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NRCS EQIP High Tunnels

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NRCS EQIP High Tunnels

Abstract

The brochure was developed as part of the Sustainable Agricultural Land Tenure Initiative, and provides an overview of the Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative administered by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) as part of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

Disciplines

Agriculture | Agriculture Law

an additional agreement that specifies the nature of the high tunnel as a permanent fixture or removable item or simply sets forth the parties responsibilities in relation to the improvement and ownership at the end of the lease.

Any modifications to a lease agreement to accommodate the construction of a high tunnel should clearly reference the initial lease agreement, state the intentions of both parties to supplement or modify the existing agreement, and be signed and dated by both parties.

V. HELPFUL CONTACTS

Your **Local USDA Service Center** can provide additional local and state specific information and will be your administrative resource for the application and selection process. Local Service Centers can be found at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/contact/local> or by calling (202) 720-2791.

VI. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A **Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative Fact Sheet** from NRCS is located at http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb1046338.pdf.

Beginning Farmer and Rancher Loans can be used to finance the construction of high tunnels prior to reimbursement from NRCS. Learn more at <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=fmlp&topic=bfl>.

EQIP Organic Initiative provides an additional opportunity for organic and transitioning producers to receive financial and technical assistance for a high tunnel. Find out more at http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/programs/?&cid=nrcs143_008224.

The **Missouri High Tunnel Loan Program** provides an example of available financing that can assist in the construction of a high tunnel prior to reimbursement. Information is located at <http://mda.mo.gov/abd/financial/hightunnel.php>.



LEOPOLD CENTER

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The Drake Agricultural Law Center is internationally recognized for providing opportunities to study how the legal system shapes our food system and influences the ability of the agricultural sector to produce, market and utilize agricultural products.

Cover Photo Courtesy of USDA.

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NRCS EQIP HIGH TUNNELS

A DRAKE AG LAW PRIMER



LESSON PLAN

- I. Introduction to the Program
- II. Eligibility and Participation
- III. Considerations for New and Beginning Farmers
- IV. Considerations on Leased Farmland
- V. Helpful Contacts
- VI. Additional Resources

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE EQIP HIGH TUNNEL PROGRAM

High tunnels, also referred to as hoop houses, are basically unheated greenhouses that cover a portion of farmland. Their ability to protect plants from cooler weather extends farmers' growing season for several weeks or months in the spring and fall. They come in a variety of shapes and sizes but are typically made of a metal, pvc, or wood frame and covered with a plastic sheet. High tunnels usually cost between \$4,000 and \$6,000 to construct and can be fixed or mobile.

The Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative is administered by USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) as part of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). EQIP is a voluntary program that provides financial and technical assistance for planning and implementing conservation practices on agricultural land. Landowners enter into EQIP contracts with USDA for up to 10 years.

NRCS implemented the Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative to help extend the growing season for high value crops, in an environmentally sustainable manner. High tunnels can reduce soil erosion, prevent nutrient and chemical runoff, and decrease energy use and air pollution by promoting local sources of fresh produce.

II. ELIGIBILITY, APPLICATION, & SELECTION

To be participate in the High Tunnel Initiative both the producer and the land must meet eligibility requirements for EQIP.

Producers must be engaged in agricultural production or have an interest in the agricultural production on which the high tunnel will be situated. The producer can be a tenant but must be in control of the land during the EQIP contract period, meaning a lease for a term of years that extends at least through the contract period. In addition, landowners can only participate if they provide an opportunity for the tenant producer to participate in EQIP. The land

must be in compliance with all highly erodible land and wetland conservation provisions.

Eligible producers may submit an application through their local USDA Service Center at any time. Links to service centers and applications are provided on the reverse side of this brochure. There isn't a limit on the number of high tunnels a producer can receive funding for, but the maximum land cover allowed is 2178 square feet.

Applications will be evaluated at the local level by county conservationists. The evaluation process will involve ranking applicants based on the producers ability to use the high tunnel to address the following:

- Conservation crop rotations
- Water quality protection through nutrient and pesticide management
- Retention of organic matter in the soil
- Soil conservation
- Responsible management of irrigation water

Producers will receive a higher ranking for marketing crops produced with the high tunnel locally. Additional ranking points will be granted based on the following categories:

- Within 50 miles of the site - 100 points
- Within 50 to 100 miles of the site - 50 points
- Within 100 to 150 miles of the site - 25 points

This places a high value on local marketing as the maximum points a producer can earn is set at 400.

The applications will be sent to the national office for selection. Producers will compete only against other applicants for the High Tunnel Initiative as NRCS will establish a specific amount dedicated to the Initiative.

Organic and transitioning producers can also apply for high tunnel assistance through the EQIP Organic Initiative.

III. CONSIDERATIONS FOR BEGINNING FARMERS

The program also has a particularly significant impact on beginning farmers. Many beginning farmers, particularly those lacking access to large amounts of

land, rely on local and niche markets. Extending a beginning farmers growing season and, hence, expanding their marketing opportunities can provide valuable additional revenue.

Beginning farmers, however, are also often short on capital to make improvements, such as high tunnels. This is where the EQIP Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative, as well as other NRCS programs, can be especially useful. Its important to note that selected producers will receive a reimbursement payment for the high tunnel after its completed. This could limit a beginning farmers ability to participate.

There are other programs that can provide supplemental assistance. For instance, Missouri's Department of Agriculture has developed the High Tunnel Loan Program available to producers that have applied for the Initiative. Other states have similar loan programs that are available to beginning farmers to assist with the initial cost of constructing a high tunnel. Find links on the reverse side of this brochure.

IV. CONSIDERATIONS ON LEASED FARMLAND

There are additional considerations when entering an EQIP contract on leased land. As mentioned in the eligibility section, EQIP participants on leased land must be in control of the land during participation. This means a written lease agreement with a term extending for at least the duration of the EQIP contract period.

In addition, the lease agreement should address issues involving the construction of improvements on the land. Such issues can involve receiving permission before construction, maintenance of improvements, payment of taxes and insurance on improvements, and ownership of improvements at the end of the lease term.

High tunnels come in a variety of shapes and sizes. In addition, some are easily moved from one place to another, while others may be attached to a specific location. The construction of a high tunnel should be accompanied with written clarification within the lease contract itself or incorporated into the lease with