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## Before You Break Out New Ground, Ensure Your Farm Meets Conservation Compliance

The term “sodbusting” is used to identify the conversion of land from native vegetation to commodity crop production after December 23, 1985. As part of the conservation provisions of the Food Security Act of 1985, if you’re proposing to produce agricultural commodities (crops that require annual tillage including one pass planting operations and sugar cane) on land that has been determined highly erodible and that has no crop history prior to December 23, 1985, that land must be farmed in accordance with a conservation plan or system that ensures no substantial increase in soil erosion.

Eligibility for many USDA programs requires compliance with a conservation plan or system on highly erodible land (HEL) used for the production of agricultural commodities. This includes Farm Service Agency (FSA) loan, disaster assistance, safety net, price support, and conservation programs; Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) conservation programs; and Risk Management Agency (RMA) Federal crop insurance.

Before you clear or prepare areas not presently under production for crops that require annual tillage, you are required to file Form AD-1026 “Highly Erodible Land Conservation and Wetland Conservation Certification,” with FSA indicating the area to be brought into production. The notification will be referred to NRCS to determine if the field is considered highly erodible land. If the field is considered HEL, you are required to implement a conservation plan or system that limits the erosion to the tolerable soil loss (T) for the predominant HEL soil on those fields.

In addition, prior to removing trees or conducting any other land manipulations that may affect wetlands, remember to update form AD-1026, to ensure you remain in compliance with the wetland conservation provisions.

Prior to purchasing or renting new cropland acres, it is recommended that you check with your local USDA Service Center to ensure your activities will be in compliance with the highly erodible land and wetland conservation provisions.

For additional information on highly erodible land conservation and wetland conservation compliance, contact [your local USDA Service Center](#).

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# USDA Commits to Big Game Conservation Partnership with the State of Wyoming: Initial Investments Forthcoming

USDA announced a new partnership that uses diverse Farm Bill investments to support voluntary conservation of private working lands and migratory big game populations in Wyoming. Using lessons learned from this pilot, USDA seeks to scale up this model across the West as part of President Biden's commitment to support voluntary, locally-led conservation efforts to reach the administration's national conservation goals.



USDA participated in extensive engagement and listening sessions with stakeholders throughout Wyoming and developed this pilot in response to their feedback. Those listening sessions helped guide the project's concepts and principles: recognition of the large scale of this issue in key landscapes, coordination with state agencies, consistency with state policy and direction and support of existing partnerships wherever possible.

The pilot will take a systems approach to voluntary conservation and draw on several USDA programs, including the [Grassland Conservation Reserve Program](#) (Grassland CRP), [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#) (EQIP), the [Regional Conservation Partnership Program](#) (RCPP) and the [Agricultural Conservation Easements Program](#) (ACEP) to provide financial and technical assistance for landowners who want to participate. USDA is committing an initial \$15 million in investment through EQIP and ACEP for Wyoming, in addition to the rental payments that will go to producers who enroll in Grasslands CRP. There are three distinct conservation areas that USDA will invest in using these voluntary and incentive-based programs. All are designed to help willing landowners and their partners conserve private lands for the benefit of migratory big game populations. They include:

- **Agricultural Land Protection** – Preventing the conversion of private working lands that provide habitat and other values for migratory big game populations to alternative land uses not compatible with big game migrations. Specifically, this would include preventing actions like residential subdivision, mining and development of commercial wind and solar facilities on private lands. Additional resources will be provided to Wyoming for Agricultural Land Easements through the ACEP (ACEP-ALE) for this effort, as well as prioritization of big game conservation through RCPP.
- **Restoration, Enhancement and Management** – Restoring and managing working lands to provide a variety of healthy habitats migrating animals need to meet their life history requirements. Habitat quality can be improved in many ways including but not limited to the control of invasive species, restoration of degraded aspens, removal of encroached woodlands and restoration of wet meadows. Ensuring compatibility with fences used for managing working lands and migrating animals is also a top priority. Today, USDA is announcing an additional \$5 million in FY22 resources through the EQIP for Wyoming to specifically support these needs. These resources are a significant addition to the State's current FY22 EQIP allocation of over \$16 million.
- **Conservation Leases** - Managing working lands in a way that ensures the resiliency of the desired habitat conditions is extremely important to migrating big game as they rely upon healthy lands to meet their diverse seasonal habitat needs. Providing annual financial incentives to landowners through a conservation lease can help encourage the long-term management that results in resiliency. The 10- to 15-year contracts through the Grassland CRP are being used to fulfill this need. To date, USDA has committed \$32.3 million (\$2.3 million paid to landowners annually) to conserve over 170,000 acres through Grassland CRP in Wyoming with additional enrollments to be announced from this year's sign-up in the coming weeks. For this year's sign-up, USDA piloted policy changes to make it easier for producers to access multiple programs. USDA will continue to work with partners to tailor the program to meet the state's needs before next year's sign-up.

For more information, landowners can contact USDA at their local [USDA Service Center](#). On farmers.gov, landowners can [create a secure account](#), apply for NRCS programs, electronically sign documents and manage their conservation contracts.

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# USDA Accepting Applications to Help Cover Costs of Organic, Transitioning Producers

Agricultural producers and handlers who are certified organic, along with producers and handlers who are transitioning to organic production, can now apply for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) [Organic and Transitional Education Certification Program \(OTECP\)](#) and [Organic Certification Cost Share Program \(OCCSP\)](#), which help producers and handlers cover the cost of organic certification, along with other related expenses. Applications for OTECP and OCCSP are both due October 31, 2022.

OTECP covers:

- Certification costs for organic producers and handlers (25% up to \$250 per category).
- Eligible expenses for transitional producers, including fees for pre-certification inspections and development of an organic system plan (75% up to \$750).
- Registration fees for educational events (75% up to \$200).
- Soil testing (75% up to \$100).

Meanwhile, OCCSP covers 50% or up to \$500 per category of certification costs in 2022.

This cost share for certification is available for each of these categories: crops, wild crops, livestock, processing/handling and State organic program fees.

Producers can receive cost share through both OTECP and OCCSP. Both OTECP and OCCSP cover costs incurred from October 1, 2021, to September 30, 2022. Producers have until October 31, 2022 to file applications, and FSA will make payments as applications are received.

To apply, producers and handlers should contact the Farm Service Agency (FSA) at their local USDA Service Center. As part of completing the OCCSP applications, producers and handlers will need to provide documentation of their organic certification and eligible expenses. Organic producers and handlers may also apply for OCCSP through participating State agencies.

Additional details can be found on the [OTECP](#) and [OCCSP](#) webpages.

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## USDA Expands Farmers.gov to Include Farm Records

Producers with farmers.gov accounts can now access farm records and maps online, the latest self-service feature added to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) website.

You can quickly and easily access your land information in real time by desktop computer, tablet or phone. Capabilities include:

- View, print and export detailed farm records such as cropland, base acres, yields, CRP acres, land ownership details, and much more;
- View, print and export farm/tract maps that can be provided to lenders, chemical or fertilizer providers, and FSA for reporting acreage and crop insurance agents; and
- Export common land unit (field) boundaries as ESRI shapefiles.

The ability to access these records on demand without a visit to the service center saves you time and money.

[Farmers.gov](#) now includes the most popular functionalities from FSA Farm+, the FSA portal for producers, while providing enhanced functionality and an improved user experience. A new enhancement expands the

scope of accessibility to include farmers and ranchers who are members of an entity, as well as people with a power of attorney form (FSA-211) on file with FSA.

## Managing USDA Business Online

Using farmers.gov, producers, entities and those acting on their behalf can also:

- View, upload, download, and e-sign conservation documents.
- Request financial assistance, including submitting a program application.
- View and submit conservation requests.
- View technical references and submit questions.
- Access information on current and past conservation practices, plans and contracts.
- Report practice completion and request practice certification.
- View farm loan and interest information (producers only).

Future plans include adding the ability to import and view other shapefiles, such as precision agriculture planting boundaries.

To access your information, you'll will need a [USDA eAuth account](#) to login to farmers.gov. After obtaining an eAuth account, producers should visit [farmers.gov](#) and sign into the site's authenticated portal via the [Sign In/Sign Up link](#) at the top right of the website. Google Chrome, Mozilla Firefox or Microsoft Edge are the recommended browsers to access the feature.

In addition to the self-service features available by logging into farmers.gov, the website also has ample information on USDA programs, including pandemic assistance, farm loans, disaster assistance, conservation programs and crop insurance. Recently, USDA updated the navigation and organization of the site as well as added some new webpages, including "[Get Involved](#)," "[Common Forms](#)," and "[Translations](#)." [Learn more about these changes](#).

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## USDA Updates Farm Loan Programs to Increase Equity

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is updating its farm loan programs to better support current borrowers, including historically underserved producers. These improvements are part of USDA's commitment to increase equity in all programs, including farm loans that provide important access to capital for covering operating expenses and purchasing land and equipment.



The 2018 Farm Bill authorized FSA to provide equitable relief to certain direct loan borrowers, who are non-compliant with program requirements due to good faith reliance on a material action of, advice of, or non-action from an FSA official. Previously, borrowers may have been required to immediately repay the loan or convert it to a non-program loan with higher interest rates, less favorable terms, and limited loan servicing.

Now, FSA has additional flexibilities to assist borrowers in such situations. If the agency provided incorrect guidance to an existing direct loan borrower, the agency may provide equitable relief to that borrower. FSA may assist the borrower by allowing the borrower to keep their loans at current rates or other terms received in association with the loan which was determined to be noncompliant or the borrower may receive other equitable relief for the loan as the Agency determines to be appropriate.

USDA encourages producers to reach out to their local loan officials to ensure they fully understand the wide range of loan and servicing options available that can assist them in starting, expanding or maintaining their operation.

### Additional Updates

Equitable relief is one of several changes authorized by the 2018 Farm Bill that USDA has made to the direct and guaranteed loan programs. Other changes that were previously implemented include:

- Modifying the existing three-year farming experience requirement for Direct Farm Ownership loans to include additional items as acceptable experience.
- Allowing socially disadvantaged and beginning farmer applicants to receive a guarantee equal to 95%, rather than the otherwise applicable 90% guarantee.
- Expanding the definition of and providing additional benefits to veteran farmers.
- Allowing borrowers who received restructuring with a write down to maintain eligibility for an Emergency loan.
- Expanding the scope of eligible issues and persons covered under the agricultural Certified Mediation Program.

Additional information on these changes is available in the March 8, 2022 [rule on the Federal Register](#).

### More Background

FSA has taken other recent steps to increase equity in its programs. Last summer, USDA announced it was providing \$67 million in competitive loans through its new Heirs' Property Relending Program to help agricultural producers and landowners resolve heirs' land ownership and succession issues. FSA also invested \$4.7 million to establish partnerships with organizations to provide outreach and technical assistance to historically underserved farmers and ranchers, which contributed to a fourfold increase in participation by historically underserved producers in the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program 2 (CFAP 2), a key pandemic assistance program, since April 2021.

Additionally, in January 2021, Secretary Vilsack announced a [temporary suspension of past-due debt collection and foreclosures](#) for distressed direct loan borrowers due to the economic hardship imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Producers can explore available loan options using the [Farm Loan Discover Tool on farmers.gov](#) ([also available in Spanish](#)) or by contacting their local [USDA Service Center](#). Service Center staff continue to work with agricultural producers via phone, email, and other digital tools. Due to the pandemic, some USDA Service Centers are open to limited visitors. Producers can [contact their local Service Center](#) to set up an in-person or phone appointment to discuss loan options.



## USDA Service Center

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**Next County Committee Meeting: TBD**

**County Committee**

Kelly Johnson  
Kim Clark  
Deanna Clark