

Nebraska Fact Sheet: Seasonal High Tunnel System for Crops

January 2010

Overview

A seasonal high tunnel is a polyethylene covered structure with no electrical, ventilation, or heating system, at least 6 feet in height, which modifies the climate to create more favorable growing conditions for vegetable and other speciality crops grown in the natural soil beneath it. Potential natural resource benefits from using tunnel structures include:

- Improved plant quality;
- Improved soil quality, and;
- Improved water quality through methods such as reduced nutrient and pesticide transport.

Seasonal High Tunnel Standards

NRCS will use an interim conservation practice standard to allow funding of these structures on a pilot basis. High tunnels are applicable to agriculture producers who grow crops which need an extended growing season either earlier or later in the year (or both).

Requirements for applying this practice include:

- Must be located on existing cultivated cropland that has an active crop production history;
- Crops grown within the tunnel must be planted directly into the natural soil profile – raised beds of natural soil can be used but the use of tables, benches, growing racks, portable pots or hydroponics is not eligible;
- No electrical, heating and/or mechanical ventilation systems are allowed;
- Participants are required to purchase, plan, design and construct the tunnel structure in accordance with the commercial manufacturer's recommendations;
- As a minimum, the structure must use 6-mil greenhouse-grade UV resistant polyethylene covers, and;

- High tunnels must be maintained for a minimum of four years. Participants are responsible to repair and/or replace any materials damaged by wind, snow and other weather conditions or situations for the entire four year period.

These are intended to be “seasonal” structures which are not designed to sustain a heavy snow load. The participant will be responsible for deciding whether or not to remove the cover at the end of the growing season based on manufactures’ recommendations.

Water runoff from the high tunnels can cause ponding and runoff issues that may require the application of several other practices such as underground outlets, grassed waterways, critical area plantings and sediment basins. If they are needed, these additional practices will need to be planned and installed as a condition for the installation of a high tunnel. Additional practices, such as nutrient and pest management and crop rotation, should also be considered as part of the conservation plan.



A seasonal high tunnel is a polyethylene covered structure used to create favorable growing conditions.

What is NOT Eligible as a High Tunnel

These structures are not greenhouses and are not permanent structures. These structures are only for use in growing crops. The use of these structures for housing livestock is not allowable through this program.

Financial Assistance

Financial assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is limited to a maximum size of 2,178 square feet of land under the high tunnel per USDA identified agricultural operation. The NRCS payment rate in Nebraska will be \$1.85 per square foot.

Please note: Only a limited number of seasonal high tunnels will be funded during the recently announced 3-year pilot study. Future funding opportunities will be determined by the results of this initial study.

Applying for Funds Through EQIP

EQIP is a voluntary conservation program administered and carried out through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. It supports agriculture production and environmental quality as compatible goals.

Through EQIP, land users may receive financial and technical help to voluntarily address soil, water and related natural resource concerns on private lands with structural and management conservation practices.

Applications for participation in EQIP can be made at a local NRCS field office. All EQIP applications are evaluated through an environmental scoring and ranking process. In Nebraska, the demand for EQIP funding generally far exceeds the available funding, and only those applications which rank the highest are extended an offer to develop a funded contract.

In general, EQIP is intended to assist agricultural producers with the implementation of conservation practices that help solve an identified resource concern that currently exists on their farm. EQIP rules specify

that payments are limited to the implementation of newly applied conservation practices that have not been previously established. EQIP is **not** a grant program. EQIP payments are made through a reimbursement process. Participants must successfully carry out the approved conservation actions, then certify the practice for payment.

Eligibility for EQIP

To receive cost sharing through EQIP you:

- Must have an active interest in agricultural crop production at the time you apply for the program;
- Must have a minimum of \$1,000 in documented annual agricultural production;
- Must own or have control of the agricultural land for the length of the contract;
- Must comply with highly erodible and wetland provisions of the farm bill;
- Must meet the USDA defined Annual Gross Income (AGI) limits, and;
- Must establish eligibility as a producer within the USDA record system before applying.

To apply for EQIP funds, farmers must visit their local USDA Service Center to make an application. In order to receive funds through the EQIP for any conservation practice, an application must be approved and a contract signed prior to any work being done.

When applying for EQIP, especially when applying for the first time, producers should be mindful that they will need to fill out forms providing USDA with information that confirms that they are eligible to participate in these public-funded programs. NRCS staff will be available in the service center to help producers through this application process.

More Information

For more information about EQIP and this new Seasonal Tunnel System practice, visit your local NRCS field office located in the USDA Service Center, or the Nebraska NRCS web site at www.ne.usda.gov, under the Programs tab.

