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How Indiana NRCS Serves Small and Urban Farms

Learn about all the ways Indiana NRCS offers technical and financial assistance



Producer-Focused Solutions For Every Operation



USDA-NRCS is proud of its service to our landowners. As a non-regulatory agency focused on conservation, we always have the best interest of farmers, no matter the size or location of their operation, and their most prized asset — their land — at the center of everything

we do. NRCS serves all agriculture — large to small, conventional to organic, rural to urban. As American agriculture continues to grow in new directions, NRCS conservation assistance is growing along with it. Here's how:

- ▶ We're a free service: Imagine having a soil scientist, wildlife biologist, water specialist and energy consultant on staff with no cost. Turns out you do!
- ▶ We're completely voluntary: Even after you work with our team to develop an improvement plan for your property, it's your choice to implement the recommendations.
- ▶ We provide full-service support: If you decide to move forward with aspects of your conservation plan, we'll help you every step of the way, from paperwork to technical guidance on implementation.

This farmer-focused approach allows us to customize plans and priorities based on the needs of each individual operation. No two farms are the same, and no two producers are the same either, but we have the inside track on how to meet the needs of every producer.

This publication highlights how NRCS supports producers operating small and urban farms secure resources to advance their operations and missions. NRCS has resources to help small and urban farms address unique challenges related to their operations including season extension through high tunnels, irrigation, transitioning to organic, establishment of pollinator habitat and more.

Sincerely,

Jerry Raynor
Indiana State Conservationist

A Conservation Plan To Help Fulfill A Community Vision

In one of the most productive agriculture states in the country, food insecurity persists in urban areas, but producers in Indianapolis are working to fix these food deserts with the help of technical guidance and financial incentives

Sharrona Moore didn't know she would become a pillar of her community or to bring food to one of the state's most pervasive food deserts. She didn't know that she would inspire interest in backyard vegetable gardens and a deeper understanding of nutrition, health and prosperity for residents of her neighborhood. And she didn't start her journey with the intent of educating and cultivating the next generation of farmers and food security for urban centers.

But she's done all those things just four years into Lawrence Community gardens in northeast Indianapolis, where an unused seven acres now provides an oasis for a community to get back to its roots by understanding how to grow food and the health benefits of better nutrition.

"It's just a snowball effect on the community," Moore says.

Moore had always grown food. When she was growing up, members of her family had a farm north of Indianapolis where they raised pigs and chickens and grew vegetables. The farm fed her family, and over the years, she developed a love for growing food and playing in the dirt that she's carried with her all her life. When family health issues forced her to rethink nutrition, her hobby became a professional passion.



She enrolled in an urban agriculture certificate program through Purdue University. While taking the class her initial desire to help her family blossomed into a plan to impact her entire community. She secured seven acres of undeveloped land and began her journey to make a difference in people's lives.

Through USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, she was able to develop her operation, first through the agency's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and was able to receive priority access to the program as a socially disadvantaged, low resource and beginning farmer. The EQIP funding she received for



“ This [high tunnel] is allowing us to grow 365 days a year. We have access to fresh, nutrient-dense food every day of the year.

the farm funded most of the purchase price for a high tunnel, which was installed in 2018, and the planting of a hedgerow to provide a pollinator habitat and access to edible perennial fruits and berries.

“This [high tunnel] was way more than what I would be able to afford,” Moore said. “I mean, I would save maybe five to seven years and I wouldn’t be able to afford a hoop house of this size ... The NRCS’ help with bringing a hoop house here to our neighborhood is allowing us to improve food access for one of America’s largest food deserts.”

See a complete guide to the resources available for Historically Underserved producers



NRCS Financial Assistance Programs

Financial and technical assistance programs are voluntary mechanisms that enable USDA-NRCS to incentivize conservation. Every operation is different, and the best way to understand the programs that are right for you is through a consultation with your local USDA-NRCS Service Center. Historically underserved farmers, socially disadvantaged, beginning, limited-resource producers, military veterans and tribal producers all receive priority consideration and, in many cases, additional financial support through these programs.



LEARN MORE

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers to address natural resource concerns and deliver environmental benefits. EQIP supports

provides financial assistance to small and urban farmers to construct high tunnels, address irrigation issues, plant pollinator habitat and more.



LEARN MORE

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) helps agricultural producers maintain and improve their existing conservation systems and adopt additional conservation activities to address priority resources

concerns including on small or urban farms. Participants earn CSP payments for conservation performance—the higher the performance, the higher the payment.



LEARN MORE

The Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) program provides voluntary conservation technical assistance to landowners and producers in planning and implementing conservation systems. Conservation technical

assistance is a free program that helps people voluntarily conserve, improve and sustain natural resources.

How Unity Gardens Accelerated Its Growth And Prosperity

South Bend cooperative scales up with the help of a conservation plan that allows it to be more efficient and profitable so that it can meet its mission to feed vulnerable populations

It began with an idea to provide homeless people with more nutritious food. Twelve years later, Sara Stewart has launched a movement in St. Joseph County where a thriving network of more than 40-60 plots help to feed those on the fringes of society and also grow their commercial operations to support the mission.

The network of gardens is now known as Unity Gardens, which includes a sprawling flagship garden in South Bend where they have based their operations since 2009.

During COVID, Stewart estimates they grew 200,000 pounds of food and had more than 5,000 people visit the garden.

“This model is unprecedented, and yet it’s working,” Stewart said. “And as long as people

value it, they’ll support it. So here we are, 12 years later, and it’s just as scary as it was on day one, maybe more so because I feel like I have a bigger responsibility. But I also have faith that I take one step in front of another, and I’ll continue to enjoy those serendipitous moments.”

Four-season growing is a key part of providing adequate food for commercial resale, and in recent years to help fuel their outreach, and they have expanded from two high tunnels to four to enable efficient planting and crop rotations.

“If we have two greenhouses, they’re constantly in action,” Stewart said. “We’re using the soil. We’re using every piece of it. We’re growing food just to survive ... We would never have grown hot peppers, for instance, and hot peppers have been one of the single biggest things. The only reason we learn to grow potatoes well is because of that fourth greenhouse.”

The third and fourth high tunnels were built in 2017 with help from the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service. The NRCS’ Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provides cost-share assistance to urban

farms like The Unity Gardens to build high tunnels, enabling them to increase their production capabilities.

Unity Gardens applied and was approved for two EQIP contracts in 2017. One of them was used to build the two hoop houses as well as a rock trench drain, which captures rainwater to be used for irrigation inside the high tunnels. The second contract funded a two-acre pollinator garden. Within the native plants growing there, honeybees and other insects flourish and play a key role in pollinating the garden and helping the food grow flourish can be found.

The NRCS and the local Soil and Water Conservation District have also actively participated in field days and other education outreach initiatives at Unity Gardens.

“Without people like the NRCS, we couldn’t even survive,” Stewart said. “We wouldn’t grow the food well because there’d be no pollination or that kind of thing. So, one thing leads to another. And I really can’t underestimate how important it’s been.”

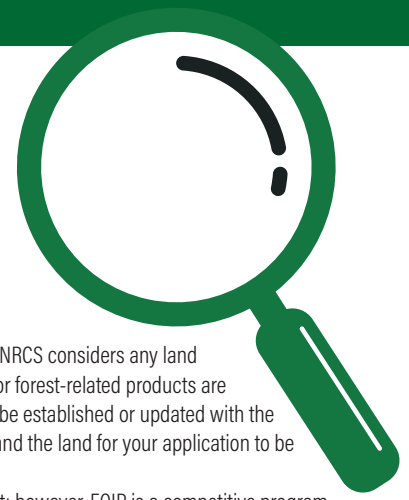




“ Without people like the NRCS, we couldn't even survive. We wouldn't grow the food well because there'd be no pollination ... One thing leads to another, and I really can't underestimate how important it's been.

EQIP

AT A GLANCE:



WHO IS ELIGIBLE?

For eligibility purposes in Farm Bill programs, NRCS considers any land on which agricultural commodities, livestock or forest-related products are produced as eligible land. Farm records must be established or updated with the Farm Service Agency for both the applicants and the land for your application to be eligible and evaluated.

EQIP has no minimum acreage requirement; however, EQIP is a competitive program that awards points based on resource concerns to be addressed and other factors.

DID YOU KNOW?

NRCS offers higher payment rates and advance payments to historically underserved (HU) producers including socially disadvantaged, beginning and limited resource producers who implement conservation practices in an EQIP Conservation Incentive Contract?

HOW TO APPLY

NRCS accepts applications for EQIP year-round, however producers and landowners should apply by state-specific, ranking dates to be considered for each year's funding. If you apply after the application cycle ranking date, your application will automatically be deferred to the next funding cycle. To apply, producers should contact their local USDA-NRCS Service Center.

HOW TO GET STARTED WITH NRCS

Planning: Visit your local field office to discuss your goals, and work with staff on a conservation plan. The recommendations are completely voluntary, and they could unlock your operation's growth potential while providing the technical expertise and financial support to achieve your growth plan.

Application: Your district conservationist or program manager will help you determine which programs are right for your operation and help you to complete the necessary paperwork.

Eligibility: NRCS has insights on eligibility and will be able to verify you as a producer or the practice change that you are trying to achieve.

Ranking: NRCS ranks applicants according to local resource concerns and eligibility requirements.

Implementation: NRCS will help navigate the contracting process and provide ongoing technical support and tools to help you achieve the program parameters.



SEE THE NRCS SERVICE CENTER LOCATOR TO TAKE THE FIRST STEP!

How Soil Health Practices Helped Good Earth Farm Live Up To Its Name

No farm is too small for best practices, and no-till combined with cover crops can boost organic matter for healthier plants, better yields and more efficient use of water resources

Even soil health experts on small farms need help. When Dan Perkins and his wife, Julie, bought the 20-acre property that would become Good Earth Farm in DeMotte, Indiana, they knew the sandy soils would need some work.

“I took a soil test, and it was 1.5% organic matter” Dan said, about half of the target 3% for healthy soils. But Dan knew exactly what to do. As a Jasper County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) crop advisor and soil and water technician, Dan had experience helping farmers like him, and he knew how to engage NRCS to get the best results.

“You take the soil health principles, and you make them work,” Dan said, explaining how he transformed his infertile soil. “For us, that was carbon. We needed as much carbon as possible and free leaves from the town provided that.”

SOIL HEALTH STARTERS FOR GOOD EARTH FARMS:

- **No-till:** Soil disturbance can result in soil compaction and decreased diversity of beneficial insects and microorganisms.
- **Cover crops:** A physical barrier between the environment and soil protects the soil from disturbance, reduces erosion, and year-round root systems promote organic matter by allowing beneficial organisms to survive and crop residues to break down.
- **Water optimization:** Crop residues, year-round roots and more organic matter means soils absorb more water and store it for longer periods during dry intervals, and those factors help soils absorb more water during heavy rains.

Despite Dan’s expertise and background working to optimize soil health on small farms just like his, he turned to NRCS for technical and financial assistance multiple times throughout

their first decade owning the farm as they transformed it above and below the surface.

MAJOR PROGRAMS AND ASSISTANCE:

- The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is administered and paid for by USDA’s

Farm Service Agency with technical assistance provided by NRCS. In 2011, the Perkins enrolled in the program in order to install a windbreak and an upland buffer. The CRP windbreak helped with their future organic certification process, as windbreaks



We were paying a mortgage on 20 acres of land, we were beginning farmers... I wouldn't have gotten that first tunnel [without EQIP].



help to protect land from wind erosion and herbicide and pesticide blow-over.

- ▶ The Perkins also enrolled three acres into CRP's Habitat Buffers for Upland Birds program, which removes land from production and creates a habitat for quail, pheasant and other upland birds. Additionally, these buffers provide shelter for other organisms like snakes and pollinators. Since its installation in 2011, the Perkins have seen increased pollinator activity across the farm. Another plus to habitat buffers for the Perkins is the increase predator population, which significantly decreases harmful pests on the farm.
- ▶ The Perkins entered into an Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contract to build three high tunnels on the farm. Years after their construction, the high tunnels at Perkins' Good Earth Farm house

flourishing tomatoes, fragrant herbs and fresh salad greens, enabling them to grow 12 months out of the year.

"We were paying a mortgage on 20 acres of land, we were beginning farmers...I wouldn't have gotten that first tunnel [without EQIP]," Perkins said.

Since 2011, USDA-NRCS has assisted with seven conservation practices on the farm. From hedgerows and brush management to cover crops and high tunnels, Dan and Julie have utilized these practices to build and improve their operation.

"I remember distinctly looking through the [NRCS] practice lists. Because I worked for the smaller [farms], I had kind of like an inner look at it ... I could see all the practices possible," Dan said.

Making A Conservation Plan

A Conservation Plan is a great first step in evaluating your operation for resource concerns and identifying practices that can boost efficiency and productivity, and it's a gateway to NRCS programs. It is a voluntary and dynamic tool that helps manage your lands profitably while protecting your natural resources. Soil erosion, season extension and access to water are just a few of the resource concerns that could be addressed with a plan. A completed conservation plan will describe each of the conservation practices you select to manage your natural resources. The choice to develop or not develop a conservation plan is yours. It is a voluntary process. You make the decisions. You implement the plan. NRCS conservation planners provide the technical assistance needed to develop and implement your plan. Creating a plan does not provide public access to your property. You control all rights of entry and use. Information in your conservation plan is confidential and is not released to other agencies, groups or individuals.



Learn the nine-step process on how conservation planning works and get additional resources and farmer success stories.

10 WAYS A CONSERVATION PLAN HELPS YOU

- 1** Saves money as your land becomes more productive
- 2** Protects the natural resource that supports your business
- 3** Increases your property value
- 4** Enhances open space and wildlife habitat
- 5** Conserves soil and water for a sustainable future
- 6** Prevents off-site impacts, and may help you comply with environmental regulations
- 7** Saves you time, money, and labor
- 8** Makes your land more attractive and promotes good neighbor relations
- 9** Promotes health and safety for your family
- 10** Helps you identify your eligibility for USDA programs

Ask the Expert

Did you know that NRCS advises thousands of producers each year, and specialized staff is on standby to consult on specific areas, including small and urban farms, invasive species, soil health, energy, pollinators, cover crops and more. Have a question about a particular resource concern or practice?

Ask Indiana's experts.



Indiana Producer Success Stories

See what's possible from working farmers and ranchers who have embraced the technical and financial assistance of NRCS programs to improve their lands, livestock, forests and working lands. You can search by natural resource concern, program and location to get ideas that are most relevant for your unique operation. Producers are the key to Indiana's conservation.



AMERICA'S CONSERVATION AG MOVEMENT

America's Conservation Ag Movement convenes farmers, agriculture businesses and the conservation community together around the future of farming by bringing profitable, climate-smart farming and ranching into the mainstream. We give producers a platform to share their journey, meet other farmers and mobilize resources they need to undertake change.

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

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

Organized by Trust In Food™ and Farm Journal Foundation with technical and financial support from USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, this public-private partnership empowers collaborators to leverage Farm Journal's nearly 150 years of market trust and farmer-to-farmer networks to accelerate adoption of climate-smart practices, products and technologies.

