Deadline Extended to Apply for Pandemic Support for Certified Organic and Transitioning Operations

USDA has extended the deadline for agricultural producers who are certified organic, or transitioning to organic, to apply for the Organic and Transitional Education and Certification Program (OTECP). This program provides pandemic assistance to cover certification and education expenses. **The deadline to apply for 2020 and 2021 eligible expenses is now Feb. 4, 2022**, rather than the original deadline of Jan. 7, 2022.

Signup for OTECP, administered by USDA’s Farm Service Agency (FSA), began Nov. 8.

Certified operations and transitional operations may apply for OTECP for eligible expenses paid during the 2020, 2021 and 2022 fiscal years. Signup for the 2022 fiscal year will be announced at a later date.

For each year, OTECP covers 25% of a certified operation’s eligible certification expenses, up to $250 per certification category (crop, livestock, wild crop, handling and State Organic Program fee). This includes application fees, inspection fees, USDA organic certification costs, state organic program fees and more.

Crop and livestock operations transitioning to organic production may be eligible for 75% of a transitional operation’s eligible expenses, up to $750, for each year. This includes fees charged by a certifying agent or consultant for pre-certification inspections and development of an organic system plan.

For both certified operations and transitional operations, OTECP covers 75% of the registration fees, up to $200, per year, for educational events that include content related to organic production and handling in order to assist operations in increasing their knowledge of production and marketing practices that can improve their operations, increase resilience and expand available marketing opportunities. Additionally, both certified and transitional operations may be eligible for 75% of the expense of soil testing required under the National Organic Program (NOP) to document micronutrient deficiency, not to exceed $100 per year.
Producers apply through their local FSA office and can also obtain one-on-one support with applications by calling 877-508-8364. The program application and additional information can be found at farmers.gov/otecp.


**Additional Organic Support**

OTECP builds upon USDA’s **Organic Certification Cost Share Program (OCCSP)** which provides cost share assistance of 50%, up to a maximum of $500 per scope, to producers and handlers of agricultural products who are obtaining or renewing their certification under the NOP. Although the application period for OCCSP ended Nov. 1, 2021, FSA will consider late-filed applications for those operations who still wish to apply.

Meanwhile, USDA’s Risk Management Agency (RMA) recently [made improvements to Whole-Farm Revenue Protection](https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/risk-management-agency/whole-farm-revenue-protection) to make it more flexible and accessible to organic producers.

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

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**USDA Expands Partnerships for Conservation Through Its Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program**

*New Partners are Encouraged to Apply*

USDA is leveraging its authorities under the **Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)** to bring in new types of partners and ultimately expand opportunities in voluntary conservation for the Nation’s agricultural producers and private landowners.

In direct response to feedback from state agencies, Tribes, non-profits and other groups, USDA has updated CREP’s rule regarding matching fund requirements, and invested in additional staff to work directly with partners for streamlined, partner-driven conservation efforts.

CREP is part of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and enables USDA’s Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC), through Farm Service Agency (FSA), and partners to co-invest in partner-led projects. CREP also plays an important role in USDA’s broader climate change strategy, bringing together producers, landowners and partners for climate-smart land management.

**Matching Funds**

A Dec. 6, 2019, rule required that 50% of matching funds from partners be in the form of direct payments, which made it more difficult for diverse types of groups to participate as partners in CREP. With this rule change, partners can now provide their negotiated level of matching funds in the form of cash, in-kind contributions, or technical assistance. This change allows for greater flexibility and opportunity for additional partners to participate in the program.

This change was enacted through a [Dec. 13, 2021 rule in the Federal Register](https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/12/13/2021-28371/conservation-reserve-enhancement-program-rule-change).

The rule also updated policy to now provide a full annual rental rate to producers who are impacted by state, Tribal or local laws, ordinances and regulations that require a resource
conserving or environmental protection measure. The previous rule reduced the rental payment made to producers who were covered by such laws.

**Additional Capacity to Support Partners and Producers**

In order to implement these changes, FSA has hired three new CREP staff members, using a regional approach to work closely with potential and existing partners and expand program availability. The team members include:


- **Kim Martin**, focusing on Arkansas, Illinois, **Indiana**, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas and Wisconsin.


These investments in CREP staffing build on other recent outreach and education efforts by FSA, including a $4.7 million investment announced this year to establish partnerships with organizations to provide outreach and technical assistance to historically underserved farmers and ranchers on a variety of CCC and FSA programs, including conservation programs.

Currently, all CREP partners are States; however, FSA is strongly encouraging Tribes and non-governmental organizations to consider partnerships. This program is a great vehicle for their conservation-focused efforts.

**About CREP**

Currently, CREP has 34 projects in 26 states. In total, more than 860,000 acres are enrolled in CREP.

Eligible partners include States, Tribal groups, and non-governmental organizations. Potential partners interested in CREP should contact their FSA State Office or one of the new CREP team members listed above.

**More Information**

Earlier this year, FSA rolled out a number of improvements to CRP, which included a larger emphasis on climate-smart agriculture through a new Climate-Smart Practice Incentive for CRP general and continuous signups. Learn more in our "What’s New with CRP" fact sheet. These updates to CREP build on FSA’s larger effort to improve all components of CRP.

To learn about CREP and other CRP opportunities, producers and landowners should contact their local USDA Service Center.
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