

Lessons Learned from an NRCS Contract: Three Feathers Farm's Experience with EQIP

Background Information:

OFRF is currently working to increase farmer and community awareness of available federal funding for organic and transitioning farms. We interviewed Héktor Calderón-Victoria of Three Feathers Farm in California about his farm's experience receiving support for a hedgerow planting and high tunnel construction through the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

You can [read more about Three Feathers Farm and their experience utilizing EQIP](#) funding to implement sustainability measures on the farm.

While these programs have ultimately been very beneficial for his farm, Héktor shared some of the challenges he experienced, including navigating the federal agencies, communication, and project timelines. We pulled out the **key takeaways** so that other farmers who are interested in utilizing these federal funding programs can learn from his experience.



Héktor Calderón-Victoria farms at Three Feathers Farm in California and utilizes NRCS EQIP.

Key Takeaways:

Navigating Federal Agencies

Challenges:

- It's hard to know which USDA agency does what.
- Figuring out who to talk to can be confusing.

Lessons Learned:

- Familiarize yourself with the USDA's different agencies.
- **Get a Farm Identification Number** from FSA before applying for NRCS programs.
- Use farmer-support groups like **OFRF for resources** about accessing USDA programs.

Language Matters

Challenges:

- NRCS agents use technical terms that farmers may not know, especially for conservation standards.

Lessons Learned:

- Ask questions if you don't understand something.
- Ask your NRCS agent to explain acronyms or terms in plain language.
- Take notes and look things up later.

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Communication Gaps and Outdated Systems

Challenges:

- USDA programs require a lot of paperwork.
- Some of their systems are outdated and not very user-friendly.
- Many forms require printing, signing, and scanning, or potentially signing in person.

Lessons Learned:

- Keep good records of contracts and communications with your agents.
- Create folders in your email, computer, and/or on paper.
- Use reminders and calendars to track due dates, follow-up tasks, and reimbursement deadlines.
- Don't expect agents to remind you—stay proactive and organized.



Long Delays and Understaffing

Challenges:

- NRCS offices may be understaffed, especially with recent federal firings and funding freezes.
- Even the most well-intentioned staff may be overwhelmed by the amount of farmer requests.

Lessons Learned:

- Be patient, proactive, and persistent.
- Advocate for yourself and keep checking in..
- Reach out again if you don't hear back—try email, phone, or visiting the office.



Awareness of Practices that Apply to Organic Farms

Challenges:

- Not all NRCS agents know which programs work well for organic farms.
- Knowledge varies by office, region, and individual staff.

Lessons Learned:

- Learn what practices are available in your area.
- Ask other farmers what federal programs have worked for them.
- Read OFRF's farmer stories featuring **farms that have implemented NRCS practices** and refer to the **TOPP W Toolkits** for specific program details.



Project Implementation and Reimbursement Timelines

Challenges:

- The USDA contract timelines may not match your farm's needs perfectly.
- It may not be clear how long the process takes—from application to project completion to reimbursement.
- Advance Payment options aren't always volunteered by staff.

Lessons Learned:

- Plan ahead—don't wait until you're ready to build to apply.
- Ask if you're eligible for the **Advance Payment option**.
- Ask your field agent detailed questions about the project timeline:
 - When is your application due?
 - When will you hear back?
 - When can you start the project?
 - How long do you have to finish it?
 - When and how do you submit for reimbursement?

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