Funding Available for High Tunnels

USDA’s Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) is offering financial assistance payments to Hawaii farmers to establish seasonal high tunnel systems for crops via a three-year pilot program.

A seasonal high tunnel, also called a hoop house, is a polyethylene covered structure with no electrical, heating, and/or mechanical ventilation systems that is used to cover crops to extend the growing season in an environmentally safe manner.

By extending the growing season, high tunnels provide farmers the opportunity to successfully grow crops, and to increase production, quality, and yields. In temperate regions of the U.S. mainland, high tunnels usually extend the growing season by increasing temperature. In Hawaii, high tunnels may be used to extend the growing season in other ways, such as by acting as 'rain-shelters' to allow for the production of high-value horticultural crops during the winter/rainy months (when crop prices are normally higher). Runoff captured from the tunnel covers may also extend the growing season by providing a supply of irrigation water during the summer/drier months.

Potential natural resource benefits of high tunnel structures include: improving plant quality; improving soil quality; and improving water quality through methods such as reduced nutrient and pesticide transport. As part of the pilot program, farmers who receive financial assistance payments will document their yields, length of growing season, and use of nutrient and pesticides via yearly reports. The information will be used by NRCS to evaluate the natural resource benefits of high tunnel systems and decide whether to continue the use of the practice after the end of the pilot.

Financial assistance payments for establishing high tunnels are being offered at the rate of $2.51 per square foot to regular producers and $3.01 per square foot to Historically Underserved producers up to 2,178 square feet per operation. Historically Underserved producers include limited resource, beginning, and socially disadvantaged farmers. The payments are being offered via the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the EQIP Organic Initiative, and the Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) program. These programs also offer payments to farmers to establish numerous other conservation practices which may be used to address natural resource problems. The deadline for applying for this year’s funding under the EQIP Organic Initiative is March 12, 2010. Although the deadlines for the EQIP and the AMA programs have already passed, farmers may still file an application for the next funding cycle. Interested farmers should contact their local NRCS Service Center to apply for program funding. Service Center contact information is available on the Pacific Islands Area NRCS website (http://www.pia.nrcs.usda.gov/contact/).

The pilot program requires that the high tunnels be installed on existing cultivated cropland and to crops grown in the natural soil profile. The high tunnels must be prefabricated manufactured tunnels, available as kits; 6 feet in height at their highest point; and have a minimum 6-mil UV resistant polyethylene cover. The pilot program also requires that farmers install supporting practices to address all environmental concerns associated with the use of high tunnels, complete three yearly reports and maintain the tunnels for 4 years.

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