

Succeed with EQIP

A guide to help specialty crop growers successfully apply to the Environmental Quality Incentives Program to support their use of conservation practices

Farmers understand better than most people the value of farming practices that conserve natural resources and protect the environment. They also know implementing those practices can be expensive because the initial costs can rarely be recovered from the sale of their crops. To better support growers' efforts, the 2002 Farm Bill increased the funding available to assist growers with the expense of initiating conservation practices. One of the programs funded by the Farm Bill is the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). EQIP is a voluntary program administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) that provides payments to eligible growers for a wide range of practices on their farms.

If you have had little experience with NRCS or other government conservation programs, taking advantage of these opportunities may seem challenging. This guide is intended to be a grower-friendly aid that helps you successfully negotiate the steps to applying for EQIP payments. There are four basic steps.

Step One Contact your nearest NRCS office and tell them you want to apply for EQIP.

They will schedule a time for you to meet with NRCS staff to start your application. The information in your application will be kept confidential. As part of this initial step, the NRCS District Conservationist or a conservation planner will help you fill out a pre-application form to see if you are eligible for the program. The pre-application form asks basic questions about your farm. Be sure to submit the pre-application form directly to the District Conservationist as soon as possible, because the date of submission will be used as part of the selection process if more funds are requested than are available.

Step Two Work with NRCS to draft a conservation plan for your farm.

The District Conservationist or a conservation planner working with the District Conservationist will come to your farm to help you identify practices that are eligible for EQIP or similar programs. You and the planner will work on a plan outlining conservation practices to implement. The goal is to work together to design a plan that makes sense for your farm, both for resource conservation and maintaining farm production.

For your meeting, you will need copies of:

- ♦ Pest and nutrient management records from the past three years
- ♦ A farm layout or aerial photo of the farm (Discuss with the conservationist whether you need to provide a map for the meeting or whether they can generate one.)
- ♦ A list of areas where you have conservation concerns
- ♦ A list of crops and rotation schedules, if applicable

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Potential practices to consider for your conservation plan:

- ♦ Pest management
- ♦ Irrigation water management
- ♦ Nutrient management
- ♦ Ag chemical containment facility
- ♦ Field border
- ♦ Critical area planting
- ♦ Windbreak establishment
- ♦ Windbreak renovation
- ♦ Riparian buffer/Filter strips
- ♦ Conservation cover
- ♦ Stripcropping
- ♦ Residue management
- ♦ Heavy use area protection
- ♦ Crosswind strips
- ♦ Cover crops

Additional practices may qualify.

The District Conservationist will help you identify practices that make sense for your farm and will help you identify which resources (soil, water, air, etc.) those practices will address. In doing so, he or she will also help you determine whether your application is likely to have priority for funding under EQIP. Here are examples of IPM tactics that have recently qualified for EQIP:

- ♦ Adding electronic canopy sensing technology to sprayers and use of shielded sprayers to reduce drift potential.
- ♦ Converting from chemical weed control to flamer/steamer weed control.
- ♦ Converting or eliminating pesticides with high to moderate potential for ground or surface water contamination to pesticides with low risk potential.
- ♦ Removing wild host plants of pests adjacent to a fruit production area.
- ♦ Utilizing disease inoculum reduction strategies.
- ♦ Providing nesting structures for insectivorous birds, bats and other predators.
- ♦ Implementing pesticide resistance management.
- ♦ Using organic mulches to suppress weeds and reduce herbicide use, and using rotary hoeing beneath bushes to reduce weeds and reduce herbicide use.

As a general rule, growers who are able to apply for multiple practices that improve more than one resource have a higher priority for funding. Even if you previously participated, you are eligible as long as your farm has remaining conservation concerns.

Step Three

Complete the application.

Once you have identified the resource concerns and practices to address those concerns, you and the District Conservationist will complete your application. If you are a Limited Resource Producer or Beginning Farmer, you are eligible for higher payments – check with the NRCS staff to determine if you qualify.

Step Four

Submit the application to NRCS.

Once you have submitted your application to NRCS, it will be ranked with other applications in the state based on the number of points it has received. The NRCS District Conservationist will contact you about whether or not your application is funded. If your application has been accepted, you will complete and sign a contract stating the payments and your obligations.

Useful resources on the Internet

For more information about EQIP and integrated pest management (IPM), visit:

<http://www.ipm.msu.edu/farbill.htm>

Read about Michigan growers' experiences with this program at:

<http://www.ipm.msu.edu/farbill/growers.htm>

To locate a Michigan NRCS office near you: <http://www.mi.nrcs.usda.gov/contact/>

Click on the “Find a Service Center” option along the left side of the screen.

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