

## 2023 Nebraska SWCS Chapter Annual Legislative/Informational Meeting

The 40<sup>th</sup> annual Legislative/Informational Meeting was held at the Denney Federal Building on January 31<sup>st</sup> 2023. Twenty-six people were in attendance, including 5 senators and 1 legislative aide, 14 SWCS members, and 3 scholarship recipients from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Rob Lawson, USDA NRCS State Conservationist, gave a presentation on the various USDA conservation programs available to landowners in Nebraska, including Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Regional Conservation Partners Projects (RCPP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). Fiscal year 2022 accomplishments were also highlighted as well as the emphasis for fiscal year 2023, including Climate Smart Agriculture, Inflation Reduction Act funding, and the Urban/Small Scale Ag funding.



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# Conservation Programs in Nebraska

State Conservationist Rob Lawson - January 31

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# NRCS – Helping People Help the Land

- **The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is USDA's primary private lands conservation agency.**
- **Help people make investments in operations to keep working lands working.**
- **Assist with making decision using objective, reliable science to improve air, water, soil, plants, and habitat.**



# NRCS Assistance



- **The Natural Resources Conservation Service offers financial and technical assistance.**
- **All assistance provided is free of charge and participation in NRCS programs is voluntary.**
- **NRCS is a non-regulatory agency.**



# NRCS Assistance



## Technical Assistance

- **Natural resource assessments.**
- **Conservation practice design.**
- **Natural resource monitoring.**
- **Follow-up of conservation practice installation.**
- **May serve as springboard for participation in financial assistance.**



# NRCS Assistance



## Financial Assistance

- Funding primarily made available through the Farm Bill.
- Conservation programs available include:
  - Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
  - Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)
  - Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)
  - Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)





# Environmental Quality Incentives Program - EQIP

A photograph of a herd of black cows grazing in a lush green field. In the foreground, there is a body of water with tall grasses growing along the edge. The background shows rolling green hills under a clear sky.

**Provides financial and technical assistance to address natural resource concerns and delivers environmental benefits such as improved water and air quality, conserved ground and surface water, reduced soil erosion and sedimentation, and improved or created wildlife habitat.**

# Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

- Through EQIP in fiscal year 2022 over \$25 million was obligated to over 930 contracts on over 400,000 acres.
- NRCS Nebraska obligated \$1.4 million for livestock deferral on impacted grazing lands through its disaster assistance for producers impacted by wildfire.



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# Top 10 Contracted Conservation Practices in Nebraska Through EQIP:

1. Cover Crop
2. Irrigation Water Management
3. Livestock Watering Facilities
4. Conservation Crop Rotation
5. Brush Management
6. Fence
7. Livestock Pipeline
8. Pumping Plant
9. Terraces
10. Water Well



# EQIP FY23 Allocations:




- **Approximately \$24 million was initially allocated to NRCS Nebraska.**
- **The funds are allocated between the following programs:**
  - Disaster = \$1,500,000
  - Source Water Protection (10%) = \$2,396,000
  - EQIP-Conservation Incentive Contracts (5%) = \$1,200,000
  - Inefficient Energy = \$25,000
- **Balance left to distribute to Local Fund Pools = \$9,994,000**
- **National Initiatives Allocations (NOTE: Included in FA initial allocation total)**
  - Joint Chiefs = \$0 (No request for FY23)
  - Water Smart = \$250,000
    - URNRD = \$250,000
    - MRNRD = \$0 (Project expired 9/30/22, No request for FY23)
  - National Water Quality Initiative = \$1,200,000
    - Bazile Creek (LCNRD, LENRD, UENRD) = \$800,000
    - Big Sandy (LBNRD) = \$200,000
    - Turkey Creek (LBBNRD) = \$200,000





# Regional Conservation Partnership Program -

A woman with dark hair in a braid, wearing a blue shirt, is shown in profile, looking at a pine tree. She is touching the needles of the tree. The background is a blurred green forest.

**Promotes coordination between NRCS and its partners to deliver conservation assistance to producers and landowners. Under partnership agreements, NRCS and its partners leverage and target their respective resources to deliver conservation assistance to producers and landowners to address priority natural resource concerns.**

# Regional Conservation Partners Projects (RCPP)

- **NRCS Nebraska has five active RCPP partner projects. Current Producer Enrollment:**
  - 57 producer contracts
  - \$1.2 million in total obligations
  - Over 17,000 Acres
  - Over \$136,000 Producer Payments
  
- **The Fiscal Year 23 National Funding Opportunity for Classic and Alternative Funding Arrangements is anticipated to be announced soon.**




# Regional Conservation Partners Projects (RCPP) Include:

- **Ogallala Aquifer and Platte River Recovery**
- **Regional Grassland Bird and Grazingland Enhancement**
- **Cropland Cover for Soil Health and Wildlife**
- **Republican Basin Conservation Partnership**



# Conservation Stewardship Program - CSP

A young green plant is in the foreground, growing in a field. In the background, a tractor with yellow wheels is visible, and several people are standing nearby. The ground appears to be covered in a dark, textured material, possibly a conservation practice like cover crops or mulch.

**Helps agricultural producers maintain and improve their existing conservation systems and adopt additional conservation activities to address priority natural resource concerns. Participants earn CSP payments for conservation performance—the higher the performance, the higher the payment.**

# Conservation Stewardship Program

- **Payment for building on existing conservation efforts while strengthening operation.**
- **5-year contract length.**
- **Voluntary conservation.**



# Popular CSP Activities:

- Prescribed Grazing
- Cover Crops
- Pest Management
- Nutrient Management
- Tree/Shrub Establishment
- Herbaceous Weed Treatment
- Pollinator seedings



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# CSP by the numbers



- **Nationally >80 million acres enrolled since 2010**
- **Current Enrollment in Nebraska to Date:**
  - 1,626 active contracts
  - Approx. \$108 million in total obligations
  - 2.4 million acres
- **During Fiscal Year 2023:**
  - 104 renewal contracts
  - 974 classic contracts
  - 46 Grassland Conservation Initiative contracts





United States Department of Agriculture

# Agricultural Conservation Easement Program - ACEP

Helps landowners, land trusts, and other entities protect, restore, and enhance wetlands, grasslands, and working farms and ranches through conservation easements.

# Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

- **Helps keep agricultural land as ag land.**
- **ACEP has 2 components:**
  - **Agricultural Land Easement Component (ALE)**
  - **Wetland Reserve Easement Component (WRE)**



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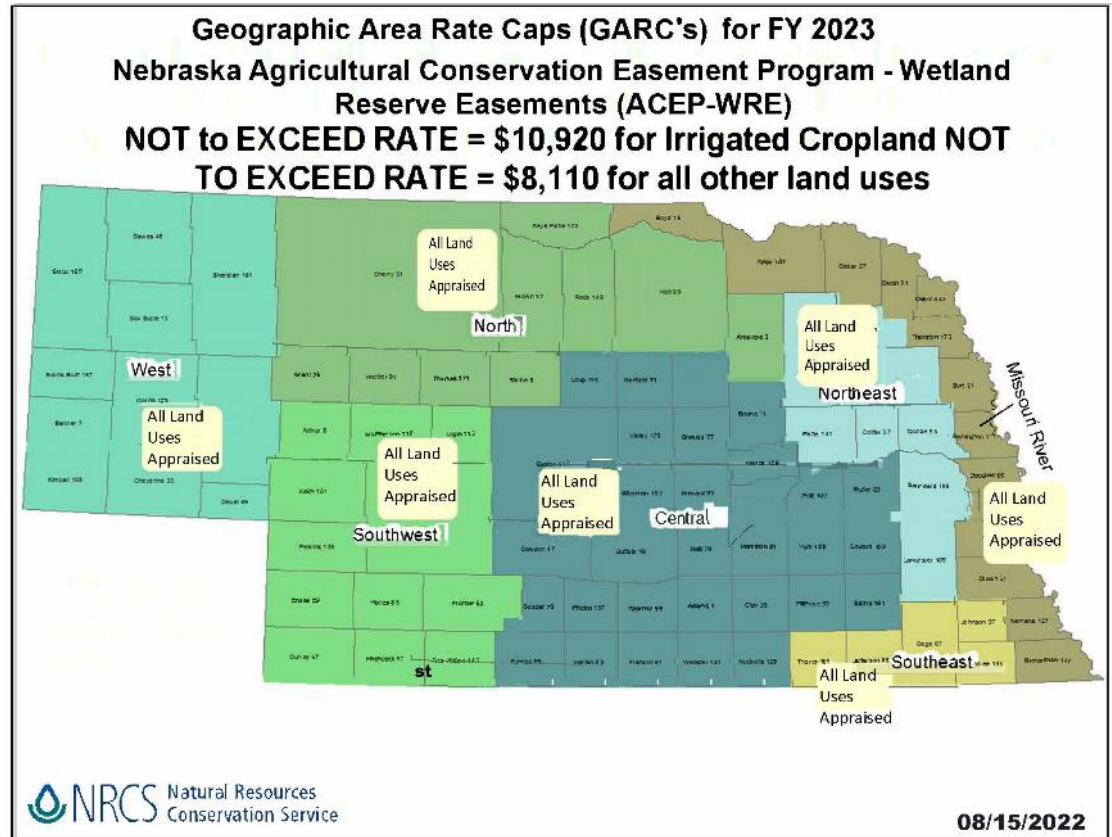
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# Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

## ACEP payment rates based on lower of:

- Fair market value minus a 10, 15, or 20% reduction (location based)
- Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC)
- Offer by landowner



# Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

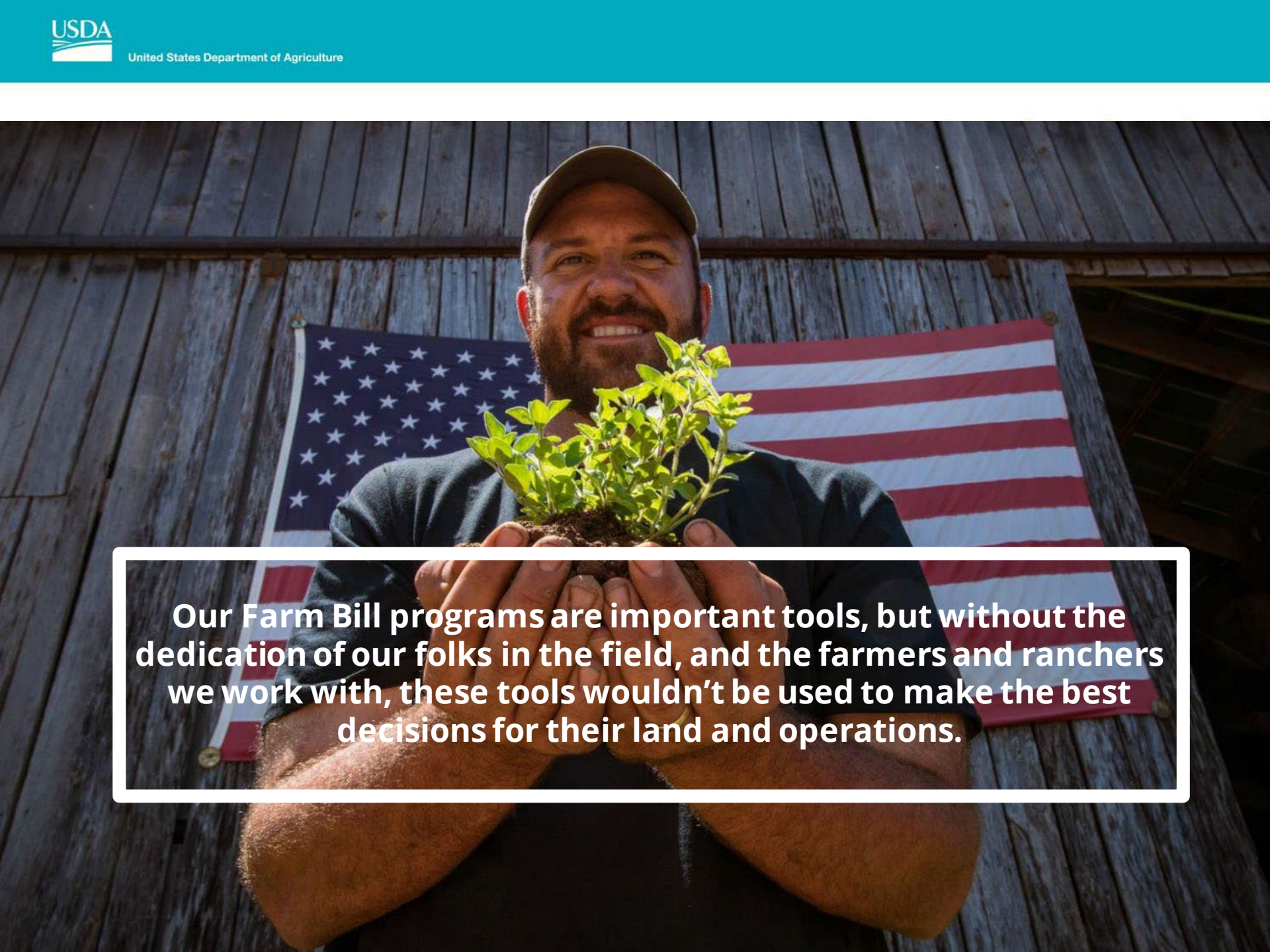
## NRCS Nebraska staff received:

- 5 applications for Wetland Reserve Easements on 645 acres
- 1 application for an Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) on 1,070 acres
- 2 applications for ALE-Grassland of Special Environmental Significance easements on 7,823 acres

## Staff are also working to finalize easements on:

- 8 Emergency Watershed Protection Program -Floodplain Easements on 1,109 acres
- 5 ACEP – Wetland Reserve Easements/Wetland Reserve Enhancement Partnership on 692 acres
- 3 ACEP – Agricultural Land Easements-Grasslands of Special Significance on 18,222 acres



A man with a beard and a baseball cap, wearing a dark t-shirt, is smiling and holding a small green seedling with soil in his hands. He is standing in front of a wooden wall with an American flag hanging behind him. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting an outdoor or well-lit indoor setting.

**Our Farm Bill programs are important tools, but without the dedication of our folks in the field, and the farmers and ranchers we work with, these tools wouldn't be used to make the best decisions for their land and operations.**

# NRCS Nebraska FY22 Accomplishments

- **Conservation plans written on over 1.4 million acres.**
- **Conservation systems applied to grazing land on over 1.2 million acres.**
- **Conservation applied to improve soil quality on over 690,000 acres.**
- **Improved irrigation water management on over 130,000 acres.**
- **Conservation applied to improve wildlife habitat on over 105,000 acres.**

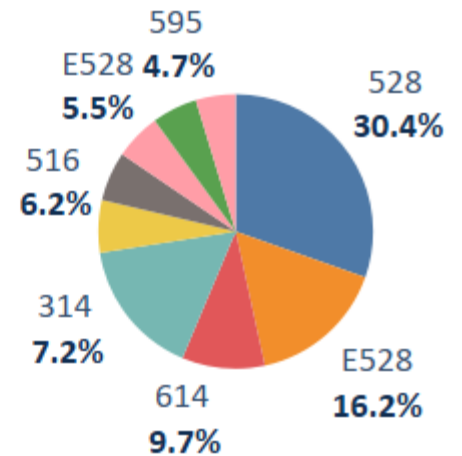


# NRCS Nebraska FY22 Accomplishments

## Top Practices

- 528 - Prescribed Grazing
- E528 - Maintaining quantity and quality of forage for animal h...
- 614 - Watering Facility
- E528 - Improved grazing management for plant productivity/...
- 314 - Brush Management
- 516 - Livestock Pipeline
- 340 - Cover Crop
- E528 - Use of body condition scoring for livestock on a monthl...
- 328 - Conservation Crop Rotation
- 595 - Integrated Pest Management (IPM)

## Percent of Top 10 Practices by Acres



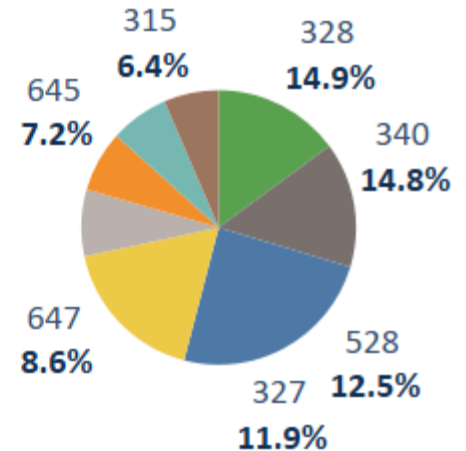


# NRCS Nebraska FY22 Accomplishments

## Top Practices

- 328 - Conservation Crop Rotation
- 340 - Cover Crop
- 528 - Prescribed Grazing
- 327 - Conservation Cover
- 449 - Irrigation Water Management
- 647 - Early Successional Habitat Development/Management
- 329 - Residue and Tillage Management, No-Till/Strip Till/Direc...
- 645 - Upland Wildlife Habitat Management
- 314 - Brush Management
- 315 - Herbaceous Weed Control

## Percent of Top 10 Practices by Count



# What's Ahead in 2023?



# Climate Smart Ag



- **NRCS is placing a specific emphasis on promoting the implementation of “climate smart ag” conservation practices.**
- **There are over 45 conservation practices that are currently considered “climate smart.”**
- **These are conservation practices that have a positive impact on mitigation climate change.**



# Climate Smart Ag



- **Examples of conservation practices that are considered climate smart include:**
  - **Cover crops**
  - **No till**
  - **Conservation Crop Rotation**
  - **Filter Strips**
  - **Forest Stand Improvement**
  - **Contour Buffer Strips**
  - **Tree/Shrub Establishment**
  - **Wetland Restoration**
- **The opportunity to apply climate smart practices will increase due to the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funding.**



# Inflation Reduction Act



- On August 16, 2022, President Biden signed the Inflation Reduction Act into law.
- It is a historic, once-in-a-generation investment and opportunity for the agricultural communities that USDA serves.
- NRCS asked for public input through a Federal Register request for information on implementation of more than \$19 billion provided by the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA).



# Inflation Reduction Act



## NRCS asked for feedback on:

- **How to best maximize benefits for climate mitigation, including targeting practices and programs that provide quantifiable reductions in greenhouse gas emissions;**
- **How to maximize, target, monitor, and quantify improvements to soil carbon, reductions in nitrogen losses, and the reduction, capture, avoidance, or sequestration of carbon dioxide, methane or nitrous oxide emissions associated with agricultural production; and**
- **How to further streamline and improve program delivery to increase efficiencies and expand program access for producers, especially underserved producers.**



# Inflation Reduction Act

- **USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will use the investments provided through IRA-funded conservation programs**
- **The Inflation Reduction Act provided unprecedented funding levels for several of the existing programs that NRCS implements.**



# Inflation Reduction Act



• The increased funding levels begin in fiscal year 2023 and rapidly build over four years, totaling these additional amounts:

- \$8.45 billion – Environmental Quality Incentives Program
- \$3.25 billion – Conservation Stewardship Program
- \$4.95 billion – Regional Conservation Partnership Program
- \$1.4 billion – Agricultural Conservation Easement Program
- \$1 billion – Conservation Technical Assistance
- \$100 million – Administrative Costs
- \$300 million – Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Monitoring





# Urban/Small Scale Ag



- **NRCS Nebraska is expanding its assistance to urban and small-scale ag producers.**
- **Recent activities include:**
  - **Created a Small-Scale Urban Ag (SSUA) sub committee**
  - **Developed a Small Scale and Urban Ag EQIP practice list with over 60 practices including supporting practices**
  - **Small-Scale and Urban Ag EQIP applications went from 11 in FY 22 to well over 60 for FY23**



# Urban/Small Scale Ag



## •Recent activities include (continued):

- Over 30 of our current Small-Scale Urban Ag EQIP applications are for non-legacy beginning farmers
- We have signed up over 100 new customers (new farm numbers issued) across the state for Small-Scale Urban Ag
- Over 150 new underserved individuals and groups have been engaged for Small-Scale Urban Ag
- We have created the Nebraska Urban Ag and Conservation Council (NUACC), a group of NRCS employees as subject matter experts for Small-Scale Urban Ag



# Conservation at Work



- The “Conservation at Work” video series landowners applying conservation practices on their operations with the of NRCS.
- Over 50, 90-second feature individual conservation practices from the perspective of the landowners applying them.
- This series is a great way to really see what NRCS is all about and the work we do every day.
- It’s not about programs, it’s about people.



# Conservation at Work



YouTube

Search



## Conservation — AT WORK —



Natural Resources Conservation Service

0:01 / 1:48



### Conservation at Work

TheUSDANRCS - 55 / 57



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Water and Sediment Control Basin (Catch Basin)

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Water Well

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53



Watering Facility

TheUSDANRCS

54



Wetland Reserve Easements

TheUSDANRCS

▶



Wetland Restoration

TheUSDANRCS

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Windbreak Renovation

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57



Conservation at Work Trailer

TheUSDANRCS

- There are currently over 55 videos featuring farms and ranches in over 25 states.



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# Conservation — **AT WORK** — Video Series

**REAL STORIES. REAL SUCCESSES. REAL QUICK.**



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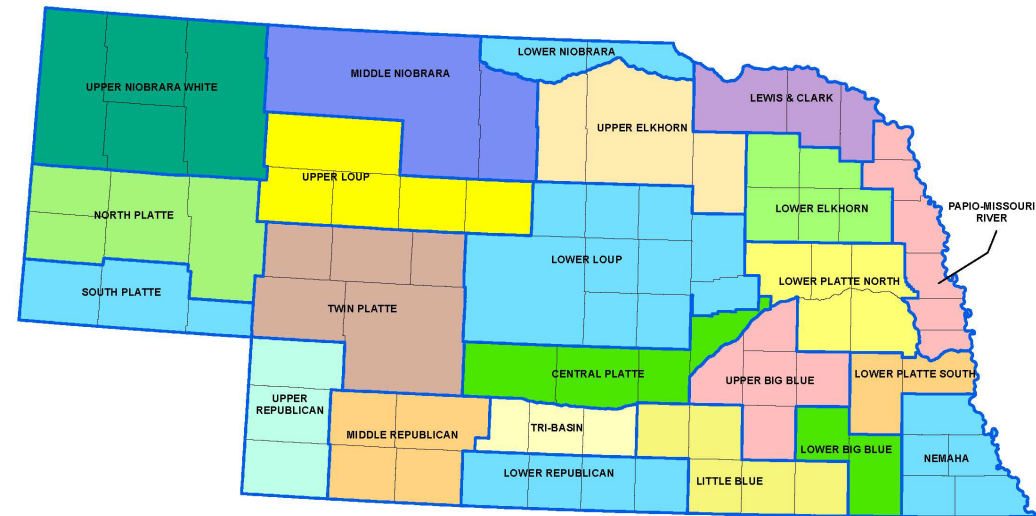
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# FY2023 Local Work Group Meetings

- Meetings completed in February/March 2023

- Local Work Group Agenda items:

- Priority Resource Concerns
- Fund Pools – Ranking Tools – Screening Tools
- Practice Payment Schedule
- Local Issues





**Questions?**

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