



Small Farm Conservation Act of 2023 (S.2180, H.R.5354)

Lead sponsors:

Senators Michael Bennet (D-CO), Ben Ray Lujan (D-NM), Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Martin Heinrich (D-NM), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), Peter Welch (D-VT), Ron Wyden (D-OR), Angus King (I-ME), Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Jack Reed (D-RI), and John Fetterman (D-PA)

Representatives Yadira Caraveo (D-CO-08), Gabe Vasquez (D-NM-02), Elissa Slotkin (D-MI-07), and Brittany Pettersen (D-CO-07)

Background:

Most farmers and ranchers, particularly those new to farming, operate on paper-thin profit margins. United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) conservation programs, such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), support the voluntary implementation of a wide range of on-farm conservation practices. Through EQIP, participants receive cost-share and technical assistance to install or implement conservation practices on their farmland. A scaled-down version of EQIP, modeled after the Farm Service Agency's microloan program and RMA's new small farm crop insurance program, can help small farms and young farmers access EQIP funds that this group has difficulty accessing.

Young and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) farmers are excited about building on-farm resilience while feeding their communities. EQIP can help ensure that young farmers do not have to choose between meeting their bottom-line and investing in conservation to protect shared resources.

However, young farmers continue to report significant challenges in accessing USDA cost-share programs, even those specifically designed to assist them. Throughout Young Farmers' national network, young farmers and ranchers have identified two key barriers:

- **Farm Size:** While designed to be "size-neutral," studies indicate that there is a definite positive association between farm size and EQIP participation. Researchers examining EQIP in Arizona found that only 1% of small farms reported participating in EQIP, but the percentage increased for each larger farm class.¹ While this correlation may not be as strong in every state, overall, large farms are more likely to receive payments than small farms.² Small acreage farms can have a crucial role to play in protecting natural resources, such as water quality and wildlife habitat. Due

¹ Adaptation and Resilience: The Economics of Climate, Water, and Energy Challenges in the American Southwest (2012).

² GAO-14-428

to capital and land access constraints, younger farmers typically start their businesses on small acreage. Women and producers of color are also more likely to operate on fewer acres compared to other producers. Therefore, these farmers are less competitive in EQIP pools, despite the demonstrated benefit the program has on both farm viability and environmental resilience.

- **Application Process:** While USDA programs have potential to assist young and BIPOC farmers, the application process can often be prohibitive to these producers. According to Young Farmers' latest national survey of young farmers, respondents identified three major barriers to accessing USDA programs: a lack of information on programs, limited time to complete applications, and the application and reporting paperwork requirements were too much work.³ Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff often lack the time and resources to help new farmers navigate applications, and EQIP requires a complex application and long wait times to receive assistance. Because a conservation plan or application can require the same amount of time for a small farm as a large one, NRCS staff can have difficulty prioritizing projects on small farms.

Legislative Summary:

The Small Farm Conservation Act helps meet the conservation needs of young and BIPOC producers through dedicated funding and a simplified application process for small operations. The Small Farm Conservation Act creates a new subprogram of EQIP dedicated to helping these producers access valuable cost-share dollars and increasing access to technical assistance.

Specifically, the Small Farm Conservation Act will:

- Create a new subprogram within EQIP with tailored support for small farms and ranches under the median farm size or herd size for their state;
- Accept applications and provide payment on a continuous enrollment basis instead of waiting for the annual ranking period;
- Streamline the application and contract approval process for small farms and ranches to reduce the application burden for these small contracts;
- Establish a National Subprogram Coordinator and an additional Coordinator in each state to support the implementation of this new subprogram;
- Implement a minimum contract of \$2,500 for contracts awarded under the subprogram;
- Create bonus payments for producers under 50 acres who are implementing soil health practices; and
- Require the Natural Resources Conservation Service to train field staff on conservation practices tailored to small-scale producers and to conduct outreach to these farmers and ranchers.

Lotanna Obodozie
Climate Campaign Director, Young Farmers
lotanna@youngfarmers.org

Erin Foster West
Policy Coordination and Management Director,
Young Farmers
erin@youngfarmers.org

³ Sophie Ackoff, Evan Flom, Vanessa García Polanco, David Howard, Jessica Manly, Carolina Mueller, Holly Rippon-Butler, Lytisha Wyatt, "Building A Future with Farmers 2022: Results and Recommendations from the National Young Farmer Survey," National Young Farmers Coalition, August 2022, <https://www.youngfarmers.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/NationalSurveyReport22-1.pdf>.