate-setting process, a ranking system that awards higher points for applications that address more resource concerns, the current policy to

*“A local, small-scale farm wanted to put in a composting facility, but engineering costs were insane. It makes sense for a giant facility, but not small. We dropped off late in the process having wasted a lot of time”*  
 —AFT FARM BILL WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT,  
 PACIFIC NORTHWEST

allocate annual NRCS state funding based on historic expenditures, and limited staff capacity. For example, in AFT’s workshops, many producers were concerned that, due to the ranking criteria, EQIP in particular favors larger farms.

The process for setting payment rates especially deserves a closer look, as producers need adequate financial assistance from NRCS in order to justify the time and cost of applying for support and meeting NRCS’s specifications and requirements.

Unfortunately, payment rates, and the way they are set, may contribute to inequities in program access. For example, the fact that EQIP practice payment rates are set regionally by NRCS economists means that they cannot meet the needs of all producers in the region equally or equitably since the cost of individual practices can vary widely among states, even those in the same region.<sup>g</sup>

<sup>g</sup> For example, in Connecticut, payments for fencing did not come near their actual costs because, unlike other states in the region, they only had residential fencing companies which charge much more than agricultural companies.

In addition, for small-scale growers, per-acre payments designed to support the “average” grower in the region are often insufficient, even though the Farm Bill permits higher cost share or upfront payments for certain classes of farmers.<sup>h</sup> This means that often only well-resourced growers who can spread costs over many acres and cover the rest of implementation cost match will be able to make use of NRCS conservation assistance. In contrast, small-acreage operations cannot spread their costs over a large number of acres, and also often need to buy retail (vs. wholesale). **Because cost is the number one barrier to conservation practice adoption—and climate volatility is increasing the importance of conservation practices as a risk management tool —ensuring financial assistance is available to farms of all sizes is critical to retaining farms of all sizes in America.** While there are mechanisms within NRCS to increase payment rates for practices in certain cases, and some individuals within the agency are doing innovative work to increase per-acre rates for small-acreage operations, it is time-consuming and cumbersome for NRCS staff or producers to raise and address these issues piecemeal.

Payment rate transparency is also important, especially early in the application process. Because the application process can be lengthy, discovering late in the process that the payment rate is insufficient to meet the producer’s needs is frustrating at best. For example, a New York producer shared that they dropped off late in the CSP application process when they found out the payment rates would be inadequate to cover even a small fraction of the cost of practice adoption.

*“[We] enrolled in CSP but payouts for enhancements were peanuts. It’s not for a small farm. We dropped out late in the process having wasted a lot of time. Might cost us \$2,000 for a new practice, but we were only going to get paid \$100.”*

—AFT FARM BILL WORKSHOP  
PARTICIPANT, NEW YORK

Finally, while changes have been made in recent Farm Bills to provide increased and up-front payments to certain producers, this option is not always made known to these producers by NRCS agents. More consistency in program implementation, as recommended above, and increased promotion of EQIP advanced payment options would help to address this problem.

**To provide assistance to all farms, without disadvantaging some, AFT recommends that Congress do the following in the next Farm Bill:**

1. [Include the Office of Small Farms Establishment Act of 2023](#) to create an Office of Small Farms that ensures USDA programming, rulemaking, and regulations fully take the needs of small-acreage operations into account. Such an office would be tasked with addressing the barriers these farms face in accessing conservation programs as well as programs within other USDA agencies. Direct NRCS to adjust the payment-rate setting process to ensure it provides equal access to programs and services to small-scale producers and producers in all states.
2. Direct NRCS to adjust the payment-rate setting process to ensure it provides equal access to programs and services to small-scale producers and producers in all states.
3. Direct NRCS to provide higher payment rates for in-field practices for small-acreage operations across the country, or increase payment rates for the first X number of acres (e.g., 100 acres) for any farmer applying for in-field practice conservation assistance.

<sup>h</sup> While the research AFT conducted is inconclusive as to whether increased payment rates will adequately surmount equity issues within these programs, no paper reviewed found them to be too high.

## Establish a USDA Office of Small Farms to Support Lower-Acreage Producers

**Small acreage farms—those with fewer than 180 acres—represent 70% of all U.S. farms but only receive 12% of government payments.**<sup>12</sup> These small farms support rural economies, community resilience, and local and regional supply chains. And although they only cover 8% of agricultural land, they are responsible for 20% of all agricultural sales.<sup>13</sup>

Regardless of farm size or production system, all producers should be able to access and benefit from USDA programs. While small farms are not expressly ineligible, many USDA programs have been designed with a one-size-fits-all approach that can disadvantage participation by smaller-acreage operations. For instance:

- Only 7% of small farms use crop insurance.
- Some programs, including the initial rollout of the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program, offer payments based on commodity market rates, not factoring in the higher prices that many small farms receive for selling direct to consumers or for producing specialized products.
- Accessing programs requiring cost-share (e.g., EQIP) can be difficult since scale is often not factored into payment rates and many small farms cannot buy wholesale or spread costs across acres.
- It can be easier for USDA staff with limited capacity to efficiently expend funding by working with a few large operations rather than many smaller-scale ones.
- Small farms are more likely to face barriers such as lack of resources to meet match requirements and limited time, making program applications more challenging.
- USDA's research and applied technology is often focused on the needs of larger farms.

USDA, under Congress's direction, provides essential support to help producers succeed. Although USDA agencies are already working to ensure that all producers can access these essential services (e.g., NRCS's Office of Urban Agriculture, RMA's Micro Farms Program), greater coordination is needed. More systemic review would also help smaller-acreage operations access USDA support and ensure they are fully considered as part of the Department's rulemaking.

**The Office of Small Farms Establishment Act of 2023, led by Senator Corey Booker (D-NJ), Congresswoman Marilyn Strickland (D-WA), Congresswoman Alma Adams (D-NC), and Congressman Jim McGovern (D-MA), and developed by the Black Family Land Trust and AFT, would help ensure that small farms, ranches, and forest operations have full access to USDA programs.** The legislation would create an Office of Small Farms, located within the Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) Mission Area, with liaisons across other agencies. The Office would help USDA better accomplish its mission of serving farmers of all types and scales and help secure a more resilient food system for all Americans by:

- Assessing the needs of small operations, evaluating USDA's current ability to serve them, and recommending improvements to USDA program policies, design, and delivery.
- Providing technical assistance and grants of up to \$25,000 to small operations either directly or through cooperative agreements.
- Operating an anonymous hotline for small scale operations to report challenges accessing programs.

This bill proposes \$25 million annually to carry out these functions, with \$15 million going to the Office and \$10 million to technical assistance and grants.

4. Direct NRCS to increase payment rate transparency earlier in the application process, like many organizations do when including salary ranges in hiring notices.
5. Direct NRCS to develop an entry level application designed to be easier and less time-consuming for small-scale producers and applicants interested in EQIP, CSP, and RCPP.
6. Direct NRCS to train all staff to increase program implementation consistency and ensure socially disadvantaged and beginning producers are made aware of set-aside funding pools and up-front payment options without exception.
7. Investigate and report to Congress on systemic inequities within the current programs based on policy choices, NRCS office structure, or program structure (e.g., application process, program ranking criteria, program administration, payment rate-setting process). Determine whether these or other factors create or reinforce disadvantages for producers based on farm size or farmer race, income, or gender. If any are found, these should be corrected immediately in consultation with the USDA equity commission.

### Improve Reporting on Program Data and Outcomes

Quantifying the outcomes<sup>i</sup> of conservation practice adoption is critical to informing public policy, communicating the benefits of conservation programming to the public, and enriching scientific understanding of natural resource management. Over the decades, USDA NRCS—together with associated agency efforts—have increased their capacity for evaluating federal conservation programs. The Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) within the National Institute for Food and Agriculture is an excellent example of this. However, additional efforts are needed on this front.

NRCS programs have successfully addressed many resource concerns, but the outcomes remain challenging to quantify. **AFT recommends that in the next Farm Bill, Congress:**

1. Direct NRCS to develop and deliver a report to Congress on outcomes at least two years before each new Farm Bill is due for reauthorization with the goal of increasing quantification efforts.
2. Direct USDA-NASS to include more questions on which conservation practices farmers are using in the Census of Agriculture to help inform future approaches.
3. Direct NRCS to aggregate and publicly report information on state funding allocations as well as what practices and resource concerns are funded in each state.

RCPP is especially ripe for improvement in quantification. Congress reiterated the importance of partner quantification of RCPP project outcomes within the 2018 Farm Bill report language.<sup>j</sup> But for this vision to be realized, additional work must be done to equip these partners to successfully quantify outcomes. Based on extensive work in this arena, **AFT recommends that Congress direct USDA to provide partners with greater guidance to meet this legislative mandate, including:**

- Disseminating information and resources that offer transparency around the different types of methods, models, and tools available as well as information on their respective applications, strengths, and limitations.<sup>k</sup> This could include hosting meetings of project partners and tool experts as well as providing additional one-on-one advising on tools or methods selections.

<sup>i</sup> Such outcomes could include water quality, climate, social, and/or economic impacts.

<sup>j</sup> 2018 Farm Bill's report language clarified the rationale behind quantifying outcomes by stating, "The Managers emphasize the importance of a partner's duty to quantify the environmental outcomes of their RCPP projects, and partners are encouraged to assess and report on the economic and social outcomes of their projects, as partners may be able to encourage increased adoption of conservation practices."

<sup>k</sup> AFT has produced *A Guide to Water Quality, Climate, Social, and Economic Outcomes Estimation Tools* which functions in this role by inventorying and assessing various models and tools.

- While protecting producer privacy, providing additional information on existing practice adoption within a given project area. This is especially important in the case of CSP, which supports a mix of ongoing practices and new practice adoption.
- Ensuring quantification models are calibrated to improve their accuracy and directing USDA to continually update these models with real world data. Projects funded by the Partnership for Climate-Smart Commodities Program as well as new investments in Farm Bill programming through the Inflation Reduction Act can help to provide and support this new “National Calibration Dataset.” The National Calibration Dataset could aggregate high-priority data pertinent to strengthening models into a centralized, interoperable, publicly available repository that modelers can access. This new dataset could also help improve the accuracy of modeled outcome estimates (such as through COMET) and expand the states, production systems, and conservation practices that the various tools and models can analyze.

## Conclusion

NRCS programs provide a strong foundation to build upon in order to achieve the critical resilience and conservation goals that producers must meet in order to remain viable in the 21st century. The ultimate goal of this work should be to equitably provide support to the farmer-innovators who are leading the way towards a resilient future, and to help them mentor others to do the same. This work to increase adoption of resilience-building practices will only become more important to future farm viability and risk management as the world contends with climate change. Many creative changes can be made by leaders in Congress in the next Farm Bill, and by USDA, to better support farmers in equitably accessing NRCS programs and support. Adoption of these recommendations, and those made in AFT’s other Farm Bill white papers, will help the U.S. meet these goals, and reap the benefits so critical to our very survival.

## Appendix: AFT’s Recommendations to Improve Conservation Programs, Build Equity, and Increase Adoption of Climate-Smart and Resilient Practices in the Next Farm Bill

During the winter of 2022, AFT held eight regional workshops focused specifically on conservation practice adoption. These were an opportunity to hear from farmers and ranchers about the barriers they face in adopting conservation practices, the strengths of USDA-NRCS conservation programs, and the opportunities for program improvements to help producers overcome barriers. Grounded in these conversations, the following Farm Bill recommendations were created to improve the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) so that they: 1) provide equitable access to technical and financial support; 2) increase access to trusted experts; 3) continue to provide reliable information; 4) fill service gaps; and 5) de-risk the transition process so that practice adoption is incorporated into the farm’s long-term management. Incorporating these recommendations into the Farm Bill will position these programs to continue their important work of locally-led conservation while better helping farmers adopt conservation practices increasingly vital to farm viability in the face of a changing climate.

### Target Funding and Increase Support for Practices that Achieve Multiple Resource Benefits

1. Keep the IRA funding in conservation, ideally by folding it into the Farm Bill Conservation Title (Title II) baseline so that it can contribute to longer-term, increased support for voluntary conservation activities, and:
  - a. Increase set-asides for socially disadvantaged producers and young and beginning farmers
  - b. Increase technical assistance capacity at NRCS while also better enabling qualified organizations, advisors, and producers to provide it (see full recommendations above)
  - c. Increase emphasis on practices and systems of practices within Title II that build resilience to and mitigate climate change, while addressing multiple resource concerns

### Streamline Applications to Reduce Wait-Times for Assistance, Especially for Climate-Smart Practices

1. Direct NRCS to use a threshold score to rank applications, especially for urgently needed climate-smart practices, immediately funding those that are above the threshold as was done with USDA’s 2021 Cover Crop Initiative.
2. Direct NRCS to develop an entry level application designed to be less time consuming for small-scale producers and applicants interested in EQIP, CSP, and RCPP.<sup>1</sup>

### Ensure Adequate and Equitable Technical Support for Producers

1. Include the forthcoming Farmer to Farmer Education Act of 2023 (S.2614) in the Farm Bill to create a farmer-to-farmer Navigator program that enables NRCS to enter cooperative agreements with entities that can build capacity for, and fill existing gaps in access to, farmer-to-farmer networking. Learn more [here](#).

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<sup>1</sup> This also applies within the “Building Equitable Access” and “Support Small Farms” recommendations.

2. Place special emphasis on peer-to-peer learning as an important strategy for practice adoption in Farm Bill programs and in report language.
3. Create a way for NRCS to provide CSP awardees and experienced EQIP awardees training and extra cost share (comparable to market-rate payment as consultants) to act as mentors for other farmers, providing advice, assistance, or guidance on practices and programs to apply for.
4. Provide funding to increase opportunities for producers to cultivate new peer-to-peer networks and events through existing programs (e.g. RCPP) or a new targeted program.
5. Direct NRCS to provide more operationalized opportunities for experienced farmers and their networks to inform conservation practices and standards.
6. Fix the TSP program by directing NRCS to:
  - a. Expedite and simplify the TSP certification process, including recognizing state licensure and other state laws and/or requirements as well as private sector professional certifications as meeting the qualifications for TSP certification.
  - b. Reduce wait times (e.g., the 60-day NRCS review period for TSPs certified by an approved entity).
  - c. Increase TSP payment rates to be fair market value for the work.
  - d. Examine current barriers to provider certification and deployment.

## **Help Farmers Achieve Long-Term Adoption of Climate-Smart and Resilient Practices**

1. Provide higher cost share, and up-front payments for climate-smart practices that build soil health—particularly those that are underutilized and achieve multiple benefits.
2. Increase use of the EQIP Conservation Incentive Contracts and focus this funding on soil health and climate-smart management practices that require longer transition periods.
3. Increase Funding for EQIP Conservation Innovation Grants and Soil Health Demos, and other climate adaptation and mitigation research, prioritizing those projects that work to quantify carbon sequestration in soils.

## **Continue Building Equitable Access to NRCS Conservation Programs**

1. Provide more targeted, culturally competent support and technical assistance to underserved communities. Fund more community-based navigators across the U.S. to support historically underserved EQIP, CSP, and RCPP applicants in navigating the application process and in providing implementation assistance once a contract is awarded.
2. Direct FSA to issue clear instructions on how to obtain a farm number and tract ID and provide outreach to ensure historically marginalized producers are aware of this requirement.
3. Increase program transparency by annually report to Congress on the following:
  - Who received technical assistance based on demographics and farm size.
  - Who applies for funding vs. who is awarded funding based on demographics, farm size, and practices applied for.
  - Who is awarded funding disaggregated by race, gender, farm size, and income level to help determine how equitably producers are being served.

## Provide Targeted Support for Small Scale Operations

1. Include the Office of Small Farms Establishment Act of 2023 in the next Farm Bill to create an Office of Small Farms. Among other things, this office will help tailor conservation applications and support to small scale producers' needs and operationalize this assistance across the agency.
2. Adjust Program Payment Rates to Build Greater Program Equity by:
  - Providing higher payment rates for small-scale growers across the country.
  - Increasing payment rates for the first X number of acres (e.g., 100 acres) for any farmer applying for in-field practice conservation assistance.
  - Adjusting the payment-rate setting process to ensure it provides equal access to programs and services to small-scale producers and producers in all states.
  - Increasing payment rate transparency earlier in the application process.
3. Direct NRCS to increase consistency in program implementation to ensure socially disadvantaged and beginning producers are aware of set-asides and up-front payment options.
4. Require USDA to develop a report investigating whether there are systemic inequities within the current programs based on policy choices, NRCS office structure, or program structure (e.g. application process, ranking criteria, program administration, current payment rate-setting process). All of these should be investigated to determine whether they create or reinforce advantages for producers based on farm size or farmer race, income, or gender. If any are found, these should be corrected immediately in consultation with the equity commission.

## Improve Reporting on Program Access and Outcomes

1. Direct NRCS to develop and deliver a report to Congress on outcomes at least one year before each new Farm Bill is due for reauthorization with the goal of increasing quantification efforts.
2. Direct USDA-NASS to include more questions on which conservation practices farmers are using in the Census of Agriculture to help inform future approaches.
3. Direct NRCS to aggregate and publicly report information on state funding allocations as well as what practices and resource concerns are funded in each state.
4. Direct USDA to provide RCPP partners with assistance in quantifying outcomes to meet legislative intent, including:
  - Disseminating information and resources that offer transparency around the different types of methods, models, and tools available as well as information on their respective applications, strengths, and limitations.
  - Providing additional information on existing practice adoption within a given project area while protecting producer privacy.
  - Ensuring quantification models are calibrated to improve their accuracy and directing USDA to continually update these models with real world data.

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