



FACT SHEET

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Rangeland Watershed Program

U.C. Cooperative Extension and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

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The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) was established in the 1996 Farm Bill to provide a voluntary conservation program for farmers and ranchers. Nationally, EQIP provides technical, financial, and educational assistance primarily in designated priority areas. Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has leadership for EQIP. It works with the Farm Services Agency (FSA) to set the program's policies, priorities, and guidelines. Four of USDA's former conservation programs were combined in EQIP: the Agricultural Conservation Program, Water Quality Incentives Program, Great Plains Conservation Program, and the Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Program.

Funding for EQIP comes from the Federal Government's Commodity Credit Corporation, which funds several other USDA conservation programs. Eligibility is limited to persons who are engaged in livestock or agricultural production. Eligible land includes cropland, rangeland, pasture, forestland, and other farm or ranch lands where the program is delivered. Other conservation programs in the Farm Bill include Conservation Reserve Program, Wetland Conservation, Wetland Reserve Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program, and the Farmland Protection Program.

Program Priorities

Nationally, half of the funding for EQIP is targeted to livestock-related natural resource concerns and the remainder to other significant conservation priorities. In 1997 EQIP contracts

in California totaled about \$4.7 million dollars, and in 1998 EQIP contracts for conservation purposes totaled more than \$6 million dollars.

EQIP works primarily in priority areas where significant natural resource problems exist. In general, priority areas are defined as watersheds, regions, or areas of special environmental sensitivity or having significant soil, water, or related natural resource concerns. These concerns could include soil erosion, water quality and quantity, wildlife habitat, wetlands, and forest and grazing lands. These priority areas are identified through a locally led conservation process. Conservation Districts convene a local workgroup comprised of the district board members and key staff, NRCS staff, FSA county committees and key staff, Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service and other Federal, State, and local agencies interested in natural resource conservation. To ensure that the workgroups develop and implement conservation programs that fully reflect local needs and priorities, the conservation districts bring views of local interests to the workgroups. The local work group identifies program priorities and develops program priorities based on a natural resource needs assessment. Priority area proposals are submitted to the NRCS State Conservationist, who selects those areas within the State based on the recommendations from the State Technical Committee. There are several priority areas throughout California and priority concerns currently focus on water quality, air quality and salmon and steelhead habitat.

EQIP can also address additional significant statewide concerns that may occur outside designated priority areas. In the first year of the program, at least 65 percent of the funds were used in designated priority areas and up to 35 percent can be used for other significant statewide natural resource concerns. Additional emphasis is given to areas where State or local governments offer financial or technical assistance and where agricultural improvements will help meet water quality and other environmental objectives.

Conservation Plans

All EQIP activities must be carried out according to a conservation plan. Conservation plans are site-specific for each farm or ranch and can be developed by producers with help from NRCS or other service providers. Ranch water quality plans completed during the Rangeland Watershed Program's Ranch Water Quality Planning Short Courses meet the needs for a conservation plan. Producers' conservation plans should address the primary natural resource concerns. All plans are subject to NRCS technical standards adapted for local conditions and are approved by the conservation district. Producers are not obligated, but are encouraged, to develop comprehensive or total resource management plans.

Contracts

EQIP offers 5- to 10-year contracts that provide incentive payments and cost sharing for conservation practices called for in the site-specific conservation plan. Contract applications will be accepted throughout the year. NRCS conducts an evaluation of the environmental benefits the producer offers. Offers are then ranked according to previously approved criteria developed with the advice of the local work group. The FSA County Committee approves for funding the highest priority applications. Applications are ranked according to environmental benefits achieved weighted against the costs of applying the practices. Higher rankings are given to plans developed to treat priority resource concerns to a sustainable level. EQIP seeks to maximize environmental benefits per dollar spent. Total cost-share and incentive payments are limited to \$10,000 per person per year and \$50,000 over the length of the contract.

Practice Payments

Cost sharing may pay up to 75 percent of the costs of certain conservation practices, such as grassed waterways, filter strips, manure management facilities, capping abandoned wells, and other practices important to improving and maintaining the health of natural resources in the area. Incentive payments may be made to encourage a producer to perform land management practices such as nutrient management, manure management, integrated pest management, irrigation water management, and wildlife habitat management. These payments may be provided for up to three years to encourage producers to carry out management practices they may not otherwise use without the program incentive.

Eligibility

Eligibility is limited to persons who are engaged in livestock or agricultural production. Eligible land includes cropland, rangeland, pasture, forestland, and other farm or ranch lands where the program is delivered. The 1996 Farm Bill prohibits owners of large confined livestock operations from being eligible for cost-share assistance for animal waste storage or treatment facilities. However, technical, educational, and financial assistance may be provided for other conservation practices on these "large" operations. In general, USDA has defined a large confined livestock operation as an operation with more than 1,000 animal units. But, because of differences in operations and environmental circumstances across the country, the national definition of a large confined livestock operation may be amended in each State by the NRCS State Conservationist, after consultation with the State Technical Committee, and approval of the NRCS Chief.

EQIP Applications

Producers may obtain contract applications at any USDA Service Center. The applications will be accepted throughout the year. The ranking and selecting of offers of producers will occur periodically during designated periods.

NRCS, FSA, the local Extension Service, or local conservation district can provide more information. Local USDA Service Centers are listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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