

Conservation Programs & Practices for: High Tunnels

About NRCS

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) works to protect and conserve natural resources on our nation's private lands.

A part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, NRCS administers conservation programs funded primarily through the 2008 Farm Bill.

The conservation provisions in the 2008 Farm Bill will affect farmers for years to come. New provisions continue to build on the conservation gains made by U.S. citizens over the past decade. Existing programs have been simplified and new programs created to address high priority environmental protection goals.

In addition to addressing a broad range of environmental goals, the 2008 Farm Bill includes increased financial assistance for new, limited resource and socially disadvantaged farmers.



Contact your local NRCS field office for more information and assistance.

Contact NRCS:

Massachusetts USDA Service Centers

Barnstable: 508-771-6476
Greenfield: 413-772-0384
Hadley: 413-585-1000
Holden: 508-829-4477
Pittsfield: 413-443-1776
West Wareham: 508-295-5151
Westford: 978-692-1904

NRCS is conducting a three-year High Tunnel Pilot Project that began in early 2010. Agricultural producers can apply to receive financial and technical assistance to help NRCS test the conservation benefits and effects of high tunnels in practical, real-world situations. The high tunnel pilot project is offered under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) of the 2008 Farm Bill.

What is a high tunnel?

High tunnels (also known as hoop houses) are structures that modify the growing climate, allowing for tender, sensitive, and specialty crops like certain varieties of vegetables, herbs, berries, and others to grow where they otherwise may not. High tunnels are constructed of metal bow frames with wood framed ends, at least six feet in height, and are covered with one or two layers of polyethylene.

What will EQIP pay for?

NRCS provides financial assistance for high tunnels up to a maximum of five percent of one acre, or a total of 2,178 square feet. Landowners can purchase and install larger high tunnels, but NRCS will only pay for the first 2,178 square feet.

Plants must be planted in the ground or in permanent raised beds, not containerized.

Since water runoff from high tunnels can cause erosion, pooling and other environmental concerns, additional conservation practices may be installed as a condition for the installation of a high tunnel. These include:

- runoff management
- filter strips
- drain structures for water control
- critical area planting

Additional practices that might be considered as part of your conservation plan include nutrient management and integrated pest management, cover crop, and conservation crop rotation.

In 2011, farmers who were selected through the competitive EQIP process received \$4.14/square foot for the construction (materials and labor) of a high tunnel, or \$9,016 for a 30' x 72' high tunnel. The payment rate for beginning farmers, socially disadvantaged or limited resource farmers was \$4.97/square foot.



Courtesy Flats Mentor Farm



Diane Petit, NRCS



NRCS Conservation Programs for High Tunnels

Grasshopper Sparrow (Last Modified: 5/2011)

Why high tunnels?

High tunnels can lengthen the timeframe for local marketing of produce, which increases sustainability while lowering energy and transportation inputs.

An extended growing season and steady income may offer advantages to small, limited resource, and organic farmers. They can also assist producers transitioning to specialty crops.

USDA announced the pilot project under the Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food initiative. The high tunnel pilot study will help determine possible conservation benefits, such as improving plant, water and soil quality, as well as reducing disease pressure.



Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

EQIP helps promote farm and forest production by enhancing the environmental quality of soil, water, air, plants and animals.

Farmers can apply for financial and technical assistance for over 70 other conservation practices to benefit their land and operations through EQIP.

Who can apply?

- To qualify for the High Tunnel Pilot Project, you must:
 - Be an agricultural producer.
 - Have either produced or sold an annual minimum of \$1,000 worth of agricultural products.
 - Install the high tunnel on existing cultivated land.

Other considerations

- The land must currently be in agricultural production.
- Approved applicants will receive financial assistance for a high tunnel and related additional conservation practices that help achieve the expected conservation benefits or mitigate any potential negative effects from installing the high tunnel.
- The high tunnel must be purchased as a manufactured kit from an NRCS list of approved vendors, be at least six feet high and have an expected lifespan of at least four years.
- Electrical, heating or ventilation systems may be added to the high tunnel at the applicant's own expense.
- Participating growers must help evaluate the effects of high tunnels on natural resources. You must complete a short questionnaire annually about nutrients and pesticides used, crop yields and crop season dates.

How do I apply?

- Contact your local USDA Service Center to speak to one of our conservation professionals to begin the program application process.
- Information and application forms are available on our website.

When should I apply?

- Applications may be submitted anytime.
- All applications will be evaluated periodically in a competitive ranking process as funding becomes available. Ranking criteria for each program is available on our website.

Please call your local NRCS field office or visit us online to learn more.