



ACCESSING NRCS SERVICES AND BENEFITS:

The Challenges Faced by Historically Underserved
Farmers and Ranchers and Recommendations for
Improving Their Experience with USDA's Natural
Resources Conservation Service

June 2022 - April 2024



(USDA) Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)
Outreach and Partnerships Division
Cooperative Agreement (#NR223A750003C066)
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This report was produced by Rural Advancement Foundation International - USA (RAFI), written by Jaimie McGirt, Lisa Misch, and Dr. Carolina Alzate-Gouzy and edited by Susan Alan and Beth Andrachick Hauptle. Contributions were made by producers in the Southeast U.S., Puerto Rico, and U.S. Virgin Islands as well as Project Partners: Alliance for Agriculture, Botanical Bites and Provisions, Fountain Heights Farm, Virgin Islands Good Food, Green Heffa Farms, and Mr. Jacob Crandall.



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Table of Contents

Purpose of This Report	1
Background	3
Methodology	4
Summary of Key Findings	5
Challenges and Recommendations	9
Conclusion	71
Appendix	



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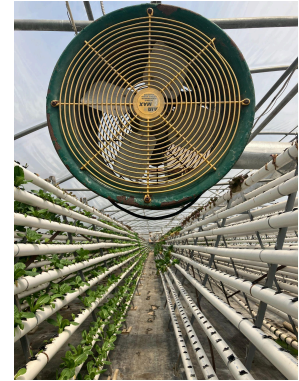
Purpose of this report

NRCS programs and services are currently not being accessed equitably by large numbers of Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers (HUFR). As a result of a two-year project providing outreach and technical assistance to this demographic of agricultural producers in the Southeast U.S., Puerto Rico, and U.S Virgin Islands, RAFI found several factors impacting accessibility of NRCS services for this demographic.

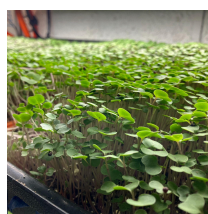
This report provides a summary of the barriers and challenges RAFI and Project Partners identified that producers are experiencing along with recommendations for improved farmer experiences and outcomes. These findings are intended to inform the NRCS of improvements needed to operations and programs, to increase Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers' access to NRCS financial and technical assistance. This report may also be used by other service providers who want to increase Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers' access to NRCS.



One acre of specialty vegetables are planted in successions both in-field and under "caterpillar tunnels" on this NC micro-farm, where numerous conservation practices have an ecological and economic impact for the Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers.



“Working with you and RAFI, there’s just a little more confidence and comfort than doing it alone through the whole process. I’ve written government grants and still the NRCS process was intimidating to me. It helped me understand a little bit when I learned from you that we have to meet technical criteria and there have to be positive environmental outcomes, but I wouldn’t have had the confidence and wherewithal to see it through without assistance.”
—Diversified crop and livestock producer, North Carolina



Background

There are various reasons for the gap between desired outcomes and actual experiences of small-scale and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) producers regarding NRCS programs. This report brings together RAFI's technical assistance experience, data analysis from producers' assessments about their experiences with NRCS, and producers' shared stories.

The goal of RAFI's two-year Conservation Resources for Resilient Farms project was to expand the delivery of NRCS conservation services to small-scale, BIPOC producers in the Southeast U.S., Puerto Rico, and the U.S Virgin Islands.

RAFI equipped project staff and external Project Partners with the training necessary to provide localized outreach, education, and individualized technical assistance regarding NRCS programs. Outreach to producers was made through a combination of trainings, workshops, webinars, written materials, and online content.



RAFI Project Technical Assistance Providers visit Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers and aspiring producers in the Southeast U.S. and U.S. Virgin Islands, listening to their experience with NRCS, observing the application of conservation practices or resource concerns, and/or helping determine their eligibility for NRCS assistance or alternative means of assisting their needs.

Methodology

In addition to RAFI staff, six Project Partners were involved in this project, providing communications and outreach support as well as in-region technical assistance (TA). The challenges and recommendations included in this report were identified by RAFI and Project Partners using a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches for gathering feedback and data. Project Partners included:

- ◆ *Alliance for Agriculture, Puerto Rico*
- ◆ *Botanical Bites and Provisions, Virginia*
- ◆ *Green Heffa Farms, North Carolina*
- ◆ *Fountain Heights Farm, Alabama*
- ◆ *Jacob Crandall, North Carolina*
- ◆ *Virgin Islands Good Food, United States Virgin Islands*

Conservation Assessments - The Conservation Assessment was a voluntary survey, conducted in 2022-2023 by RAFI and Project Partners, in both online and hard copy formats. Producers were asked 43 questions related to their demographics and farm characteristics, as well as their history, successes, and challenges with applying for on-farm conservation practices. 225 responses were received. Reference Appendix Charts 1-3.

Producer Feedback via Technical Assistance (TA) Cases - 326 producers received one-on-one TA over the course of the project. TA occurred via emails, phone calls, and site visits. Through these interactions, RAFI and Project Partners captured producers' challenges and successes. They also kept track of commonalities in experiences.

Project Technical Assistance (TA) Provider Feedback - Along with relaying critical feedback from producers they supported, Project TA Providers also communicated the challenges, benefits, and overall impact of Cooperative Agreement funding in supporting local producers with individualized TA.

NRCS Educational Events - RAFI and Project Partners hosted several virtual and in-person events focused on increasing producers' awareness of NRCS and conservation practices. Producers often provided important feedback on NRCS during such events. We also collected evaluation data post-events.

Listening Sessions - In April 2024 RAFI hosted two virtual listening sessions for producers: one held in English (27 attendees) and one in Spanish (16 attendees). The goal of the listening sessions was to gather producer feedback on NRCS challenges and recommendations that had been identified over the course of the two-year project. Feedback included spoken testimonies, poll responses, and notes from small group conversations. A third in-person focus group was hosted in the U.S. Virgin Islands by Virgin Islands Good Food.

Summary of Key Findings

1

Small-scale and Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers who proactively manage their impact on the natural resources of their working lands are insufficiently receiving NRCS services and benefits.

Producers who completed RAFI's Conservation Assessment and/or requested TA from RAFI and Project Partners overwhelmingly attested to their interest and commitment to natural resource conservation on their crop, pasture, range, or forest land but many reported not receiving NRCS services or experienced challenges when requesting services and benefits. See Appendix Charts 1 & 2.

Producers who have successfully addressed resource concerns in their land use areas and express interest in further enhancements reported feeling like they do not receive full benefits of Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and are not aware of nor directed to apply to the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

While the Agency invites producers of all sizes and management styles, regardless of location, to apply, RAFI finds the Agency is insufficiently serving sustainable, regenerative, and agroecological producers due to:

1. The Agency's history of servicing mid to large-scale farms with greater number or more severe resource concerns
2. Lack of exposure to small-scale and urban farms
3. Inadequate training for Field Staff as shown by their difficulty conducting on-farm resource inventory assessments and lack of awareness of small-scale conservation practice scenarios available in their state's Payment Schedule
4. Lack of "buy-in" and knowledge of CSP by experienced and new NRCS staff, Cooperators, and NRCS partners

2

New or improved customer service training and protocols are needed to best serve small-scale and Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers and successfully enroll them in the appropriate NRCS Program(s).

If producers receive poor service once they get to the Agency's doors — whether poor quality is a result of understaffing or poor training — conditions “bottleneck” and the result is frustrated producers, frustrated Agency field staff, and often a severed relationship. The outreach efforts then become a moot effort.

RAFI and Project Partners acknowledge that some small-scale and Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers do have positive experiences with the Agency. These cases are noteworthy, should be commended, and elevated to Staff, Cooperators, and NRCS Partners as positive working examples for state and district teams. See Appendix “Featured “Success Story.”

3

Individualized technical assistance funded by NRCS Cooperative Agreements is essential for increasing small-scale and Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers' access to NRCS services and benefits.

Technical Assistance (TA) from RAFI and Project Partners not only resulted in more producers receiving NRCS services and benefits but improved producers' knowledge, confidence, and overall experience with the Agency. Furthermore, TA ensured that Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers received conservation plans more aligned with their goals and financial needs and higher contract values, when obligated. Many District Conservationists and other field staff reported that producers served by Project TA Providers were better prepared for the conservation planning process (sometimes streamlining their responsibilities), and to obtain a contract with their on-farm obligations.

“Thank you so much. I don’t know how anyone does all of this alone. What y’all have done with me is so important.” —Beginning poultry producer, Arkansas

During TA provision, producers often reported having (1) better understanding of NRCS’ purpose and methods of supporting producers, (2) improved understanding of NRCS processes, and (3) increased confidence through TA support.

RAFI attributes these improvements to the quality of TA given to producers. Project TA Providers had shared values of listening to producers’ experiences, keen awareness of small-scale and Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers’ strengths and needs, personal/professional experience with the Agency, and training for TA provision at the beginning of the Conservation Resources for Resilient Farms Project.

“If they had explained it the way you just did, I would be in a totally different place.”
—Beginning vegetable producer, Georgia

“I have to make sure people’s expectations come back down to earth.”
—Norysell Massanet, Project TA Provider, Puerto Rico

4

Generalized outreach is insufficient for increasing small-scale and Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers’ engagement and success with NRCS.

While outreach information about NRCS does make its way to farmers, we found it too generalized and broad to give Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers enough success. Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers will have increased awareness and confidence with tailored outreach materials. Outreach — using various communications channels, attending conferences, and hosting educational events — needs to be:

1. Tailored to the producer and their size/style of production

2. Regionally and culturally appropriate
3. Considerate of the history of Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers, particularly BIPOC producers with the USDA
4. Offered with language accessibility (translation and interpretation in Spanish).

Challenges and Recommendations

The following section summarizes the eight categories of challenges identified as restricting Historically Underserved Farmers' and Ranchers' access to NRCS services and programs. With each challenge, recommendations are provided to improve producers' experience and overall success.

Eight Challenge Categories

1. Awareness of NRCS as a resource is still developing.
2. Many producers do not understand the purpose of NRCS and the Agency is not fully addressing producer's needs.
3. The NRCS process: protocols, communication, and transparency.
4. Experiencing Poor Service and Disparities in Servicing.
5. Confusing Communications.
6. Inadequate services provided by NRCS field staff and Technical Service Providers (TSP's).
7. Affording the cost-share: Why the current payment rates are not enough.
8. Cooperators' relationships with NRCS Staff are not guaranteed but have to be fostered.

While this report focuses on challenges and needed improvements, that doesn't take away from the existing positive efforts from the Agency and individual staff. RAFI and Project Partners observed great improvements from NRCS over the course of this project and believe our recommendations may further improve programs and operations for small-scale and Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers, especially Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

Challenge 1: Awareness of NRCS as a resource is still developing.

As with most USDA resources and services, public awareness is always a challenge and is often the first hurdle an agency tries to overcome. RAFI's project findings demonstrate that awareness is complex and seems affected by (1) the outlets in which Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers receive information, (2) producers' mistrust of information or the Agency, and, (3) the quality, accuracy, and timing of information.

Analysis of RAFI's Conservation Assessment results indicates that about half of producers surveyed had at least some awareness that government resources for conservation enhancement were available to them; only 22% were unaware. For those who were at least somewhat aware, 60% of mainland, Puerto Rico, and U.S. Virgin Islands and producers were specifically aware of NRCS. (See Chart 1 below).

Awareness of government resources was generally higher in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands than in the mainland U.S., but awareness of NRCS specifically was lower in both Caribbean Islands.

Level of Producer Awareness	Total	Mainland	Puerto Rico	U.S. Virgin Islands
Producers not aware that government resources for conservation enhancement were available to them	22%	26%	15%	18%
Producers with limited or little awareness that government resources were available to them for on-farm conservation efforts	51%	48%	56%	36%
Producers who know what "NRCS" is	60%	63%	58%	55%
Producers who have requested assistance from NRCS prior to this project	40%	42%	38%	33%

Chart 1: Producers' level of awareness of government resources for on-farm conservation efforts.

Source: RAFI Conservation Assessment and Farmer TA Intake

Additional data from the Conservation Assessment illustrating producers' viewpoints related to their awareness, perceived access, and involvement with NRCS to date can be referenced in Appendix Chart 1.

From both the Conservation Assessment responses and observations in the field, RAFI noted that there is high awareness of NRCS services among Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers and that NRCS has enhanced its efforts to better serve Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers. These enhancements include (1) establishing higher payment rates for Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers, (2) creating distinct ranking pools to guarantee selection of high-ranking applicants, and (3) creating educational and promotional materials for Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers' customers and all three have made a difference with customers obtaining financial and technical assistance.

Even with these positive indications of NRCS awareness, RAFI identified areas where Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers' awareness and understanding of NRCS could be improved.

Challenge 1a: Awareness is affected by the outlets from which information is shared.

National Headquarters or State Leadership might communicate to producers:

- There are funding opportunities to help your farm
- There is more funding available for Working Lands programs than ever before
- "This is your agency, Please apply!"

Producers' perceive this communication to mean:

- There are definite funds to help my farm
- I can't pass up this funding available, there's so much of it
- "I'm qualified to apply"

Outreach Events and Conferences

RAFI and Project Partners attended a wide array of producer-serving conferences and events and have seen that various USDA state-level leadership are making concerted efforts to increase awareness of NRCS services and benefits. RAFI's observation was that while this general welcome from a state leader feels important to have on the agenda, there was often a missed opportunity to provide enough information and directives so that producers could later request specific assistance from their local field office. We further noted that, post-event, when the producer contacted their local office, they did not



RAFI Farmers of Color Network members and guests attend an Atlanta urban farm tour where urban growers demonstrate their micro- and small-scale management styles to aspiring and beginning BIPOC producers.

always get the same feeling of welcome which led to a decrease in interest or trust in the Agency.

Press Releases and Newsletters

Other communications from the national or state offices such as press releases and newsletters announcing new initiatives and programs, available funding, and the latest application cycles are another sign of NRCS leadership's desire to increase producers' awareness. These announcements frequently direct interested producers to visit or contact their local USDA Service Center/Field Office.

These announcements can be beneficial, however, there is a timing issue of when the announcement is made and when Field Office staff are trained and equipped to provide access to the new services.

Producers receiving these communications reported that Field Staff were frequently unaware of the new information and unable to direct them to next steps. RAFI finds that when new information was specifically directed to Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers, and their local office could not share more information, Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers felt poorly serviced and often discriminated against. BIPOC producers frequently voiced the feeling that their local NRCS Field Office was intentionally withholding information about new initiatives, programs, or funding.

While Field Staff often communicated they have not received training on the new information yet, some responded curtly that they can't help the producer as requested.

"Nobody's told us anything so I can't help you with that."

—NC NRCS Field Office employee

Receiving no details or a clear explanation of why, producers reported leaving these conversations feeling confused, disappointed, and sometimes discriminated against.

The "one-size-fits-all" approach to information delivery, whether online or in person, too often fails to consider the specific context or timing needs of the audience, thereby reducing the effectiveness of the outreach efforts.

Challenge 1b: Awareness is affected by mistrust in information or the Agency.

NRCS is not the same agency it was 60 years ago, much less a decade ago. However, from interactions with field offices in 2022-2024, it was unclear to what extent local staff were aware of the history of disparities in servicing and thus the history of mistrust in USDA among socially disadvantaged producers.

This mistrust has and can lead to Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers' self-exclusion from NRCS services, especially among Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, due to (1) feelings of resentment or disbelief based on the historical track record, or (2) reluctance, since there has been no prior experience or successful experience with NRCS among family or peers.

*"I started going to farm events and conferences. I was seeing these great NRCS resources, but every farmer in my county says don't call [the county] USDA."
— Beginning pastured pig producer, Washington State*

These factors of mistrust that affect awareness of today's version of the Agency still exist today, and still drive mistrust among some producers.

Challenge 1c: Awareness is affected by the quality, accuracy, and timing of information.

RAFI finds that too little information or misinformation given to producers becomes a detriment to both the Agency and the producer. Producers repeatedly told Project Technical Assistance (TA) Providers that factual, more detailed, and well-timed information is needed and that the information provided by their TA Provider was often far more helpful than what they received from NRCS itself.

RAFI acknowledges that each state's NRCS office operates autonomously, making program and services information state-specific and often very nuanced and easy to confuse with information they have learned from peers or offices in other states. However, producers reported receiving misinformation (or not receiving critical information) from their own local office, which not only impacted their awareness but also their relationship with the Agency.

Misinformation — Project TA Providers frequently witnessed or heard NRCS field staff and NRCS partners like Soil and Water Conservation District and Cooperative Extension staff and ACES contractors share misinformation about NRCS services and benefits. This often included hearing service providers say that to qualify for financial assistance, producers had to meet minimum requirements such as years in operation, minimum acreage, or minimum income from farm sales. Sometimes misinformation was shared about application ranking deadlines.

“The farmer told me that when she contacted her NRCS Soil Conservationist to ask about the ranking date she saw published online, he first told her that it wasn't true so she sent him a screenshot of the information on the state website. He then said ‘it must be a mistake on the website.’”

—Jaimie McGirt, Project TA Provider

TA Provider Testimony: Misinformation is Defeating & Misleading

A Project TA Provider attending a North Carolina Extension-sponsored event reported hearing a Soil and Water Conservation District agent tell a group of beginning and established BIPOC producers that NRCS “requires three years in operation, minimum acreage size, and at least \$3,000 in annual farm income.” The TA Provider noticed that the producers' enthusiasm visibly waned upon hearing the news. Producers murmured, “Then what’s the point asking for help?” The TA Provider later wondered, “What would have happened differently if accurate and more detailed information had been shared? What if that Agent had said instead: “To qualify for NRCS assistance, you will need to have established crops on the site where you would install a high tunnel, and your crops have to be affected by heat, frost, or pests.” Those BIPOC producers would know right then and there if they could request a high tunnel next week or next year.

Withheld Information* — More prevalent than misinformation, Project TA Providers reported that NRCS Field Staff often omitted critical information, leaving producers with more questions than answers and a feeling that information was being withheld. Producers expressed and Project TA Providers observed that even national or state webpages and factsheets omitted important information, giving producers insufficient details about important processes and timelines. The producers often kept their questions to themselves, and often reached out to the TA Provider for clarity or answers. When

clarifying information was given by a TA Provider, producers reported feeling confused and disappointed, wondering why the agency was not more transparent and communicative. Regardless of whether the information was left out intentionally or unintentionally by their local office, producers felt like the absence of information was intentional and discriminatory.**

**Sections 2 and 3 of this report demonstrate the information often left out of discussion between NRCS Staff and Historically Underserved Farmer and Ranchers, and the effect of such on the producers.*

***Section 4 states RAFI's understanding of disparities in servicing and shares producers' experiences.*

In several cases, producers reported going to other county offices to get their primary information or to get a second opinion.

“Reception in [the NRCS office one county over] versus [my county office] is a night and day difference.” —Beginning pastured pig producer, Washington State

RAFI found that clarity around state batching/ranking dates was the type of critical information sometimes withheld from producers. The Agency tells producers they may “apply anytime,” however, this communication does not inform producers of internal application processing timelines and how entering that timeline at the right point could result in a contract being awarded in six to nine months versus sixteen months. Producers frequently reported how important it was to learn about their state’s batching/ranking dates and expressed gratitude to Project Partners for publicizing the batching/ranking date in their state. Project TA Providers reported that many producers were unaware that batching/ranking dates are important deadlines, and that the Agency reviews applications in batches until funding is exhausted in that fiscal year.

Producers’ engagement with the Agency often diminishes after misinformation is shared or withheld. The impact is lost financial opportunity for Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers. Even if they later receive correct information, Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers’ trust in the Agency is now broken or at least affected and they often wonder if more poor servicing will come further down the road.

1: Recommendations to Address Challenge 1 — Awareness

“The more I farm and the more conversations I have with other farmers the more I learn about what is really available to us. And to be fair, as it often goes with stewards of color, we are out here practicing good stewardship whether or not dollars and some cents are thrown our way. It is evident though that there is a bit of a bureaucratic issue here in that the land access piece for diversified farms like mine doesn't match up with available funding given that there is one number being shared by many farms. I will keep doing what I am doing, and maybe things will catch up... eventually.”

—Specialty Crop Producer, Maryland

A. Customize Information

1. NRCS Cooperators plan customized events for specific producer audiences in order to share information most relevant to them.
 - a. RAFI hosted events tailored to producers' type of operation and expressed goals. One event provided hands-on experience. Examples of customized events held by RAFI included:
 - i. “Conservation on Grazing Land and Cost-Share Opportunities,” which emphasized practices most common for livestock producers and silvopasture as an emerging management strategy and approved NRCS conservation practice.
 - ii. “High Tunnel Raising,” where a group of producers assisted one operation in building their high tunnel model that is newly cost-shareable in many states.
2. At large farm conferences, request that NRCS state leadership provide contextualized information to participants, including:
 - a. the Agency's need to address resource concerns and/or incentivize practices already addressing resource concerns.
 - b. Advantages for Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers and what the agency will do to provide equitable service, and
 - c. information that guides producers in the process, timeline, any funding priorities, and awareness of unique climate-smart practices.
3. At mid-size or small farm events, host more informative or interactive sessions or breakouts to better guide producers in the three points named above.

4. NRCS presenters provide information specific to the topics of farm events.
 - a. If the event is held for graziers, provide information specific to grazing management.
 - b. Educate participants on newer or less known grazing management strategies like establishing silvopasture, and NRCS's financial assistance avenues for grazing practices.
5. NRCS creates outreach materials that are customized for various circumstances, and state offices customize content unique to their state.
 - a. Offer tailored flyers or brochures for row crop producers, graziers, small-scale diversified producers, and producers wanting to improve wildlife habitat.



RAFI hosted a "Resource Rodeo" event for BIPOC producers to spend time with NRCS staff and completing eligibility forms with RAFI's TA assistance.

B. Understand and Address Mistrust*

"So many organizations get USDA funding to support small farmers and it doesn't ever benefit us. But RAFI does what it says it's going to do." —Micro-scale specialty crop producer, Georgia

1. National and State NRCS need to continue offering Cooperative Agreements to producer-serving organizations with established trust and rapport among Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers.
2. Increase the number of first-time contracts given to Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers and center the overall customer experience. Good experiences with the Agency will increase the likelihood of return participation and positive word of mouth.

**Reference Section 3 and 4 for further recommendations on building or rebuilding trust between producer and Agency.*

C. Provide Accurate and Quality Information

"I think the key is to give visibility to actual examples of practices." —Producer in Puerto Rico

1. Train at least one staff person in every Service Center to provide excellent intake services for first-time inquiries and require a follow-up protocol to ensure producer inquiries are resolved.
2. Adopt or enforce a no tolerance policy for misinformation given to producers.
3. NRCS partners such as Soil and Water Conservation Districts and Cooperative Extensions receive yearly training.
 - a. Share what producers should expect from NRCS, myths/misconceptions, and any local nuances that might affect services provided.
4. Continue to hire new Outreach Coordinator positions in each state and strive to hire former field staff adept in customer service skills for this position. This person, with knowledge of producers' experiences, can not only develop improved outreach materials and represent NRCS at producer events but also improve the rapport of the Agency and visit producers experiencing challenges with accessing NRCS.



NC NRCS Outreach Coordinator and former District Conservationist Diana Irizarry visits with a NC forest-raised pork producer to learn about their holistic land management and qualifications for CSP.

Changes in Motion

One example of improved information sharing is NRCS' announcements of state ranking dates. In just two years, RAFI observed some improvements by NRCS to publicize ranking dates and make the information easier to find on the national Agency website. North Carolina's NRCS Public Relations Specialist proactively communicated ranking deadlines to RAFI to ensure Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers were aware of the coming deadlines. RAFI and Project Partners' communication of Southeast states and Caribbean Area ranking dates to network and TA case contacts led to an increase in applications with many of the applicants successfully receiving contracts.

Challenge 2: Many producers do not understand the purpose of NRCS and the Agency is not fully addressing producers' needs

"So it's like you have to create a problem for NRCS to help you fix it? That doesn't make any sense. I want to do it the right way now." —Diversified livestock producer, North Carolina

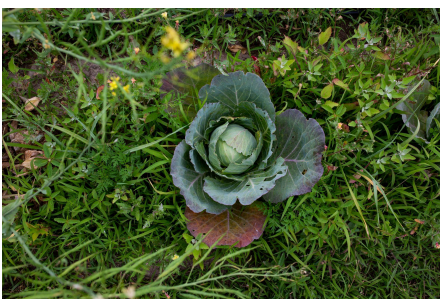
"It is very important to understand the agency's mission, to join forces in the right way. Expectations are not aligned with the services offered by the agency." —Producer, Puerto Rico

Many producers requested RAFI and Project Partners' TA to access (1) EQIP financial assistance for critical infrastructures on their small-scale farms, and (2) EQIP assistance for long term management practices and agroecological enhancements that benefit their landscape and beyond. Only a small handful of producers were aware that the agency could financially reward their existing conservation efforts and further support their conservation goals through the incentivizing and enhancement-focused program Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

"Does there have to be a problem?"
—Beginning producer,
North Carolina

RAFI recognizes that resource concerns, or problems, must be present and evaluated, and NRCS will only provide financial assistance if the producer can yield or has yielded conservation results through the installation of NRCS-approved conservation practices. RAFI trained Project TA Providers to understand NRCS's need for existing resource concerns and to hear producers' reasons for approaching NRCS for support.

During the TA intake process, TA Providers deduced that most producers were (1) not aware they needed to discuss their farm needs with NRCS from a deficit standpoint, and (2) there needed to be a clear, inventoried problem on the farm for NRCS to process their EQIP application into the ranking process. The willingness of NRCS Field Staff to work with the producer to identify these resource concerns varied greatly.



Small-scale farms may have fewer or smaller occurrences of certain resource concerns (e.g. Poor Plant Productivity and Health, Compaction, or Aggregate Instability) but the successful inventory of existing concerns will determine eligibility for financial assistance and a positive outcome with conservation practices implementation.

RAFI finds that the Agency is far more adept in identifying and assessing the most prominent resource concerns.

In addition, RAFI also finds that NRCS Field Staff infrequently and insufficiently recognize conservation practices that producers independently put in place. In such cases when previous resource concerns are already improved by the producer (such as improvements to a buffer area or wildlife habitat) and would be strong candidates for CSP, we observed extremely low rates of the Agency recommending that they participate, thus barring producers from the financial benefits of this incentive-based program.

The Agency's interest in the farm operation is to mitigate resource concerns, but this interest is too little communicated and little known to most producers. This gap effectively results in lower rates of small-scale and Historically Underserved Farmer and Rancher participation in NRCS programs.

Challenge 2a: Perceptions and realities of NRCS's purpose vary greatly

RAFI and Project TA Providers find that the purpose of NRCS according to producers often differs from the purpose of NRCS according to NRCS.

Testimony: A PR Producer Calls for More Education on NRCS's Purpose

"I understand the issue is education. Both state and federal agencies must make an effort — NRCS in this case — so that people understand what NRCS does and its purpose — because this [misunderstanding] is typical in Puerto Rico. At least nine to 11 entities offer services to producers and each one has a different purpose. Obviously, if you haven't built your agriculture project yet, NRCS won't give any type of assistance. They can recommend but they can't tell you what to do. They won't provide you money if you don't have a real conservation problem with soil, energy, [etc.]. Possibly in the process [of starting], other entities can offer this service, also there are private services that can make suggestions. But when you start your agricultural project, that is when the USDA joins the process, assessing what you have done on your farm and suggesting improvement actions. So that is my point with education, 'What is NRCS' purpose? It is an Agency responsibility: that the producer understands what is the purpose and [what are] the programs. I have been farming for more than 25 years; producers have an expectation of being helped with this and the Agency can't do it and then the conclusion is that the Agency is not good, or didn't want to help. But it is a matter of education."

Grant or Cost-share Contracts? For some producers, NRCS EQIP is thought of as a grant program which alleviates some of the costs of enhancing specific areas of their operation. Producers requesting TA were almost always unaware that Field Staff's assessment of resource concerns must qualify producers for assistance, essentially justifying their application of U.S. tax-dollars to an individual or entity.

Critical Infrastructure or Environmental Mitigation? While it's true that EQIP financial assistance can reduce the cost of enhancements for producers, the Agency's Field Staff have to first and foremost inventory resource concerns and determine how the application of cost-shared conservation practices would create measurable improvements on the farm.

The most popular practices that producers requested TA guidance with included (1) Fencing, (2) High Tunnel System, (3) Water Well (and associated practices), and (4) Prescribed Grazing. Vegetative Barriers for Erosion Control (for the purpose of planting vetiver for erosion control) were also highly sought in Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands.

However, when speaking with producers about their current management practices, land use needs, and long term goals, Project TA Providers realized that most were unaware of the full spectrum of cost-share support NRCS offers. Nor did they report receiving much guidance from NRCS regarding the full advantages beyond single pieces of key infrastructure.

Beginning producers have a specific

perception of NRCS assistance.

RAFI found that Beginning and micro or small-scale producers are especially interested in seeking out NRCS support. Such producers eagerly attend farm conferences, field days, and events where they see demonstrations of NRCS conservation practices. With the encouragement they receive during such events plus the assumption that NRCS simply helps with key infrastructure, it cements their perspective that NRCS is solely a farm-bolstering resource, and not as a “resource-concerned” Agency.



Gravel beds to support an Irrigation Reservoir, a conservation practice cost-shared in an EQIP contract in the Bordeaux region of St. Thomas, USVI. The cost of the practice far exceeded the cost-share but will improve the producer's reliable water supply for fruit tree irrigation.

Through RAFI's TA process, we found that producers viewed these popular practices as critical infrastructure more than the resource-conserving installations they really are.

Challenge 2b: “Resource concern” is an unrecognized phrase for producers seeking NRCS assistance

Producers who contact the agency without this knowledge of NRCS's need for resource concern assessment (or even the language used) have far less success with their local Field Staff. These producers often do not reach the conservation planning phase of NRCS assistance and thus feel rejected before they ever apply for financial assistance.

“I heard some Field Staff say that it is the farmer's responsibility to show them what they need, that they're not going to go see all parts of the farm and share what else NRCS might do. One said, 'I'm not going to go out of my way to find concerns.' Only a small handful of NRCS staff would help the producer who was looking for specific assistance “reverse-engineer” their goal into a necessary resource concern that the Agency can accept.” —Project TA Provider

Those producers who requested assistance and did go on to receive farm visits often voiced feeling like they were unfairly treated or the Agency wasn't fulfilling its duty to help them enhance their farm.

"I was so upset about what it was like for NRCS staff — one staff person — to come to my farm and to do what I thought would be this really incredible assessment, but instead, the staff member just put roadblock after roadblock in front of me." —Pastured pork producer, Washington state

Producers frequently requested RAFI or Project Partner TA when they were told by field staff that NRCS "cannot do anything to support them" or "it will take three years to get our help." In every case, producers voiced their confusion; they wanted to understand whether or not they were truly ineligible for assistance from the same Agency that encouraged them to request assistance in the first place.

In other cases, when producers became aware of the term "resource concerns" and came to understand the need for the presence of one or more, it was frustrating that NRCS would **only assist them with existing and often glaringly obvious resource concerns**. This was particularly true for producers who were dedicated to incorporating conservation best practices from the start.

"Take the pipeline to the animal drinkers example. I had questions about the size of the pipeline, and NRCS just said to do it, and after they would come to the farm. Why wasn't it possible to suggest to me the correct size so I didn't lose time and money but they said it would only happen after I installed it, and three years have passed and nothing." —PR producer attending RAFI Listening Session

In most TA cases, RAFI and Project Partners observed that the purpose of NRCS was not properly understood by the producer, nor did Agency staff explain this relevant purpose of NRCS or ask questions to prompt a discussion about resource concerns.

Challenge 2c: Resource concern inventory is lacking or difficult on small-scale, diversified, or agroecological farms

In RAFI's Conservation Assessment, small-scale or urban producers growing diversified vegetable crops and/or raising poultry/livestock reported a strong interest and track record of good land stewardship. 75% of producers reported that from the beginning of their operation, they were interested in conserving natural resources. (Reference Appendix Chart 3.) TA providers reported that most producers expressed not only a strong desire to proactively

manage their natural resources, but further, regenerate natural resources and increase their resilience to climate change in their bioregion, especially in the Caribbean.



Two Puerto Rico farmers show their diversified fruit crops, priding themselves on the stewardship of their farm “oasis.”

“I’m motivated to conserve resources on my land because I want to ensure that future generations can enjoy the same benefits of a healthy and robust ecosystem. Additionally, conserving natural resources helps to reduce my personal carbon footprint, which is important to me.”

—Cattle producer

“We can deal with the possibilities now rather than waiting for the problem to come.”

—Producer attending RAFI Listening Session, Arkansas

Due to the management style and scale of production, RAFI and Project Partners observed that small-scale, diversified, and agroecological farms often lacked severe resource concerns, which makes for a difficult assessment with NRCS staff who are trained with an “eye” for obvious environmental concerns. Producers frequently reported in their TA Intake Form or their consultation with a Project TA Provider that upon visiting the farm, most NRCS Field Staff did not know how to support the producer with NRCS financial assistance programs like EQIP, sometimes stating, “you don’t have resource concerns.” RAFI found early in this project that NRCS assistance for the producer often stopped here and began providing proactive, conservation planning TA for producers at risk of losing assistance just because of the way they farm and how NRCS Field Staff are trained. See more in Section 6a.

RAFI and Project Partners proactively provided TA to producers in advance of NRCS visiting, whenever possible. When the TA Provider could meet or call the producer to hear their goals and understand their challenges, the producer was more prepared for a subsequent NRCS farm visit and could better demonstrate their resource concerns. For example, if the producer wanted to diversify their crops with fruit and nut trees, create silvopasture for livestock, and conserve native species, the TA provider could help the producer re-frame or “reverse engineer” their need into the resource concern(s) that better justify asking NRCS for EQIP assistance with a practice like “Tree and Shrub Establishment.”



Pawpaw, a native Southeast U.S. fruit tree important for wildlife and a food source important to Indigenous communities that is now an increasingly profitable fruit crop for producers in the Southeast U.S.

TA Providers found this conservation planning strategy effectively helped producers gain more traction with Field Staff when trying to apply for high paying cost-share practices through EQIP. Alternatively, TA Providers assisted the producers in identifying which conservation practices with which they've successfully addressed prior resource concerns, and which NRCS practice enhancements they could apply for under CSP.



Small-scale farms managed with "sustainable," "regenerative," or Agroecological practices can benefit from NRCS services and programs—addressing their operational needs and benefiting the larger ecosystem. Producers stand to benefit from various programs depending on their level of resource concerns.

"I'm trying to be a climate-smart farmer! I did my own research and found they have a list of hundreds of practices. Why don't they want us to know about these?"

—Beginning agroecological producer, Georgia

"In Puerto Rico, because of our topography and climate, we have practically the same disadvantages as Hawaii, in which most of the NRCS programs are directed to the national level, but here in the Caribbean islands, we have specific and special conditions totally different from the mainland."

—Diversified agroecological producer, Puerto Rico



"We don't have a single CSP contract on Virgin Islands, and we need to change that." – Virgin Islands Good Food, Project Partner

A young transplant on a Puerto Rico farm is temporarily protected but the weather conditions on the island may create difficult growing conditions, exacerbated by climate change.

RAFI found that NRCS is often not meeting the needs of "market gardeners," "sustainable farmers," agroecologists, or "forest farmers," and found this issue is rooted in NRCS' current resource concerns inventory process.

Challenge 2d: Popular infrastructural practices can “mask” the mitigation purpose of NRCS.

It is apparent to RAFI that the popularity and history of some practices such as Fence, High Tunnel System, and Water Well “mask” the intended purpose of NRCS, or the purpose of the practice can be misunderstood. To the Agency, these practices mitigate resource concerns. To many producers, however, they are often viewed as critical pieces of infrastructure that can make or break their operation’s current capacity or ability to scale production for increased income. Thus, the cost-share assistance is valuable aid and often needed quickly. Word of mouth among small-scale producers plays a tremendous role in the popularity of these three practices.



NRCS cost-shared Conservation Practices like Water Well, High Tunnel, and Fencing are highly sought by beginning and established producers.

If a producer hears from a peer about the “NRCS grant” or “cost-share assistance” they received, but doesn’t hear why their peer’s farm qualified (there was an assessment for one or more resource concerns) and how the process went (contact NRCS, have a farm visit/apply, wait for ranking, wait for a contract, sign contract, pay, implement contract to specifications, and get reimbursed), it’s understandable how a producer might think NRCS is turn-key infrastructural assistance. Furthermore, producers who successfully received NRCS cost-share for any of these three practices (nor their farming peer) are aware that the Agency can support much more conservation mitigation and enhancement on their farms.

RAFI found that small-scale producers are beginning to learn about and seek out other NRCS infrastructural practices relevant to small farms, like Roof Structure, Gutters, Irrigation Reservoirs, Micro Irrigation, and Compost Facility practice scenarios. Irrigation Reservoirs were highly sought among Puerto Rico and U.S Virgin Islands producers.

Without more education on the resource concern purpose of NRCS, producers—especially Beginning and small-scale producers—will continue to see the agency as an infrastructure grant program, and not as the conservation resource Agency that it is.

Producer Testimony: Farmers in North Carolina

North Carolina farmers received and completed an NRCS High Tunnel System contract, but when it came to their livestock operation needs, they were unaware that NRCS could also support their current diversified livestock operation and future goals for silvopasture establishment. Once aware and after approaching the Agency, they found the process of getting NRCS support very different than before. When asked what it was like applying for the high tunnel versus approaching the Agency for other offerings, the farmers recalled: “It was easy. I contacted NRCS and said I wanted to apply for a high tunnel and several months later we got it and were reimbursed for some of it.”

2: Recommendations to address Challenge 2, producers not understanding the purpose of NRCS and the Agency not fully addressing producers’ needs.

“I think if the time had been taken to just educate me I would have walked away feeling a lot better about using government agencies. I have been actively looking for a successful mentor to walk this process with me.”

—Historically Underserved Producer, Georgia

“We have the values and the intention [for conservation], but to have the infrastructure makes the difference. It will help us be more efficient and effective, which will help us be more profitable and we can give our attention to other things instead of problem solving all of the time”

—Diversified livestock producer, North Carolina

“We need NRCS to provide information that is culturally relevant”
—Diversified agroecological producer, Puerto Rico

A. Increase teaching and awareness of resource concerns and matching practices to producers and staff.

- a. Prioritize communication and education about resource concerns as the basis of eligibility and primary purpose of NRCS.
- b. Have NRCS staff discuss with producers their understanding of resource concerns and together identify the presence or absence of such.



Three Organic Growers School and RAFI workshop participants learn to think in terms of “resource concerns” on their land to understand how NRCS might assist them in the future.

B. Provide guidance and documentation of the process for identification of resource concerns.

- a. Field Staff advise the producer on what they need to demonstrate to NRCS during the first on-farm visit or what they should prepare to describe during other contact (over the phone or during an in-office visit), including any supporting documentation such as photos.

C. Create a “Livestock Predation” resource concern to justify the application of Fence (Code 382), allowing producers to cost-share exterior/perimeter fencing to expand their herd size and graze regeneratively simultaneously without compromising livestock safety.

D. Create flexibility in farm assessment and qualification protocols for micro and small-scale producers lacking evident resource concerns but needing critical infrastructure.

- a. Alternatively, promote and contract more management practices such as Grazing Management Plan or Irrigation Management Plan and increase the contract value to allow producers to independently use contract funds to purchase critical infrastructure like perimeter or interior fencing, irrigation equipment, and supplies.

- b. Successful allocation of NRCS contracts for these producers can greatly reduce the likelihood of a serious resource concern developing, (i.e. compaction, feed and forage imbalance, insufficient water quantity) and improve producers' faith in the agency to support their conservation goals.
- E. Pair pre-approvals for High Tunnel System contracts with a pre-contract signing requirement** for producers to participate in educational workshops/demo days about structural differences, operation and maintenance, and best practices applied within the structure for enhanced conservation of resources and improved plant productivity.
- F. Promote lesser-known practices** that have good value for the producer, including value for production, biodiversity, climate change, and community.
- G. Create a "Climate Mitigation"** resource concern in order to streamline conservation-savvy producers' qualification for CSAF practices eligible for EQIP cost-share assistance, effectively allowing them to sequester carbon through soil and vegetation-improving practices, and increase climate resiliency on their farm and surrounding ecosystem.
 - a. Aid more small scale producers with the secondary benefits of CSAF practices such as increased marketable products grown on-farm, increased biodiversity, and increased ecosystem services.
 - b. Train staff to the use of Climate Mitigation resource concern and recommended conservation practices, reducing the need for the "reverse engineering" skill set that not all NRCS Staff and NRCS-Adjacent Conservation Planners possess.
- H. Provide a transparent documentation process**, including what the producer and NRCS Field Staff discuss during early resource concern guidance (above) and which practices the producer and Field Staff agree will go into a conservation plan for ranking.
 - a. Perceived challenges/issues on the land where production of an agricultural product is active and/or developing
 - b. Perceived strengths of their farm (what they think they do well)
 - c. Three-year vision and further outlook
- I. Provide an in-hand practical worksheet** for matching their resource concerns with viable conservation practices (in print, digital, and translated versions).

Challenge 3: The NRCS process: protocols, communication, and transparency

“It’s a confusing process. Having someone who could explain what technical terms meant, understand best practices, and consider our farm’s needs in relation to what NRCS offers really helped us.”

—Diversified livestock and crop producer, North Carolina

NRCS has a popular graphic stating that it takes “5 simple steps,” and yet producers consistently express wanting more information and more Agency transparency. This includes information about applying, awaiting notice, contracting, implementing, and certifying with NRCS that conservation is achieved.

- While the NRCS application form is simple, the entire NRCS intake, conservation planning, contracting, and implementation process is not.
- The wait for certain forms of assistance can be long because of staff capacity and the requests for assistance continue to outstrip Agency capacity.
- Eligibility requires communication with the staff of two agencies (NRCS and FSA). Producers report that these staff members are often unresponsive, sometimes overtly biased, and frequently voice being overwhelmed.
- There is a large amount of paperwork exchange (sometimes counties away) and this poses a challenge for many remotely located and/or senior producers with limited technology access or literacy.
- Internal NRCS processes and policies are often not discussed and not transparent to the producers.
- Farms are living organisms, things come up, and producers themselves can unintentionally create contract delays.

Project Partners Virgin Islands Good Food note that literacy is a particular challenge on the islands and creates a barrier for producers needing information and help in completing forms.

Challenge 3a: Conservation Program Application-NRCS-CPA-1200

RAFI finds that the Conservation Program Application-NRCS-CPA-1200 currently serves two functions:

1) More of an inquiry form for the producer but lacks sufficient prompts for the producer state their need, describe their land use, outline resource concerns, state any goals (if known) in their terms.

2) A way for the Agency to digitize, in its own terms, the most basic information needed from a producer and retrieve the producer's signature and date of request.

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

NRCS-CPA-1200
October 2021

CONSERVATION PROGRAM APPLICATION

Applicant (Decision Maker):	Application Date:
Address:	Location where assistance is requested:
Email:	
Telephone:	Receive text messages(optional):
Assistance Requested:	

Click here for [instructions](#) to complete this form or contact the local office for assistance.

1. Do you have a customer record with the Farm Service Agency (FSA)?
☐ Yes ☐ No

2. Interested in participating in the following (select all that apply):

☐ Agricultural Conservation Easement Program-Wetland Reserve Easement (ACEP-WRE)	☐ Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
☐ Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA)	☐ Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)
☐ Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)	

a) Program enrollment type, activity type, and/or project name, as applicable:

to

However, as the only form that producers file with NRCS to request assistance, these functions do not sufficiently document producers' request(s) to the Agency. And while the Conservation Program Application-NRCS-CPA-1200 is somewhat easy to complete, the form's current format fails to fully meet either the function of inquiry or intake well.

As found in this project's TA process, a producer submitting CPA-1200 does not always guarantee that a producer will be considered for financial assistance, much to producers' dismay. In most TA cases in which a producer applied to NRCS using CPA-1200, the producer signed and submitted the application form but they were unaware of precisely what they were being considered for. In some cases, producers were extremely disappointed to learn that what they requested did not "make it" into the ranking process for final contract consideration. The results in such situations were:

- 1) Producers did not receive contracts containing all they expected, and amending would result in the entire application being re-ranked, a potential risk of losing their pre-approval status of contract.
- 2) Producers did not receive any contract, potentially due to a lower ranking score caused by the insufficient resource concerns and the absence of requested conservation practices that may have increased their ranking score had they been included in the ranking process.

Application Receipt

Producers reported feeling uncertainty whether their CPA-1200 was successfully received by NRCS as they frequently didn't receive a courtesy confirmation of receipt. Current regulation dictates that it is the producer's responsibility to request a Receipt for Service. However, RAFI found that most producers were not aware of this right to a Receipt for Service, the requirement that they have to request it, nor that it could serve as an important "paper trail" for their records. RAFI found that not only did they not receive confirmation, but many did not receive subsequent follow-up contact from the Agency or conservation planning support. TA Providers frequently helped producers make follow-up contact with their Field Office staff to better understand if their application was received or where it was in process, and schedule a farm visit with their Field Staff or relevant NRCS Specialists.

"Good customer service would dictate that the NRCS Field Office staff should notify the producer to acknowledge receipt of the application." –Benny Bunting, RAFI Lead Farmer Advocate

Application Content — Conservation Program Application-NRCS-CPA-1200 only has one small space for a producer to describe their need or request. The "Assistance Requested" section on the form does not provide the producer much room to explain their request or resource concern and thus does not provide the Field Staff member much information to reference for follow-up. This section of the CPA-1200 is especially important in cases when the Agency has yet to be responsive to the producer's requests by other means of contact, and CPA-1200 is the only official document producers can use to formally request services.

Application guidance and communication of receipt was an area where Project TA Providers stepped in, instructing producers what to write on the application, to who and how to submit it, their right to ask for a Receipt for Service, and what to do if they receive no acknowledgement of receipt.

This is not supposed to be the function of CPA-1200, but little or no immediate acknowledgment of receipt to the producer and sometimes no action at all on the part of the Agency seems to be the current standard of practice and a detriment to the Agency and producer.

Challenge 3b: Eligibility with FSA and FSA Correspondence

Any producer can supposedly request technical assistance or information from NRCS, such as conservation information, best practices, and general advice. However, an FSA Farm Record and “farm number” is required for all persons or entities requesting NRCS financial assistance. While a farm number is not necessarily required for a producer to complete an application, NRCS checks for the producer’s farm record when their application is received. If it does not exist, the NRCS CPA-1200 application effectively has nowhere to go until a Farm Record is established.

Applying for a Farm Number — In most Project TA cases, NRCS did follow-up with producers lacking a farm number, notifying them that they would first need a farm number from Farm Service Agency to be eligible. However, RAFI found that NRCS Field Staff’s subsequent guidance to the producer for how to establish a farm record is lacking or sometimes non-existent.

In occasional cases, producers requested RAFI or Project Partner TA because:

- 1) FSA was unresponsive to their previous requests to get a farm number.
- 2) FSA staff were unsupportive or made errors and the producer wanted a third-party contact for accountability.

RAFI finds that applying for a farm number, completing other first-time FSA forms, and/or updating their farm record were critical forms of support offered to producers by Project TA Providers, especially in communities where there are low rates of FSA registration.

In Puerto Rico, over 800 producers are not currently registered with FSA and many producers expressed difficulty reaching their FSA point of contact or the staff not returning calls.

Change in Motion

Having direct contact with the Puerto Rico FSA State Executive Director, RAFI and Project Partner Alliance for Agriculture could address the general backlog of non-registered producers and one-time FSA registration issues that otherwise make producers NRCS-ineligible.

Project TA Providers provided FSA registration guidance by:

1. Offering individualized assistance with forms and bridging communication to FSA
2. Contacting FSA leadership when long processing trends were reported
3. Created a blog to assist producers quickly with step-by-step instructions relevant when applying to NRCS
4. Sent notices to all producer contacts about updating their farm record in October, the beginning of each fiscal year when forms need to be resubmitted



Project TA Provider Jaimie McGirt assists three Georgia producers with FSA forms at a RAFI Farmer Resource Rodeo event in 2023.

Updating the FSA Farm Record — In cases in which a producer had a farm record/farm number with FSA and easily “cleared” this first stage of eligibility, but did not have an “updated farm record” for the current fiscal year, producers:

1. Often were unaware this was required until they received a paper notice by certified mail
2. Received conflicting information about which forms would be required and which they already had updated for the current fiscal year
3. Did not receive notice by other means like personal phone, text, or email contact
4. Needed assistance accessing the two to three forms required for updating their farm record
5. Needed access to Spanish language versions of these forms
6. Needed assistance completing the forms, especially Highly Erodible Land Certification and Wetland Certification Form AD-1026 and Historically Underserved Farmers and Rancher Form CCC-860

The burden of creating and updating a producers’ FSA farm record is reasonably on the producer. However, when correct and timely instructions, information, and access to forms in their language is not available, the burden is undue. More Agency and inter-Agency guidance and accountability to the producer is needed.

Challenge 3c: Conservation Planning and Requesting Financial Assistance

Conservation planning is arguably the most important aspect of NRCS service, and for the Agency, a producer having a conservation plan is the justification for providing on-farm financial assistance. Through TA provision, RAFI found that the requirement for conservation planning as a step to accessing financial assistance through programs like EQIP and CSP was little known and many producers reported being unaware if they had been directed through the conservation planning process or not. Some producers who were aware of the requirement of a conservation planning process reported that the Agency was not going through the conservation planning process in the way the producer expected or hoped.

“Even if it’s true one must wait three years, having a co-created plan would be useful ... otherwise the experience seems like a cruel joke because of the power dynamic in knowledge for what’s available in the form of resources.” —Diversified specialty crop producer

According to RAFI and Project Partner’s TA Intake data, 37% of producers who requested assistance from NRCS (prior to requesting this project’s TA assistance) reported having subsequent challenging experiences with NRCS.

35% of producers reported that their NRCS farm-visit led to no follow-up support to develop a future “conservation plan” while 26% of producers reported that this farm visit led to no follow-up support to apply for current year financial assistance. Some producers reported having successfully applied for financial assistance but having no knowledge of a physical plan they could have access to, while 35% were told by NRCS they have more to do before being eligible but were unsure what they would need to do or in what order they would need to do things. Other challenges that producers experienced in this stage of accessing NRCS services and benefits are found in Appendix Chart 2. Sections 2c and 2d of this report outline common challenges that arise during on-farm conservation assessments.

While many producers contacted RAFI or Project TA Providers for assistance with accessing NRCS services before the conservation planning process, many also contacted RAFI and Partners due to challenges they experienced with NRCS* one or more times mid-process. Such producers expressed feeling “something wasn’t right.”

*It is unknown from RAFI’s Conservation Assessment whether conservation planning support in each producer’s case would have come from NRCS staff or an NRCS-adjacent/partnering agency for conservation planning services, such as Department of Agricultural staff or Soil and Water Conservation Districts.

Producers who experienced challenges in the conservation planning and application for financial assistance process, often welcomed individualized TA from a Project TA Provider in order to see the process through to “application ranking.” RAFI found that producers who received individualized TA often submitted their application by the deadline, navigated the conservation planning and financial assistance application phase with more information and confidence. RAFI further found that well-timed TA intervention can make the difference in a producer potentially accessing financial assistance in the same fiscal year their application is submitted.

Farm Visits — This meeting between the producer and the Conservation Planner is a critical component of the NRCS conservation planning process. Visits are the point in which the producer can demonstrate to the NRCS Field Staff what their various concerns and challenges are. RAFI found that before this visit, producers were often not aware of how critical farm visits are for the subsequent steps the Conservation Planner might take, and producers reported that outside of RAFI or Project Partner TA, NRCS rarely communicated to them what should happen in these visits and which party is responsible for pointing out challenges, opportunities for support, and/or what questions to ask. Small-scale and diversified conservation producers especially reported difficulty with NRCS farm visits, described in depth in Section 2c



Producers describe their hydroponic/aquaponic (left) and livestock/poultry (right) farm operations. TA providers Norysell Massanet (left) and Humon Heidarian (right) listen to understand the farms' challenges, strengths, and the producers' experience with NRCS,

“I have had the experience of the visit from NRCS to my farm and I agree that talking to the [Field Staff] that is visiting about the conservation concern that you have, the wish to conserve some areas in your farm and the problems that you can have of erosion, can help a lot. But you have to communicate your plan, and knowing about it they can help identify the programs that can actually help you out with more agroecological farming. The visit to the farm is very important so they can know about the best way to help. My experiences have been excellent. I also had a CSP contract. That is the key: speaking clearly and having the genuine desire of wanting to conserve in your farm and have that plan in agriculture. I am thankful, I have had a very good experience.”

—Female producer, Puerto Rico

During this visit, producers frequently described their engagement with the agency as “souring” and “leaving a bad taste in their mouth.” Refer to in-depth producer testimonies in Sections 4 and 6.

“I felt the high tunnel was pushed on us as a practice that was likely to get funded but our greatest need was for [a different primary practice] and there were other practices that we were unaware of. We showed them the problems/issues [on our land].” —Small-scale producer, Arkansas

Conservation Plan Technicalities — RAFI finds that many producers are not aware if they went through a conservation planning process or have a conservation plan.

During such conservation assessment visits and afterwards, little documentation was reported as provided to the producer, except sometimes basic agency fact sheets.

Further, RAFI observed there were a lot of acronyms and jargon used in this phase. Such terms like “CPAs”, “DIAs,” “CEMAs,” and “TSPs” are important to the Agency. But the definition and application of such terms were very unfamiliar to producers and often not provided to producers in writing. When described, conservation planning and implementation acronyms/jargon are often oversimplified or not explained sufficiently at key times when the producers’ understanding is most important. Oversimplification has left producers feeling like important information was withheld.

Producers described that understanding terminology is most important to them when it comes to understanding who will perform which work and understanding when it is their responsibility to initiate with this person, or when it is the Agency’s responsibility to initiate.

Challenge 3d: Ranking process of applications is a mystery

Unawareness of Ranking — RAFI finds that producers — whether interested in applying or already applied to NRCS — are often unaware that NRCS applications for financial assistance (whether for EQIP, CSP, AMA, or other programs) are ranked, and how this ranking occurs among other like-applications in predefined categories called “ranking pools.”

Lack of Communication to Producers During Ranking — Producers who applied to NRCS frequently reported to Project TA Providers that they received no communication from NRCS during this point of the application process, sometimes going six to nine months with no contact from their NRCS Conservation Planner or other staff person and, thus, did not know what was happening during this period. During a RAFI Listening Session in 2024, two producers equated this lack of communication to feeling “ghosted” by their NRCS Field Staff.

During the ranking period when no communication/official notice from NRCS is required, producers sometimes think they were denied, when in reality their application is active, likely already ranked, but under the “line” that demarks which applications are pre-approved and will have a contract obligated and which applications are still pending, barring available funds in that fiscal year. Producers who do not assume that they were denied still think there’s hope but in actuality, no funds were available for their pre-approval and contract obligation in that fiscal year. In either case, producers are unaware that they will not receive official notice until the fiscal year renews (October).

“NRCS asked for my FSA paperwork in January, there was this rush of paperwork exchange, and I haven’t heard since. I just feel like they’re checking boxes. I can’t say I don’t know what I’m applying for. I do. I know something got sent off for ranking, but I hardly get any information when I ask questions.”

—Rotational Grazing Cattle producer, Michigan

Noticing of Ranking Status and Producer Decision-making — Awareness at this juncture is critical for small-scale producers with tight cash flow or any producer who is trying to augment their operation with outside financial support. Producers consider their request for assistance as a resource to complete a farm project, often a project critical to their operation. Knowing whether or not they could likely expect a contract or not in the few months ahead may be critical for their decision making.

“That’s a long time to not know what’s going on.” —Pastured pork producer, Washington State

If this decision could be hypothesized at the time when NRCS has ranked applications and the early pre-approved contracts are obligated and communicated to the producer, the producer's knowledge that they stand close to or far below that "funds available" line could affect their next decision, such as the very basic: "by what other means can I finance my needed infrastructure or enhancement?"

Producers rarely report receiving notice that they would not receive assistance in the current application fiscal year. Only in cases where a Project TA Provider prompted the producer to ask, did the producer receive a courtesy response from NRCS describing the state of their application. Despite being guaranteed to receive a letter of application deferment by certified mail at the beginning of the new fiscal year, producers sometimes report not knowing their application is being deferred for months and the next round of funding might not provide them a contract for another six months after that.

"I learned that I can request my NRCS ranking score and by reading my ranking score report, I learned that the agency grants ranking score points based on my Historically Underserved identity like my being a veteran, the resource concerns I was addressing, and the practices I would apply, and even whether or not I produce food within a certain local radius of my farm. For my next application, I knew it was important for my NRCS Soil Conservationist to know these facts about me and my farm and I [was the one that] had to make sure these facts were known." — Specialty crop producer, Virginia

The timing in which producers apply and get ranked have the ultimate determination in whether or not they receive financial assistance in a timely manner. RAFI found that Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers who had challenges throughout the NRCS process (as described above) were more likely to have "pending" or deferred applications and not receive a contract for financial assistance in the same fiscal year they applied for assistance.

Challenge 3e: Payment and payment processes

Even though producers successfully made it this far in the NRCS assistance process, those who received pre-approval and were offered, signed, and/or completed contracts still reported challenges during this phase of engagement with NRCS.

NRCS Staff, Project Partners, and producers all report that the requirements at this juncture are difficult for a variety of reasons. Challenges reported through TA testimonials and Listening Sessions included (1) farm remoteness and coordinating paperwork submission, (2) literacy

and understanding the contract and the implementation guidance contained, and (3) increased costs that limit or change implementation.

Affordability – Producers frequently report not knowing the value of their contract until they were notified of pre-approval or met their NRCS Conservationist to sign the contract itself. And yet, NRCS Conservationists know the estimated value of contracts right before ranking. Without this knowledge of a potential contract value for six to nine months after the ranking date, producers lack the critical awareness of what the Agency and their cost-share portions would be at a time when they might need to plan financing the full cost of their intended project.

While NRCS's EQIP Advance Payment option is a viable strategy to improve contract feasibility and successful implementation, RAFI found that of the producers who requested assistance from NRCS prior to this project, 26% were unaware of the option to request EQIP Advance Payment to receive a portion of their reimbursement up-front to better afford conservation practice implementation. (Refer to Chart 2 in the Appendix.) See Section 7 for Challenges of affordability as it relates to cost-share values.

Risks of NRCS contracts – Those producers with contracts reported, in hindsight, that they were not aware enough of the risks involved in NRCS contracts, such as not completing a contract or not completing it to specification. Failure to implement successfully and not communicating any challenges with as much notice as possible can result in contracts not being reimbursed.

In some cases, NRCS staff report briefing the producer on the implementation specifications required in order for the Agency to issue reimbursement to the producer, but the producers made the decision to install differently. In other cases, producers report being unaware of specific specifications and are horrified that a reimbursement cannot be issued. Some practices can be corrected in time, while others may not. Contract delays and contract completion were reported as pervasive challenges by producers, NRCS staff, and a Project Partner in the U.S. Virgin Islands

Project TA Provider Testimony After Supporting PR Producer

A Producer was denied a contract due to the Agency's lack of funds but he expressed concern to me, seeing other producers being approved and wondered if politics or corruption played a part in him being denied and others not. He said whether he receives NRCS assistance or not, he will keep farming. The whole thing left a bad taste and he may not apply again.

Once I explained the basics of ranking process criteria and acknowledged that the absence of this explanation from NRCS can create distrust of the process, the producer understood that maybe there was nothing wrong with him, his operation, or the agency. He immediately shifted the conversation to possible future plans and application questions, and expressed how important it is for producers to have this kind of information because not knowing opens the door for distrust or speculation.

Producer Testimony After Receiving RAFI Technical Assistance

"It's a confusing process and having someone who could explain what things meant, what to look for, consider our farm needs in relation to what they offer all really helped us navigate the whole process. I've written lots of grants, but this was different. You have to tell NRCS everything and they essentially write [the grant]. Then there's all of their language, the specifications, and what we needed to know we don't know. So it was helpful to have someone translate and help us understand what it all meant."

3: Recommendations for improving the NRCS process, communication, and transparency with producers.

“Farmers too often complain of the long waiting periods without understanding agency timeframes, which leads them to conclude the agency does not care, that it's ineffective or disorganized. When I explain to farmers the basics of how the agency works on annual programming, that applications can be done at any time — but there are dates that are critical and that the time they apply will have an impact on waiting periods — farmers greatly appreciate this information.”

—Norysell Massanet, Project TA Provider, Alliance for Agriculture, Puerto Rico

“I want something documented that shows the length of time that it takes to go through these processes, because there is profit lost, opportunities lost, it affects entire families.” —NC beekeeper

A. Conservation Program Application-NRCS-CPA-1200

- a. Improve Conservation Program Application-NRCS-CPA-1200: Make it clear if the application form is only for financial assistance. Improve areas of form where the producer describes assistance requested by land use and any specific practices they are requesting assistance with.
 - i. Agency required to notify the producer upon receipt of CPA-1200 and to communicate next steps for producer and Agency.
- b. Create an intake form for producers to make first contact with the Agency and record their requests in their terms.
 - i. Agency be required to notify the producer upon receipt of intake and to communicate next steps for producer and Agency.
- c. The NRCS Point of Contact would have a defined amount of time to respond to the producer, to acknowledge receipt and communicate next steps for producer and Agency.
 - i. If an NRCS adjacent Conservation Planner receives and submits an application to NRCS, NRCS Soil Conservationist is directed to confirm receipt and entry.
 - ii. If any portion of application has inadequate documentation which if not resolved may disqualify the producer, NRCS or Conservation Planner follows NRCS Working Lands handbook policy 530.22 to notify them.

- d. Direct NRCS staff to provide producers a formal notice of receipt of CPA-1200 or at least require a courtesy communication stating receipt.
- e. Include a check box for producers to opt for an Advance Payment briefing with qualified NRCS personnel.
- f. Ensure proper documentation of Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers' self-described demographic.

B. Eligibility with FSA

- a. Streamline getting producers up to date with FSA, completing or updating annual forms by prompting producers to do it at the time or soon after applying, instead of waiting until the internal deadline for FSA eligibility clearance.
- b. Send annual certified letter that demarks which FSA records are and are not updated (to inform producer of exact next steps to take, instead of generally listing all requirements and indicating their farm record "may or may not be up to date.")
- c. Provide paperwork upfront or easy ways to submit if the producer is remote to the Service Center location.
 - i. Provide access to producer training on how to use www.grants.gov for FSA Farm Record and NRCS needs.
 - ii. Field Staff carry an e-tablet to farm visits to create digital paperwork access.

C. Conservation planning and requesting financial assistance

- a. Acknowledge that, even when the information is provided, many details can be lost to producers.
- b. Create and provide producers a practical, simplified, "NRCS Assistance and Conservation Planning Guidebook" that producers can rely on. This could improve the relationship between producers and the Agency. In such "Guidebook," producers can:
 - i. Refer to agency timeframes, critical dates, ranking criteria, and glossary terms
 - ii. Take notes from meetings, record dates of interactions, record important next steps, and who is responsible for each step
 - iii. Use interactively for conservation planning with their NRCS Conservation Planner or NRCS adjacent planner. The producer can document what assistance they need, what they've officially requested, sketch desired

designs, suggestions from the Conservation Planner, and what practices or enhancements the producer finally agrees to for ranking against others

- iv. Provide a robust timeline infographic instead of the “Five Steps” and “Nine steps to conservation planning” graphics and individual factsheets
- v. Describe the cost share in easy number terms. Producers expressed increased understanding and appreciation for this type of explanation:

EXAMPLE: NRCS estimates that this practice applied on X sq ft will cost \$1000. You could be approved for a 75% cost-share, meaning if you are approved for a contract, we can reimburse you \$750 and the remaining costs over \$750 are your out-of-pocket responsibility. If your costs (such as supplies and labor) turn out to be over \$1,000, we can still only reimburse you the \$750 amount.

- c. Provide NRCS paperwork upfront or easy ways to submit, as stated in “B. Eligibility with FSA above”
- d. NRCS Outreach staff provide guidance on what makes a helpful farm visit to best assess resource concerns, showcase current practices, and identify new practices.
- e. Ensure that the Planner involves the producer in the creation of the plan and that all implementation suggestions are doable and meaningful for the producer.

D. Ranking

- a. Ensure all ranking questions are addressed during the Conservation Assessment, to ensure points are fairly given to producers meeting criteria.
 - i. If a ranking question asks if the producer grows food products for distribution within a certain radius of their farm, ensure the conservation planner requests this information and documents the answer in the Six Notes for later scoring.
- b. Provide a factsheet or include info in a “Guidebook” on what delays a producer can expect, and FAQs. This should also be discussed with the producer. See Recommendation 3Cb for detailed recommendations for this Guidebook.
- c. If funding is exhausted and a low ranking application is not going to be awarded in this fiscal year, require the Field Office to issue a letter/email/call to the producer to inform them as soon as it is known, instead of waiting until October when the

fiscal year renews. If there are still funds remaining, but their score is low, inform the producer so they may decide upon their next steps.

- d. If unawarded in this fiscal year, the Conservation Planner revisits the conservation plan with the producer before the application is deferred to see if anything should change, and explain the risk/effect of changing the plan.
- e. Prompt producer on Early Start Waiver options in case they need to start some conservation activities and can't wait for a contract to be pre-approved.

E. Contract Payments and Payment Processes

- a. Require that NRCS staff brief producers of their estimated contract value before it is submitted for ranking (to improve producer awareness of cost, and how they might need to finance their cost-share.)
- b. Require discussion of the Advance Payment option if it is relevant to the contract and could benefit the producer.
- c. For high-cost practices, provide more than 50% Advance Payment to help the producer afford and complete the practice sooner.
 - i. In a Listening Session, producers recommended a 75% option.
- d. Extend the Advance Payment use option to a longer period of time to accommodate labor shortages, financing out-of-pocket costs when prices increase unexpectedly, and other unexpected delays.
- e. NRCS Staff should be required to discuss the risks of not completing a project, even if due to supply chain or true costs increasing.

F. Recordkeeping and Completion

- a. Create templates or reinstitute use of templates for recordkeeping conservation practice installation/enhancement progress.
 - i. Train producers to record needed evidence of conservation practice implementation and completion.
- b. Create a project cost template for producers to report total practice installation costs, for a State Conservationist to annually increase conservation practice payment rates.

Challenge 4: Experiencing Poor Service and Disparities in Servicing

When Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers experience difficulty throughout the NRCS process (including information being inadvertently withheld, little or no follow-up contact, staff acting “secretive” or unwilling to assess their needs, not having their application entered or entered correctly) and the result is no access to NRCS services and benefits, they can interpret it as being discriminated against.

While RAFI recognizes that disparities in servicing for USDA has a specific definition, both RAFI and Project Partners heard producers express that their experiences of poor service sometimes felt like disparities in service. Producers find it difficult to draw the line between their experience and a legal definition, especially because there is a historical track record of resources being withheld from producers of color, tribal communities, women, and beginning producers.

“Gatekeeping is a heck of an anti-conservation practice.”
—Urban specialty crop producer and NRCS Cooperator, Georgia

“A Conservation Planner contracted by NRCS came out to our farm. [He] exited his vehicle, but did not walk away from the vehicle, or survey the farm.” —Forest producer, Alabama

According to RAFI and Project Partner’s TA intake data, 37% of producers who had requested assistance from NRCS reported having subsequent challenging experiences with the Agency.

Challenge 4a: Disparities in Servicing

A few producers reported experiences that RAFI flagged as potential servicing disparities from Agency staff; receiving different treatment including (1) being asked for unnecessary documents and (2) experiencing NRCS staff withholding information/opportunities.

Producer Testimony: Anonymously Reported Occurrence of Disparity in Services in 2022

"[The producer] then told [the NRCS Agent] that [they] were Native American. [The Agent] stated, "I will need a copy of your card." [The producer] then asked if [they] needed to be from a federally recognized tribe to qualify, or it could be a state-recognized tribe. [The agent] stated that he wasn't sure, but [the producer] had to have a card, and that either was probably fine [and] once this was received, they would process applications in the fall for the following year. No Receipt for Service was given to [the producer] and [they] were not aware that [they could] have received one. Having felt uneasy about [their] last interaction with NRCS, [the producer] researched if [they] needed to have a CDIB card, and if it had to be a federally recognized tribe, or if a state-recognized tribe would be okay to be qualified as Native American with NRCS. A friend who previously worked with NRCS contacted [someone in a leadership position] and this NRCS staff member said that this was not a requirement, and urged [the producer] to go back [to NRCS].

Challenge 4b: Poor Servicing

RAFI defines poor servicing as (1) when USDA Agencies fail to act according to their own policies, handbooks, and directives or (2) when NRCS Agency Staff provide poor customer service in the absence of protocols or by their own volition.

Failure to Act — NRCS Staff who fail to follow standard procedures set by handbook policy or directives can be found as "failing to act." RAFI observed repeated instances of Agency staff's failure to act across multiple states, including (1) Failure to submit applications, (2) Failure to notify producers of insufficient information, and (3) Failure to issue notice to producers of agency decisions and their rights to an appeal. (1) and (2) were most common. Producers without a successfully submitted application would never receive Agency decision notices and their appeal rights, and producers in this situation commonly had no idea of the status of their application, believing it was in process.

“When you go to an agency that you know you can apply to and they don’t even let you apply — you know something is wrong.” —Specialty Crop Producer, Georgia

“Both of your NRCS officers — they could’ve assisted you. And they should have.”
—Dr. Sherman Green, Georgia producer Advocate to Georgia Specialty Crop Producer

RAFI finds that NRCS Field Staff’s failure to submit applications often occurred when NRCS Field Staff makes their own decision about a producer’s eligibility based on their opinion of the producer, rather than using proper resource concern inventory tools or requesting back-up support from an Agency specialist.

RAFI also finds that some Field Staff were not proactive in communicating with producers that their application was missing critical documentation, and in some cases, they completely failed to notify the producer. Field Staff failing to notify producers of insufficient information puts an undue burden on the producer to “fact find” the errors and correct them to advance in NRCS eligibility, but the awareness of the need to correct one’s farm record sometimes comes too late and their eligibility for ranking was compromised.

“In NC, there was a case in which FSA and NRCS blamed each other for not initiating a Highly Erodible Land Certification assessment, and this delay made a producer ineligible in 2020; however, he was unaware that his application never went to ranking and faithfully thought he was still in the queue in 2022. Having no documentation, his only choice was to apply in 2023 and be at the ‘bottom of the stack.’”
—Jaimie McGirt, Project TA Provider

Poor Responsiveness and Customer Service — Producers frequently reported that NRCS Staff and Field Staff were unavailable or unresponsive (e.g. not answering emails, returning calls, holding office hours). This lack of customer service and responsiveness leads to poor servicing and, currently, there is a lack of regulation for proper accountability.

“There’s a real problem with NRCS staff returning producers’ phone calls in Puerto Rico.”
—Norysell Massanet, Project TA Provider

“Since the pandemic, a lot of farmers tell me they can’t reach staff by phone and a lot of staff don’t seem to be holding regular office hours. They really should so that farmers can expect when to reach them.”

—Jacob Crandall, Project TA Provider

“It feels like you’re asking 20 questions and getting one response at a time.” —Anonymous producer

“Sometimes it’s scary because you don’t know what you can ask for and what is available.”

—Beginning Crop Producer, North Carolina

“I know you’re supposed to go up the chain of command but my chain of command wasn’t good so now I go to the State Conservationist. And I know they’ll give me the information from the handbook.” —Specialty crop producer, Georgia

While the National Office communicates that the Agency is an equal opportunity service provider and has made sweeping changes to improve services and benefits for Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers, these producers often experience a different reality in their county or region. This misalignment shows contrasting values and producers’ reported experiences attest to the wide variety of poor service despite the Agency’s commitment to improvement in this area.

Producer Testimony: Farmer in Washington State

A second-career producer very invested in the stewardship of her farmland, this farmer wanted to farm the “right way.” She began lining up various resources she was excited to seek, including USDA assistance with NRCS and FSA loans. She had already had a successful first year, processing thousands of dollars of pastured pork, now awaiting sale. When first working with her county FSA, she discovered a lot of clerical errors in her FSA farm record, such as her farm’s location: “They had the farm property lines mapped two miles away and in the middle of the river!” Despite this, she was eager to get NRCS’s advice and apply for financial assistance. “I was so excited for the visit.” What was surprising was how “the agent presented roadblock after roadblock, saying that some low-lying areas under fence posts would be considered a wetland and wetland assessment would take two to three years because they’re short-staffed. This was an early signal that something wasn’t right, but trying to see past this hurdle, the farmer asked about other practices within EQIP, and the Agent once again told her it would take 24-36 months to get that assistance so she “might as well not apply.”

After NRCS left, she went into her house and cried. She said, “I was upset about what it was like for NRCS staff — one staff person — to come to my farm and to do what I thought would be this incredible assessment, but instead, the staff member just didn’t seem to care.”

She also had a Rodale specialist visit her farm who said it was “under exemplary management with no wetland areas for concern.”

4: Recommendations to improve poor service and disparities in servicing

- A. Train all program and Field Office staff on the purpose of new initiatives and how to service producers requesting information before the National Office issues public announcements of new initiatives.
- B. Train staff on key Working Lands policies, such as (1) when to issue a Receipt for Service, (2) When notifying a producer is required, and (3) correct orders of operation to service all producers. Training should emphasize the experiences of Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers described within this report.
- C. Automatically provide a Receipt for Service to producers without requiring them to request one.
 - a. Have NRCS staff emphasize that a Receipt for Service can help the producer stay organized, with an outline of next steps for both agency and producer.
- D. Implement/enforce “No tolerance” policies for NRCS staff who engage in:
 - a. Use of personal judgment rather than following handbook procedures for treatment of producers
 - b. Gossip: talking about producers’ requests negatively and risking their reputation with other service providers
 - c. (For tenured staff) Talking negatively about the Receipt for Service to new staff
- E. Provide in-depth training for Outreach Coordinators and other supervisory staff on producer experiences with NRCS to assist local Field Staff in understanding the producer experience and perspective.
- F. Have a standard protocol for a District Conservationist or other staff intervening or mediating in poor servicing situations after a producer reports even one suspected instance with a field staff member, if the producer is willing to engage in the process.
 - a. RAFI finds that a qualified supervising staff person or external TA Provider who respectfully intervenes in producer-Agency communication can effectively build mutual understanding between field staff and producer, reduce blame otherwise placed on the Agency or producer, generate positive outcomes for the producer, and prevent future instances of poor service.

“Farmers here in Virginia also complain about lack of responses via phone and email and it’s alarming. NRCS should track reply turnaround and at least acknowledge receipt of inquiries and have a goal of not more than two week response time or provide a logical reason for the delay.”

—Anita Roberson, Project TA Provider

- G. Provide a clear pathway for producers to receive service from another county office when they do not wish to receive service from their Field Staff due to an egregious service history.
- H. Supervisors keep statistics on NRCS staff’s service record when producers or cooperators begin to report poor servicing instances or trends. Enforce or continue enforcing a standard policy and demonstrated practice at state level for documenting poor service from local field offices and staff held accountable for repeated, documented errors.
- I. More robust communication between NRCS and FSA to ensure applicant eligibility before the internal deadline for FSA eligibility clearance.
- J. Require minimum response time for NRCS staff to reply to producers. If current workload is high or staffing is low, a response stating such and providing an adjusted timeline for next response/actions should be provided to producers.
- K. Re-implement office hours operating protocol and provide all field staff a cell phone, or call routing.

5: Challenge with Confusing Communications

RAFI and Project Partners acknowledge that the Agency has put great effort into improving communication of services and benefits to Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers, and more producers are aware of NRCS as a result. However, RAFI finds that positive communication from NRCS leadership does not often match the communication producers receive from their local NRCS Field Office, and this generates confusion and mistrust. RAFI finds that producers desire accurate, timely, clear, detailed, and directive communication from their Agency Point of Contact.

While communication challenges are cited throughout this report, recommendations to improve communications are listed below.

“If [the] Agency solicits [federal] funds for small-scale and urban farmers and gets the funds to support [these growers], but [farmers] apply for this support and don’t get it, then it tells me they’re not looking for small-scale farmers after all.” —Micro-scale specialty crop producer, Georgia

“When I explain to farmers the basics of how the Agency works on annual programming — that an application can be made at any time, but there are dates that are critical, and that the time they apply will have an impact on waiting periods — farmers greatly appreciate this information.”
—Norysell Massanet, Project TA Provider, Alliance for Agriculture, Puerto Rico

5: Recommendations for Reducing Confusion with Communications

A. Agency guidance for producers

- a. Improve training for Field Office staff so that communication to producers inquiring about programs is accurate, timely, clear, detailed, and directive.
- b. Provide producers with a reference and interactive Guidebook that gives them introductory information like eligibility, timelines, and a walk through the process from beginning to end. See Recommendation 3Cb for detailed recommendations for this Guidebook.

B. Mass Communication

- a. Ensure that Field Staff have adequate training, talking points, and supervisory guidance on new initiatives before press releases are published online or distributed to producers through state/county USDA newsletters. This action will help to set up the Field Office staff for more success.
- b. NRCS Leadership customizes presentations to fit the producer audience and provides actionable directives to Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers to improve their experience with NRCS Field Offices.

C. Provide Producers with Consistent Communications

- a. NRCS Point of Contact must confirm receipt of Conservation Program Application-NRCS-CPA-1200, provide a Receipt for Service, and provide a timeline for the next steps the producer and NRCS should take in order to set

fair expectations.

- b. Follow the Working Lands handbook, Agency directives, and notify the producer if eligibility materials are missing.
- c. NRCS Staff proactively communicates with the producer during the ranking process due to the long wait for notice of contract approval.
- d. Amend the current certified mail noticing process regarding producers' FSA eligibility for NRCS assistance.
 - i. Produce and send a tailored letter instead of a general letter to indicate specifically which FSA forms the producer needs to supply to remain eligible.
- e. Improve inter-Agency NRCS-FSA communications regarding producers' FSA eligibility for NRCS assistance, and provide producers a Receipt for Service to document receipt of FSA forms.

6: Challenge of inadequate services provided by NRCS field staff & TSPs

RAFI observed dire consequences for inadequate service provided by field staff, conservation planners, and TSPs. The producer bore the consequences of not reaching their desired goals and often missed out on critical conservation recommendations or financial assistance. RAFI also found the effect was not solely on the producer. When producers experience inadequate service from just one inadequately trained field staff, the reputation of the local, state and national levels of the Agency suffers as well.

“Some [NRCS Field Staff] have seemed novice, as in, I knew more than the staff member. Others are knowledgeable but overwhelmed.” —Project TA Provider

6a: Insufficient staffing leads to inadequate services

Both RAFI and NRCS field staff can report that demand for conservation planning and NRCS's own in-house engineering and specialty services is at an all-time high. Producers voiced the need for these services and efficient servicing to TA Providers. Meanwhile, Field Staff express that they lack the capacity to provide sufficient servicing. This issue is commonly reported for practices requiring engineered designs and the ongoing fielding of general program or service

inquiries.

“We are behind and our farmers are mad. I keep telling our leadership that we need an engineer on site. Even when we get one, the farmers will still have to wait longer for that engineer’s visit because travel has to be approved. But one is better than none.” —NRCS Soil Conservationist

In the absence of in-house NRCS conservation planning and design services or an awarded cost-share contract for outside TSP’s services, a producer who has a great need for the service has to (1) be able to afford it out of pocket and, (2) find a quality and trusted provider.

6b: Inadequately trained Field Staff leads to inadequate service

One of the greatest challenges that Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers expressed during this project is experiencing inadequate service and how it feels relative to inadequate training.

RAFI and Project Partners observed that some NRCS staff did not demonstrate adequate knowledge or use of some existing Working Lands protocols. Additionally, RAFI and Partners observed that staff do not always demonstrate the correct application of training concepts and saw the need for further training that would reinforce “best practices in producer customer service,” especially for small-scale and Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers.

On several occasions, producers reported to RAFI or Project Partners that they perceived the NRCS Field Staff as having a bias towards non-Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers and/or mid-size to larger commodity farms; in these cases, the staff involved were more likely to be a long-term NRCS employees. While determining disparities in servicing would require fact-finding (which was not done), And because Producers and TA Providers observed that larger scale and/or non-Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers received the staff’s services while the small-scale and resource-conscious producer did not, a perception of bias remains.

RAFI finds that the inadequate application of training relates to various types and tenures of NRCS positions (long-time staff and new staff). This is most apparent during general customer service and on-farm conservation assessments.

“An [NRCS Field Staff contact] was supposed to come to mark the location for the well I need for my livestock. My animals have been at my neighbor’s property that I lease, so when he got out of his truck he couldn’t see the livestock where I wanted the well to go. He leaned back against the truck, crossed his arms, and just said I’m ineligible. But he didn’t even leave the side of his vehicle. As a Black farmer I was really uncomfortable with the whole situation.” —Forest-raised livestock producer, Georgia

Long-time Staff — While there are excellent, trusted long-time staff who provide exemplary service to producers, RAFI found that some seasoned staff exhibited poor customer service practices, were unaware of new Agency policies, and conducted poor on-farm assessments during farm visits.

Specifically, some producers reported and RAFI observed that:

- A. Most were often experts in how to address the most common resource concerns with approved conservation practices, but lacked expertise in newly designated climate-smart practices or lacked knowledge of the fuller range of practices to serve producers’ requests.
- B. Some acted uninterested or said that NRCS couldn’t help them.
- C. Some did not know how to issue a Receipt for Service despite their term of service at the Agency

In several TA cases, and in RAFI’s 2024 Listening Session, some producers expressed feeling that their experiences of poor service felt like disparities in servicing.

“Negligence or ‘poor’ service is synonymous with discrimination.”
—Listening Session Farmer Attendee, North Carolina

New Staff — Producers requesting TA frequently reported challenges with newer Field Staff. A few producers expressed that they knew more about conservation, NRCS practices, or NRCS procedures than the Staff member. And yet, many producers—while feeling they received inadequate service from new Field Staff—expressed understanding of the position new Staff were in. RAFI found that this was largely due to their limited time at the Agency, who they were trained by, the breadth of their training in all production types, and how soon they began assessing producers and obligating contracts with little experience or mentorship.

A few new staff engaging with Project TA Providers during producer referrals or at producer conferences expressed having difficulty in their position and expressed a strong desire for mentorship but didn't have it in their office or region. They also noted that they want to provide the high-quality service they know producers deserve.

"Producers deserve good service. NRCS said they were starting a mentorship program and I signed up over a year ago, but I haven't heard anything since." — North Carolina NRCS employee in their second year

The challenges that producers reported experiencing with new staff included:

- A. Apparent lack of experience with customers and the wide range of situations, farm types, and support needed.
- B. Lack of knowledge of program parameters — what could and could not work in planning and contracts.
 - a. New field staff often had the same questions as producers and couldn't deliver the conservation planning or technical support producers sought.
 - b. Inexperience with contract management.
 - c. Fear telling a producer "no" or turning them away because they don't want the producer to have a bad experience with NRCS.
- C. Little knowledge and confidence with CSP as more staff become aware of the program.
- D. Many did not know how to issue a Receipt for Service, stating they didn't know where to find one. Some stated that they had never been trained on it.

Producer Testimony: Asking for a Receipt for Service

After an already difficult exchange with NRCS about paperwork, the producer requested a Receipt for Service before leaving the USDA Service Center. [The NRCS employee] had to ask other office staff where the Receipts for Service were located. No one knew, and multiple office staff were looking around. Another woman in the office asked what it was. [The NRCS employee] replied, "She has the right to ask for one, see the poster right there on the wall. We just never do it." [The NRCS employee] went to speak to someone in the back of the office who would write up the Receipt for Service, then came back out and stated to [the producer] that she was sorry, that in her eight months of employment with NRCS no one has ever asked for a Receipt for Service and they have never written one. She also stated explicitly..." We are just very understaffed. We don't have enough time to learn the new guidelines. It takes people showing us that we messed up for higher-ups to see that we need help."

Both Long-time and New Staff — Regardless of tenure, RAFI and Project Partners observed that some NRCS staff demonstrate inadequate implementation of training for existing protocols, customer servicing, and conservation planning with small-sale or conservation producers. Producers most commonly reported poor experiences with NRCS staff who:

- A. Lacked cultural sensitivity and demonstrated little understanding of the culture of farming.
- B. Often used personal judgment to determine eligibility rather than following proper assessment tools.
- C. Underestimated producers' readiness for contract obligations.
- D. Demonstrated poor follow-up habits.
- E. Were unable to translate a producer's goals into potential cost-share practices.
- F. Demonstrated a lack of buy-in for CSP

- G. Demonstrated a lack of experience in assessing producers' conservation achievements and how they meet criteria for CSP eligibility, often stating producers must "do EQIP first."
 - a. Lacked CSP program knowledge and contract experience.
 - b. Don't effectively apply NRCS services and benefits to:
 - i. Small or micro-scale farms (rural or urban)
 - ii. Diversified or specialty crop producers
 - iii. Agroecological producers or forest producers

"When I started planning a farm, the first thing I did was go to NRCS and they told me they couldn't tell me what to do, that I should implement what I wanted...and that they would inspect after, but in that aspect, the farmer wouldn't know if they did something wrong until after, and that money and time invested was lost. They responded that the Agency works like this and that is how it is. But they haven't come to visit, still. Last year, they communicated and said that the funds were over and now I am stuck."

—Small-scale cattle producer, Puerto Rico

Inadequate Training for Farm Assessment —

When a Planner doesn't know how to assess a farm, there are several effects on the producer, who might otherwise qualify for assistance if a better-trained staff member performed the assessment. In many cases, Field Staff exhibited inadequate implementation of their training for assessing certain farm types, regardless of tenure.

Small-scale or urban producers who operate as "market gardeners," "sustainable farmers," Agroecologists, or "forest farmers," frequently reported that Field Staff who came to their farm didn't know how to service them because the farm looked different or is managed differently than what they typically assess.



RAFI TA Provider Carolina Alzate Gouzy and RAFI Board Member Dr. Ivette Ruiz visit a Puerto Rico farm, listening to understand the producer's challenges, strengths, and the producers' experience with NRCS, if any.

RAFI found that Field Staff's difficulty with assessment is often a result of being trained to identify resource concerns on mid- or larger-scale commodity farms, which have more easily identifiable resource concerns, often inherently due to size and production methods. These farms more seamlessly enter the NRCS conservation planning and EQIP financial assistance application process because the Agency is experienced with their production model.

"I had [my NRCS contacts] out about a month ago now to talk about CSP and [one of them] admitted that he didn't know much about the program. I told them we want to apply and I walked around and showed them various aspects of the farm and they took notes to bring back to some of their colleagues more familiar with the program." —Diversified crop and livestock producer, North Carolina

RAFI found that inadequate training and inadequate service demonstrated by Field Staff at key times in the conservation planning process have the following specific consequences for small-scale and/or conservation-practicing producers, as seen in the chart below.

Action of the Field Staff	Consequence to the Producer
No resource inventory or assessment because the farm appears different than what they typically/historically assess leads to...	The producer never makes it past the inquiry or farm visit stage.
Little/no assessment of conservation work already achieved by the producer, and the further enhancements they desire leads to...	The producer never accesses the financial incentives for what practices are in place or further farm enhancements through CSP.
No translation of the producers' stated goal: "I need this improvement or infrastructure on my farm" to "the resource concern is "x" leads to...	The producer never accesses EQIP financial assistance for those conservation projects on their wish list or urgent need list.
No holistic farm assessment, including aspects of the operation that relate to specific ranking questions leads to...	The producer's application is not properly scored, they receive a lower ranking, and they don't get pre-approved in that fiscal year.

Anonymous Producer Testimony: NRCS Assessment of “Forest Farming”

A [NRCS] Conservation Planner with ACES came out to our farm. [He] exited his vehicle, but did not walk away from it or survey the farm. When [he] asked what our goals were or what we were producing, we stated “a food forest,” but [he] did not understand that terminology. We said that basically, it was an orchard. [He] asked what program we were interested in, and we said that we were new farmers and were unsure what we were eligible for. However, based on the NRCS website, we’re interested in cover crops, transitioning to organic farming, obtaining a hoop house, restoring native prairies, and rotational grazing, and we have multiple federally protected endangered species on our farm.

[The planner] stated that he had previously retired, and was only part-time, to help out. He stated that he was not familiar with any of the farming methods or programs I was referring to. He explicitly stated, “Look at where you are, I have no idea what you are talking about, they don’t do that around here.” I then told them I knew another local farm that also started a food forest, and that the NRCS was helping them with some of the programs I mentioned. He then said he was familiar with them and that he would find out who their servicer was, and would get someone else to come out.

6c: Confusion around Technical Service Providers (TSPs)

The role of Technical Service Providers and acronyms related to TSP types are either unknown to or confuse producers. Producers express wanting to understand (1) when a TSP’s expertise may be sought, (2) when their services are required, and (3) what they actually do for producers.

Producers reported difficulty finding local, certified, and affordable TSPs to complete their needed conservation plan, engineering design, or installation. One TA Provider reported that an undisclosed number of BIPOC producers in her region had unsafe experiences with white TSPs.

"I contacted the state TSP manager and complained when I realized that no one was available in the state of Virginia to help me with an approved irrigation management plan and they provided a waiver for me to work with an approved TSP in Connecticut to fulfill my contract requirements."

—Specialty vegetable and flower producer, Virginia

"[The] lack of BIPOC Technical Service Providers, or any Technical Service Providers for my state has been an issue. Once a farmer jumps through all the hoops and is awarded, they then have to navigate a series of un/underqualified and/or unsafe TSP's. Emphasizing expanding the number of BIPOC TSP's needs to be an NRCS priority." —Project Partner

6: Recommendations for improving NRCS Services by TSPs and Staff

"Is the way we serve customers good for [farmers] and good for NRCS?" —NRCS State Outreach Coordinator

- A. Hire and Train more "Technical Service Providers" (TSPs),** to aid in conservation planning and specialized services.
 - a. RAFI and Project Partners emphasize the importance of enrolling TSPs that are reflective of the communities they serve. Recruit and certify BIPOC TSP positions that will help BIPOC producers feel safe with on-farm assessments and installations. Such will also increase producer interest in conservation planning, continued enhancement of practices, and completion of contracts.
 - b. Specialized TSPs such as engineers are most needed to both service producers in a timely manner and to spend Working Lands funds as soon as possible.
- B. Existing training for Field Staff, ACES, and NRCS partners is revised** and centered around Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers' experiences with NRCS programs and services and what staff services would improve their experience and success with the Agency.
 - a. Include culturally sensitive Customer Service Best Practices and other recommendations below and from Sections 3 and 4 of this report.
 - b. Include recent program changes such as cost share rates of popular practices, Climate-Smart Agriculture, and Forestry Initiative.
 - c. **Infuse training in NRCS "Boot Camp" for new staff**

- C. **Develop and publish a reporting process for producers to report poor service** experiences to NRCS Area leadership. Consider reinstating an Ombudsman position.
 - a. include culturally sensitive Customer Service Best Practices and other recommendations below and from Sections 3 and 4 of this report.
 - b. Job performance graded based on successful application of boot camp training
- D. **Excite NRCS staff about the purpose of CSP** and increase training for effective enrollment for small-scale producers. Include:
 - a. how it differs from EQIP.
 - b. how to detect a producer's eligibility.
 - c. how to guide the producer to apply under the program that gives them the best conservation and financial outcome.
- E. **Staff discuss with the producer who will be responsible for communicating** and when important communication should be expected.
- F. Require **clear and transparent communication from NRCS staff about potential service delays**. Ensure producers understand that certain practices and farm conditions sometimes require custom designs and that staff shortages or long queues could cause a delay.
- G. Supervisors have a method of rating staff based on their demonstrated understanding of **proper customer servicing**.
- H. Train NRCS staff on providing the Receipt for Service and normalize the provision of it. (as seen in Section 4).
- I. Train staff in **no-tolerance policies** (as seen in Section 4).
 - a. Not following through.
 - b. Talking about producers' requests negatively.
 - c. Using personal judgment to bar an applicant from services and/or programs providing financial assistance.
- J. **Increase NRCS staff's exposure to small or micro-scale, diversified crop, or livestock producers.**
- K. **Train NRCS staff on scouting less evident resource concerns** and resource concerns that are already addressed on these farms to best fit the producer to EQIP, CSP, or other programs.

L. Improve training in conservation planning, teaching “reverse engineering” principles:

- a. Staff should not just ask the producer “What are your goals?” Train staff to translate producer goals into potential cost-share practices that can be matched with appropriate resource concerns.



A U.S. Virgin Islands producer growing specialty vegetable crops on a one-acre farm needed on-site composting capability and a rainwater catchment system for crop irrigation. Through effective conservation planning with their Field Staff, they were able to receive NRCS assistance for a “bundle” of conservation practices. However, RAFI frequently found that Southeast U.S. producers who requested assistance from NRCS for compost management and innovative irrigation solutions were rarely aware of these practices and if they were, they often got a response from NRCS like, “We don’t help with that.” or “That applies only to large operations.” RAFI found that Field Staff frequently demonstrated unawareness that NRCS does in fact have approved designs for these practices’ applied to small-scale farms. Their unawareness frequently resulted in micro or small-scale producers not receiving cost-share assistance for such critical, resource-conserving infrastructure.

Challenge 7. Affording the cost-share: Why the current Payment Rates aren’t enough

RAFI finds the following challenges with cost-share assistance are most reported by Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers:

- The cost of installing a practice and the urgency for the practice varies.
- Some cost-shared infrastructural practices are critical for the operation (like a well, irrigation, high tunnel) and there are little savings or other means of affording the out-of-pocket costs.
- Some practices feel supplemental (like wildlife habitat planting) and Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers are often not able to dedicate funds to such improvements without a high-value cost-share.

Payment Rates are often insufficient to cover the full cost of practice installation and completion. Full costs are higher than producers expect due to inflation over time and intensification during and after the pandemic.

Higher regional costs of equipment, supplies, and labor. Rates set by state leadership don't always account for hyper-local higher-cost situations if producers have not reported it or don't know how to report it.

- Freight costs to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands and remote locations. This can add thousands of dollars to the cost.



Two beginning producers very committed to land stewardship on their Western NC farm demonstrate where they wish to restore native plant species and wildlife habitat. They put so many resources into their orchard and regenerative grazing operation, they would be unable to afford the wildlife enhancement with assistance through NRCS' CSP.

“We like buying as local as possible and wanted to reduce freight costs so we purchased a High Tunnel kit from a Puerto Rican supplier — but it was missing pieces and we had the higher costs anyway trying to get the missing pieces.” —Small scale specialty crop farm, U.S. Virgin Islands

“Getting the high tunnel installed cost nearly as much as the cost of the greenhouse itself.”
—Small-scale producer, Arkansas

Discussion of the contract value comes too late.

- NRCS staff know the value much earlier than the producer but often don't communicate the value until pre-approval or sometimes not until the day the contract is signed. This affects the producer's planning and financing.
- Some producers think NRCS will cover 100% of the cost, but they will not.

“I got [a] high tunnel installed last July, had to wait two years, I had no idea where I was on the list, the cost had gone up, NCRS didn't have a provision for when it goes up, so I had to put in \$3,000-4,000 myself.” —Specialty and commodity crop producer, North Carolina

Producers are not well-informed about the Advance Payment option.

- Awareness aids in financial decision-making and overall commitment, but many producers report not being informed of the option by their NRCS staff at all.

7. Recommendations for improving affordability of the cost-share.

- A. NRCS staff should be transparent about conservation practice payment rates early in the planning process to aid the producer in decision making, especially when a practice is well paying and can support a producer's goals earlier in their production.
- B. Make Payment Rates sufficient
 - a. Apply annual inflation adjustments to contracts.
 - b. Adjust "Practice Scenarios" (NRCS's cost sheet) with increased transportation costs, which allows for higher payment rates. This is especially needed in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.
 - c. Create a project cost template for producers to submit their estimate or actual cost of a conservation project. This could inform State Leadership of needed payment rate adjustments for specific costs.
 - d. Extend the Advance Payment option to a longer period of time.
- C. Discuss project cost and cost-share potential, and contract value earlier
 - a. When a conservation plan contains final practice recommendations, have earlier conversations with applicants about conservation practice cost-share rates, and project estimates instead of waiting for contract pre-approval.
 - b. As soon as a contract value is calculated, this value should be communicated to the producer without their having to ask.
- D. Inform every producer about the Advance Payment option for qualifying practices.
 - a. Mandatory training for NRCS Field Staff on the how and importance of Advance Payment and
 - b. Require Local Office staff to have an automatic Advance Payment discussion between NRCS staff contact and producer, reviewing options and risks unique to their application.

8: Challenge: Cooperators' relationships with NRCS Staff are not guaranteed but have to be fostered

In 2022, when the project kick-off meeting was held, RAFI was not introduced to State Conservationists or other state leaders relevant to the states or regions this project would serve.* When beginning technical assistance with producers, TA Providers had to navigate a sea of mostly unknown Field Staff all operating under different supervision and guidance in their individual states.

While one State Conservationist invited RAFI to a Cooperator coordination meeting at the beginning of the project, RAFI and Project Partners initiated all other contact with NRCS staff.

Desiring a solid foundation of cooperation in the Caribbean Area, RAFI and Project Partners sought out specific Agency leadership to begin building trust, hear relevant history and local context, and pave a path forward for good cooperation. Project Partners, Alliance for Agriculture and Virgin Islands Good Food, along with RAFI worked closely with the NRCS Caribbean Area Director, meeting on multiple occasions on program delivery and visiting producers in Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands. In 2023 RAFI and Project Partners also participated in the Caribbean Area's quarterly Equity and Outreach Committee for improving team collaboration and increasing coordination of service to producers in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Additionally, Puerto Rico NRCS staff assisted RAFI in establishing a direct communication channel with the Puerto Rico FSA Executive Director, who helped producers resolve issues with obtaining their FSA Farm Number.

RAFI found that when Project TA Providers met with knowledgeable NRCS Staff or Specialists, their knowledge of technical aspects of the program grew and positively impacted their working relationships with Field Staff. The U.S. Virgin Islands District Conservationist was particularly helpful orienting V.I. Good Food's Project TA Providers to NRCS' purpose and operations. The District Conservationist provided RAFI excellent interpretation of island producer's challenges concerning climate change, supply chain bottlenecks, and producers' track record of difficulty fulfilling NRCS contracts.



Luiz Cruz-Arroyo, NRCS Caribbean Area Director, joins Project TA Providers at a poultry producer's farm in U.S. Virgin Islands, effectively finding creative strategies to help the producer resolve concerns while scaling his operation.

*NRCS Outreach and Partnership Division Director invited State Conservationists/POCs to the Project Kick-Off Meeting and shared a copy of RAFI's agreement that was listed in the application template and/or agreement where work was going to be done.

“When [my District Conservationist] explained it that way, I finally understood it!”

—Nicole Pacheco, U.S. Virgin Islands TA Provider

In North Carolina, RAFI interacted with the NC Assistant State Conservationist and frequently collaborated with the NC Outreach Coordinator to improve access and services for Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers. In 2023, the NC Outreach Coordinator presented for the RAFI Webinar: *Conservation on Grazing Land and Cost-Share Resources*. Also in 2023, Dr. Carolina Alzate Gouzy and Jaimie McGirt assisted the NC Outreach Coordinator with improvements to an NRCS informational factsheet, ensuring that the information producers reported needing appeared on this material.

In Georgia, the NRCS Public Affairs and Urban Outreach Specialist, Northeast Area Outreach Coordinator, and the new Urban Conservationist all attended RAFI’s July 2023 Farmer “Resource Rodeo” event. In this event, staff could hear participating producers’ concerns, answer their questions, and establish a relationship with them. Afterward, when a beginning BIPOC producer was receiving poor service from her local Field Staff, the Urban Conservationist was re-introduced to the producer and they charted a path forward for NRCS to visit the micro-farm and coordinate services.

8a: Cooperators’ relationships with Field Staff

TA Providers new to cooperative agreements were often unsure of how Field Staff would perceive RAFI and Project Partners’ TA. When TA Providers met with local Field Staff, the experiences were both positive and challenging. Most often challenges were related to the staff’s negative perception or lack of knowledge of what a Cooperator’s role might be.

“Some offices think we are ushering people to the office in droves. That’s not what the numbers say.”

—Norysell Massanet, Project TA Provider



RAFI TA Provider Jaimie McGirt stands with the NC NRCS State Conservationist and NC NRCS Field Staff. As a Cooperator, RAFI could join NRCS to provide information to Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers attending the Annual Forest Landowners Conference in October 2022.

TA Provider Testimony: A Cooperators' Good and Bad Interactions with NRCS Field Staff

"Providing quality TA in cooperation with Field Staff who did not appear to appreciate our role or presence was a challenge. Two different Agents from different regions of my state were really unhappy that I was providing information to these producers — when the producers reached out to RAFI, feeling like the information [provided by the Agents] was not correct or complete. One of the Field Staff said to me, 'Now look here ...' and it was uncomfortable, but I knew I was supporting producers in a positive and valuable way.

On other occasions, NRCS Field Staff were elated for their local producers to have my added NRCS assistance. The Washington State District Conservationist I spoke to about a producer's experience with misinformation asked me to explain what I do. She said, 'Well you're doing a fantastic job. You prompted [the producer] to say what I needed to hear and I'm glad producers have someone like you to call.'"

8. Recommendations to help foster Cooperator's relationships with NRCS Staff

- Provide introductions to NRCS State Leadership to invite discussion of the Cooperative Agreement project outline and timeline, identify space for direct collaboration, and hear about any outreach or TA priorities the state has and how Cooperators might aid them.
- National and State Leaders invite Cooperators to meet national, regional, and/or state program and service specialists, to build relationships relevant to project deliverables and receive any needed training in technical information relative to programs and services.
- State Leaders invite Cooperators to meet Field Staff in regions where outreach and services need to be increased.
- Before the end of an agreement, determine avenues for Cooperators to provide direct feedback to the Agency, specific contacts, and direction on the most beneficial type and timing of that feedback.
- National and State Leaders provide introductions to other Cooperators in overlapping states, regions, or nationally:
 - improve effective, place-based, and culturally appropriate outreach
 - make and receive trusted technical assistance referrals in states where work is based
 - better understand trends in NRCS service and access in other regions.

Conclusion

This report is based on experiences and data collected in implementing the successful RAFI's Conservation Resources for Resilient Farms project. RAFI found eight significant areas of challenge for Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers' engagement with NRCS and matches these challenges with recommendations for the Agency. We believe that NRCS implementing these suggested improvements at the local, state, and national levels will result in further expansion of services and benefits to Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers.

Our four key findings are:

1. Small-scale and Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers who proactively manage their impact on the natural resources of their working lands are insufficiently receiving NRCS services and benefits.
2. New or improved customer service training and protocols are needed to best serve small-scale and Historically Underserved Farmers and Rancher producers and successfully enroll them in the appropriate NRCS Program(s).
3. Individualized technical assistance funded by NRCS Cooperative Agreements is essential for increasing small-scale and Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers' access to NRCS services and benefits.
4. Generalized outreach is insufficient for increasing small-scale and Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers' engagement and success with NRCS.

Appendix

Additional Data Referenced in Report

Conservation Assessment and Farmer Intake Data, 2022-2024

Appendix Chart 1: Survey of 225 Producers' viewpoints related to their awareness, perceived access, and involvement with NRCS to date.

Source: RAFI Conservation Assessment

Level of access and awareness of government resources for on-farm conservation efforts on the farm/ranch land they own or manage	Total %
Access to government resources for conservation enhancement has been limited since beginning farming.	26.2%
Access to government resources for conservation enhancement has been next to none since beginning farming.	21.3%
I did not know that there are government resources for conservation enhancement available to me.	19.1%
I have had ample government resources for conservation enhancement since beginning farming.	7.6%
No response	11.6%
I have known there are government resources available for conservation enhancement available to me but I haven't tried to access any.	14.2%
Number of producers who report awareness of or involvement with NRCS	Total %
Knowing what the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is	60.4%
Not knowing or unsure of what the USDA NRCS is	30.2%
(left blank)	8.4%
Report having been involved with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) prior to this project	40.4%
Report having NOT been involved with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) prior to this project	46.2%
Report requesting assistance and then experienced challenges with accessing NRCS services and/or funding	37.4%

Appendix Chart 2: Specific Challenges experience by producers* who had requested assistance from NRCS prior to requesting RAFI and Project Partner Technical Assistance.

Source: RAFI and Project Partner Farmer Intake Form

Type of Challenging Experience	% of Producers
Affording my portion of the project's cost (i.e. 10%-50% of the total project costs)	20.6%
Being aware of / understanding eligibility for financial assistance	32.4%
Being aware of / understanding eligibility for programs specific to my location	35.3%
Being aware of / understanding my eligibility for advance payments of my financial assistance	26.5%
Being deemed ineligible for financial assistance	26.5%
Communication trouble with a TSP	2.9%
Completing the financial assistance application	5.9%
Conservationist acting passive, apathetic, "uninvested" in my farm hopes and dreams	26.5%
Conservationist returning phone calls/emails**	20.0%
Having access to Technical Service Providers (TSPs) in my state for the projects I want to do	11.8%
I was told I have more to do before being eligible but I'm not sure what I need to do or in what order I need to do things	32.4%
Knowing how to prepare for a farm visit	26.5%
Making successful in-person or phone contact with an NRCS conservationist (Agent)	26.5%
No support budgeting for my portion of the project cost (i.e.10% or higher personal costs)	14.7%
Scheduling a farm visit	29.4%
Told you cannot apply at this time or other misinformation about the funding timeline**	20.0%
Understanding costs of one or more projects	14.7%
Understanding terminology	32.4%
Understanding the financial assistance/cost-share procedures and paperwork after a project is approved (requesting reimbursement, requesting vendor payments, etc)	5.9%
Using the website	14.7%
Visit led to no follow-up support to apply for current year financial assistance	26.5%
Visit led to no follow-up support to develop a future "conservation plan"	35.3%
Other	20.6%

***Responses collected from Southeast U.S., Puerto Rico, and U.S. Virgin Islands**

****RAFI and some producers acknowledge that "minimal effort" may be due in part to staff being stretched thin, the shortage of experts, and/or insufficient knowledge of individual conservation practices or the variety of conservation practices.**

Appendix Chart 3: Producers' interest in conserving natural resources like soil, water, nutrients, air, and biodiversity on your farmland

Source: RAFI Conservation Assessment, 2022

Level of interest in conserving natural resources on farmland	% of Producers
I've been interested since I began farming.	74.7%
My interest has developed over time.	17.5%
My interest is just now budding.	7.8%
I was never interested	0%

NRCS Technical Assistance Methodology and Data

Between June 2022-April 2024, 386 Producers contacted RAFI, requesting technical assistance to better access NRCS services and benefits. As of April 30,2024, 326 producers received technical assistance. The number of total producers provided TA will change after RAFI actualizes data from Project Partners' last Quarterly Report, due May 16, 2024.

Key characteristics of this project's technical assistance included:

- utilizing a Producer Intake Form to document farm and producer information, their history with conservation and natural resource challenges, and their history with NRCS.
- introducing producers to NRCS's purpose and key forms of support relevant to their farm.
- registering producers with Farm Service Agency (FSA) or updating their farm record (see FSA-specific TA guidance below).
- actively listening to producers' experience with the Agency staff or processes, in cases when a producer felt unserved or discriminated against.
- understanding where communication "broke down" between producer and Agency staff or what protocols were or were not followed.
- determining if the producer understands NRCS "resource concerns," ranking deadlines, application and ranking process, and their projected costs.
- assistance with the application and supplemental eligibility paperwork with FSA.
- assistance with communication, by phone or site visit, with the agency.
- providing occasional check-ins to offer follow up assistance.

Appendix Chart 4: Number of producers receiving levels of technical assistance from Project TA Providers

Source: RAFI TA Case Data and Project Partners' Quarterly Reports

Levels of technical assistance provided	Southeast Region*	Puerto Rico	U.S. Virgin Islands
Information	326	86	17
Conservation planning	187	58	5
Farm visit	131	17	19
Assistance applying	127	11	6
Producers Applied	157	29	5
Producers reported receiving contracts	106	5	2

*Southeast region counts include producers in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

FSA Technical Assistance Methodology for Increasing NRCS-FSA Eligibility

Project TA Providers provided FSA registration guidance by:

1. Offering individualized assistance with forms and communication to FSA
2. Contacting FSA leadership when long processing trends were reported
3. Created a blog to assist producers quickly with step-by-step instructions relevant when applying to NRCS
4. Sent notices to all producer contacts about updating their farm record in October, the beginning of each fiscal year when forms need to be resubmitted

Updating the FSA Farm Record — In cases in which a producer had a farm record/farm number with FSA and easily “cleared” this first stage of eligibility, but did not have an “updated farm record” for the *current* fiscal year, Project TA providers helped producers determine if their farm record required updating for the new fiscal year and TA providers assisted producers in updating their Farm record by:

1. Deciphering any conflicting information about which forms would be required.
2. Providing digital or printed forms in the appropriate language.
3. Completing forms together, especially Highly Erodible Land Certification and Wetland Certification Form AD-1026 and HUFR Form CCC-860.
4. Submitting the forms efficiently, and getting confirmation of FSA’s receipt.

Featured Success Story

This story was published in the RAFL magazine Living Roots, issue 3.

John and Stephanie Campbell, Dinner Bell Farm in Snow Camp, NC

Having relocated from Florida to Snow Camp, NC to be closer to their daughter, John and Stephanie Campbell found themselves increasingly drawn to diversified small-scale farming. Soon after beginning their farm, they received NRCS assistance for a high tunnel. But they were unaware of the multitude of other NRCS practices they might qualify for.

In a conversation about rotational grazing and silvopasture with RAFL's McGirt, the Campbells described various infrastructure needs such as a farm well, suitable fencing for rotational grazing, a more efficient livestock watering system, and new forage species to support livestock expansion. They knew they could apply to NRCS for a well, but McGirt recommended applying to NRCS not only for a well, but also for practices that address their other livestock watering challenges — a “bundle” of many individual NRCS practices to make livestock watering more efficient and water conserving.

The Campbells saw that bundling could mitigate their challenges by achieving both short term infrastructure solutions and conservation goals. McGirt helped them complete application materials and make contact with NRCS, even accompanying them for NRCS's first farm visit to begin developing an NRCS conservation plan. This plan is what would eventually compete in NRCS' system for financial assistance.

Stephanie Campbell reports, “It's a confusing process, and having someone who could explain what technical terms meant, understand best practices, and consider our farm's needs in relation to what NRCS offers really helped us.” Having received pre-approval for EQIP financial assistance in summer 2023, the Campbells received cost-share assistance for a well, livestock pipeline and waterers, heavy use protection areas, and polywire fencing. Stephanie says, “This is going to be a game changer for our farming. What NRCS is providing isn't anywhere near the total it will cost us, but it makes a big difference.”



Trying to improve their pasture condition and keep their goats and pigs out of the adjacent creek and pond, the Campbells sought and received NRCS assistance to erect exclusion fencing, which they can now rotationally graze their livestock within.

Conservation Practice Case Study

High Tunnel System (Code 325) – Small-farm infrastructure or environmental mitigation?

The majority of crop producers served by RAFI and Project Partners who sought financial assistance through EQIP for a high tunnel clearly understood the structure as a production-enhancing, season extension tool, and less of a resource-conserving practice. So when requesting assistance from the Agency for a high tunnel, producers often start with an assumption that financial assistance comes as a production-improving grant. They are unaware that to NRCS, their application for a high tunnel is actually “check in the box” for the resource concern: “Improve Plant Health and Vigor.”

Despite being a simpler, single conservation practice application for a Field Office to process, producers often contacted Project TA Providers for technical assistance related to their High Tunnel application.

Producers specifically requested TA when:

1. The **wait time** for high tunnel assistance exceeded their expectations.
2. The **actual costs were prohibitive**. And/or,
3. They felt barred from getting **supporting practices** included in their application for improved ranking and overall production/conservation outcome.

Wait Time — Producers requesting a high tunnel often do not realize that they may be very low on the ranking list due to either their application timing or their ranking score. This ranking score versus available funds can extend their wait for assistance over two years.

Cost — Producers reported that the cost-share value of High Tunnel System contracts were too low, and that even with the maximum payment for the largest tunnel, they often had \$6,000 more in out-of-pocket costs. While most producers understood they would have cost-share responsibility, few understood at the time of application and often at the time of contract that their out of pocket costs would be significantly higher due to the higher cost of materials and labor to erect the structure.

Value of supporting practice — Producer awareness is low for the supporting conservation practices that can be applied within high tunnel structures. When applied inside and outside of the tunnel, these practices address resource concerns beyond the structure’s capability and enhance its operation. However, producers seeking high tunnel cost-share assistance are unaware of these supporting practices or are unaware that NRCS could cost-share these practices in addition to the structure itself. In Project TA Providers’ experience, very few NRCS field staff promote these supporting practices, which could further support the producer economically. 2. Recommendations to improve understanding of NRCS purpose and matching producer needs.



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