



Michigan Food &  
Farming Systems - MIFFS  
Supporting the Many Faces of Farming



## Michigan Food and Farming Systems

**MIFFS** is dedicated to supporting the many faces of farming, particularly our beginning and historically underserved farmers. These farmers grow diversified crops and raise animals, they live in rural and urban areas, and they farm individually, in groups, on incubator farms, and as cooperatives.

**Mission:** Connecting beginning and historically underserved farmers to each other and resource opportunities; ensuring social justice, environmental stewardship, and profitability.

**Vision:** MIFFS is playing a critical role in making smaller-scale farming an attractive and viable livelihood

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### Contact Us

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## Insider's Guide to NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP): Lessons Learned from Michigan Farmers



The most important thing to remember when working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is that they fund conservation practices for farmers to reduce existing risks to natural resources. This means that when you want to obtain funding for a conservation practice like a hoophouse, cover crops, pollinator habitat or buffer strips; you need to identify the associated environmental risks in order to gain access to assistance or funding. When you work with NRCS, you will typically work with the District Conservationist or a Soil Conservationist, also referred to as a Soil Con. The first time you walk into your NRCS Field Office, you should take the following steps:

- Tell them you are interested in applying for EQIP and would like to request a Conservation Plan for your Farm. The earlier you do this the better. Do not wait until EQIP signup is announced. This is a process that can take several months. It also requires you to work with the USDA Farm Service Agency to register your farm. Refer to Farmer the MIFFS publication *A Farmer's Guide: Working with USDA* to learn more about how to register your farm with FSA.
- Due to fact that NRCS exists to reduce risks to natural resources, you should talk to your NRCS field staff about your natural resources concerns first, and then identify associated conservation practices you would like to adopt to address them. It is not productive to walk in and simply say I want a Hoophouse (high tunnel) or that you want a grant for covers crops. This guide will identify common practices that beginning sustainable farmers would like to obtain cost share for and identify the environmental risks they address in order to help facilitate those conversations. It will also give you recommendations for practices you may be unaware of that can boost your application and increase the amount of money you may be eligible to receive through cotshare.

## Stream Crossing

If you have rivers or streams on your farm that livestock cross or have access to this is a great practice to consider. It also helps you comply with environmental laws and Right to Farm standards. Environmental risks this practice addresses include:

- Degradation of fish and wildlife habitat
- Soil Erosion
- Degradation of native plant communities
- Reduction of ecological diversity
- Increased fuel consumption
- Pesticide pollution
- Nutrient Pollution
- Water pollution

Frequently Asked Questions about Conservation Compliance can be found by visiting: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/programs/farmbill/?cid=stelprdb1260789>



# Rise Up & Dig in For Success

*Advice From One Farmer to Another*

## ***Sign up for the NRCS Conservation Client Gateway!***

This service gives you enhanced access to NRCS resources and program application. It can also give you additional ranking points on your application for programs like EQIP. Make sure that the person who enrolls matches the name of the person on application materials. It allows you to submit application materials online, track program payments, report completed practices, request conservation assistance, and electronically sign documents. This also helps producers access NRCS programs if their USDA service center is not close to their home or easily accessible.

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/cgate/>

**4** Reasons to Use Conservation Client Gateway

How Conservation Client Gateway can assist your conservation efforts

- 1 REQUEST TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE
- 2 APPLY FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE
- 3 REVIEW, SIGN AND SUBMIT APPLICATIONS AND CONTRACTS
- 4 TRACK YOUR PAYMENTS

# Commonly Requested EQIP Practices

## High Tunnel System

High tunnels are also known as Hoophouses. They are metal structures, covered with plastic, that extend the growing season for fruit and vegetable producers. They do this by capturing and contain heat from the soil and the sun. Environmental risks this practice addresses include:

- Groundwater and surface water protection
- Soil erosion
- Pesticide pollution
- Nutrient pollution



## Irrigation

NRCS offers costshare and technical assistance for several types of irrigation systems. Typically you must already have some sort of irrigation in place in order to prove there is an environmental risk and be eligible for the practice. Environmental risks this practice addresses include:

- Soil Erosion
- Groundwater and surface water pollution from nutrients and pesticides
- Overuse of water and energy for irrigation



# Sign up for NRCS Newsletters & Text Messages

The best way to stay up to date with NRCS program announcements and application deadlines is to sign up for Newsletters and text messages through GovDelivery. You should do this with each USDA agency you work with. In the upper right corner of the NRCS home page there is a Stay Connected bar that will take you to the agencies social media accounts and newsletter sign up. Click on the red envelope to sign up for the newsletter email listserv or text messages. It is important to select only the counties you farm in when applying for the email listserv in order to avoid getting too many emails!

You can also visit:

<https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/USDANRCS/subscriber/new>

The screenshot shows the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Michigan website. The header includes the USDA logo, 'Natural Resources Conservation Service Michigan', and 'United States Department of Agriculture'. Navigation links for 'About Us', 'National Centers', and 'State Websites' are present. A search bar and 'Browse By Audience', 'A-Z Index', and 'Help' options are also visible. The main content area features a 'Conservation Client Gateway' banner with a four-step process: 1. REQUEST TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE, 2. APPLY FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE, 3. REVIEW, SIGN & SUBMIT APPLICATIONS, CONTRACTS & MORE, and 4. TRACK YOUR PAYMENTS. A red envelope icon in the bottom right corner is highlighted with a yellow arrow pointing to it, labeled 'Newsletter Signup'.

# Commonly Requested EQIP Practices

## Field Borders

This practice allows you to install various plants that can serve as buffer strips, increase plant diversity, provide habitat and improve soil and water quality. Environmental risks this practice addresses include:

- Reduction of stormwater runoff
- Soil Erosion
- Wildlife and pollinator habitat degradation
- Nutrient pollution
- Soil health degradation
- Pesticide risks
- Pest and disease suppression
- Pollution of groundwater and surface water



## Forest Management Plans

Landowners with woodlots can apply for Conservation Activity Plans (CAPS) to have a Forest Management Plan created for sustainable timber harvests. These plans are created by a forester and are designed to meet landowner objectives for wildlife and habitat management as well as invasive species control. Environmental risks this practice addresses include: soil and stream bank erosion, ground and surface water pollution, habitat degradation, and invasive species issues.

# Common EQIP Funding Initiatives

## Organic

Even if you are not a certified organic farm, but farm or want to farm following organic practices, this is a great initiative to consider. It requires that while implementing your EQIP Contract, you develop an Organic Systems Plan. This is the same type of plan that would be required by a certifying agency in order to obtain organic certification. It does not require that you obtain your organic certification before the end of your EQIP contract. Only that you develop the Organic Systems Plan. More guidance on developing organic farm plans and plan templates can be found at the Michigan State University Organic Farming Exchange <https://michiganorganic.msu.edu/>



## Honey Bee

Helps producers protect pollinators by planting habitat and food sources





# Commonly Requested EQIP Practices

## Brush Management

You can apply for this practice to removed woody plants (shrubs and saplings) or manage woody invasive species on your farm. Environmental risks this practice addresses include:

- Degradation of fish and wildlife habitat
- Degradation of native plant communities
- Reduction of ecological diversity
- Increased fuel consumption
- Reduction in forage quality for livestock
- Pesticide pollution



## Conservation Cover

This practice can include anything from pollinator habitat to buffer and filter strips. This practice may require you have a lease, ownership or document stating that you have control of the property for 5 years. Environmental risks this practice addresses include:

- Reduction of stormwater runoff
- Soil Erosion
- Wildlife and pollinator habitat degradation
- Nutrient pollution
- Soil health degradation



# Two Practices You Should Always Add to EQIP Application

## Nutrient Management

This practice allows you to work with NRCS to develop a nutrient management farm for your plan, it also offers a payment for you to follow that plan. It requires you to consider all nutrient inputs on your farm including: conventional and organic fertilizer, compost, soil amendments and manure. In order to be eligible for the practice you must take soil samples for your fields and have nutrient analysis complete for all inputs. This an area your MAEAP technician can help with a lot. They can show you how to take a soil sample and tell you where to send it for analysis. Typically it will go to a soil lab or university such as Michigan State University. They can also help you test manure and compost for nutrient analysis. The environmental risks this practice reduces are:

- Groundwater and surface water pollution
- Nitrogen pollution
- Phosphorous pollution – this is a very common environmental risk that is overlooked by many sustainable farmers. Phosphorus comes from organic soil inputs just as much as it does conventional inputs and it needs to be managed with great care in order to protect the Great Lakes!

**Practice Contract Requirements** – Soil testing, keeping records of any nutrient application on your fields or crops.

