

USDA Announces Ranking Dates for Four Major Conservation Initiatives

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today announced the ranking dates for the On-Farm Energy, Organic, Seasonal High Tunnel and Air Quality conservation initiatives. All four initiatives offer technical and financial assistance through the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

"Producers tell us they want to apply for these initiatives, but many want more time to make sure they choose the one that's right for their operation," Vilsack said. "Moving to multiple ranking dates for each initiative is going to make it easier for more producers to apply and help them get started with implementing the practices they need to benefit the natural resources on their operations."

NRCS accepts applications for financial assistance on a continuous basis throughout the year. There will be three ranking periods for the Organic, On-Farm Energy and Seasonal High Tunnel initiatives, all ending on February 3, March 30 and June 1, 2012. Ranking periods for the Air Quality Initiative end February 3 and March 30, 2012. At the end of a ranking period, NRCS ranks all submitted proposals for funding consideration. NRCS will notify all applicants of the results of the rankings and begin developing contracts with selected applicants.

The On-Farm Energy, Organic and Seasonal High Tunnel initiatives are available in all 50 states, the Caribbean Area and the Pacific Basin. The Air Quality Initiative is available in Arizona, California, Colorado, Illinois, Montana, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Texas. Air Quality funding is limited to counties within these nine States that have serious air quality resource concerns related to non-attainment for Ozone and Particulate Matter.

Initiative Overviews

On-Farm Energy Initiative: NRCS and producers develop Agricultural Energy Management Plans (AgEMP) or farm energy audits that assess energy consumption on an operation. NRCS then uses audit data to develop energy conservation recommendations. Each AgEMP has a landscape component that assesses equipment and farming processes and a farm headquarters component that assesses power usage and efficiencies in livestock buildings, grain handling operations, and similar facilities to support the farm operation.

Organic Initiative: NRCS helps certified organic growers and producers working to achieve organic certification install conservation practices for organic production. New for fiscal year 2012, applicants will be evaluated continuously during the ranking periods. Applications meeting or exceeding a threshold score may be approved for an EQIP contract before the end of the ranking period. Applications rating below the threshold score will be deferred to the next period. A new threshold score will be established at the beginning of each ranking period. This new scoring process allows organic producers to implement conservation practices in a timelier manner.

Seasonal High Tunnel Pilot Initiative: NRCS helps producers plan and implement high tunnels, steel-framed, polyethylene-covered structures that extend growing seasons in an environmentally safe manner. High tunnel benefits include better plant and soil quality, fewer nutrients and pesticides in the environment, and better air quality due to fewer vehicles being needed to transport crops. More than 4,000 high tunnels have been planned and implemented nationwide through this initiative over the past two years.

Air Quality Initiative: NRCS helps producers address air quality concerns on their operations. Assistance includes establishing cover crops, planting windbreaks, implementing nutrient management practices and applying other conservation measures that mitigate and prevent air quality problems. Conservation practices installed through this initiative reduce airborne particulate matter and greenhouse gases and conserve energy.

Visit the [NRCS National website](#) for more information on how to apply for these initiatives and connect with an NRCS office near you.