

The Innovative Practices for Soil Health Act of 2024

Healthy soil is one of the most vital resources a farmer can have. Managing for healthy soil can improve farm productivity and incomes, insulate a farm against extreme weather, and improve a farm's impact on watersheds and wildlife.

There are many strategies for improving soil health on farms. But one of the most effective strategies available is installing perennial systems. Perennial agricultural practices help keep soil covered year-round, protecting it from erosive forces like wind and rain. Perennial agriculture keeps the soil anchored in place with living roots, which help stimulate microbial life in the soil column and cycle nutrients.

USDA can be a helpful partner to farmers installing perennial conservation practices through the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). While these programs are great tools, they can be improved to better support innovative soil health strategies such as perennial systems and agroforestry. Successfully designing, installing, and maintaining perennial systems or agroforestry on farms is a long and complex process that comes with real costs as well as periods of reduced income. USDA's conservation programs need to accommodate this reality and better promote these soil health strategies.

The Innovative Practices for Soil Health Act seeks to make needed improvements to USDA conservation programs, as well as designate four national and regional agroforestry centers, to ensure these programs can be useful for farmers who want to incorporate perennial systems or agroforestry into their operations.

The Innovative Practices for Soil Health of 2024 directly addresses the needs of agroforestry and other perennial systems while also making other program improvements. The Act would:

- Increase technical assistance for farmers using conservation programs to install perennial production systems.
- Direct USDA to enter into cooperative agreements to provide programs tailored to farmers utilizing perennial production systems.
- Make on-farm nutrient cycling and perennial production explicitly eligible for EQIP Conservation Innovation Grants On-Farm Trials.
- Provide identical definitions of "resource concern" to CSP and EQIP.
- Provide a definition of "perennial production systems" for CSP
- Add perennial production systems to the list of systems that can receive supplemental incentive payments in CSP.
- Require that more practices, including agroforestry and organic practices, receive forgone income payments as part of a CSP contract.
- Make greenhouse gas reduction planning an eligible conservation activity in EQIP.
- Give farmers equal credit for maintaining and adopting new conservation practices when applying to CSP.
- Clarify the ranking of CSP renewal applications based on existing and planned conservation activities.
- Create payments for soil health tests in CSP.
- Add tribes to the list of entities eligible to become a certified Technical Service Provider (TSP).

- Add soil health planning, GHG reduction planning, integrated pest management, agroforestry planning, and organic transition planning to the list of technical disciplines that qualify someone to become a certified TSP.
- Streamline certification for organic professionals in the TSP program.
- Designate a national Agroforestry Research, Development and Demonstration Center.
- Establish three regional agroforestry research and development centers.