



Resilience CAP

Policy for Resilient Agricultural Systems: Technical Assistance Recommendations

The Resilience CAP is a federally-funded, multi-institution research project seeking to increase the resilience of U.S. agricultural systems. These policy recommendations were developed through several focus groups with experts throughout the agricultural sector. To learn more, visit ag-resilience.org/policy-socioeconomic.

RECOMMENDATIONS AT A GLANCE

STRENGTHEN STAFFING

- The federal government provides adequate NRCS and FSA staffing levels, restoring them at minimum to pre-pandemic levels, and increases availability of staff during evening and weekend hours.
- State and local governments build technical assistance capacity by investing in staffing of state and/or county offices that serve farmers in order to best leverage available state and federal working lands conservation funding.
- State governments reinvest in Extension personnel and programming to provide tailored technical assistance to farmers and landowners on resilient agriculture systems. Extension is also well-placed to conduct a needs assessment and comparison of the effectiveness and reach of agricultural technical assistance through Extension, federal programs, and industry/retail offerings.

BUILD CONNECTIONS

- USDA and state governments increase support for programs that create opportunities for in-person relationship development and information exchange, such as watershed groups, field days, and demonstration farms.

MOBILIZE EXPERTISE

- USDA prioritizes and increases support for cooperative agreements with nonprofit organizations to provide resilient agriculture technical assistance to farmers. Agreements encourage flexibility and creativity in technical assistance delivery to bridge existing program and practice structures of local USDA offices and include professional development opportunities for USDA staff.

INCREASE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

- USDA identifies and lowers financial assistance program barriers to be more accessible and user-friendly for emerging farmers.



Technical Assistance Staffing

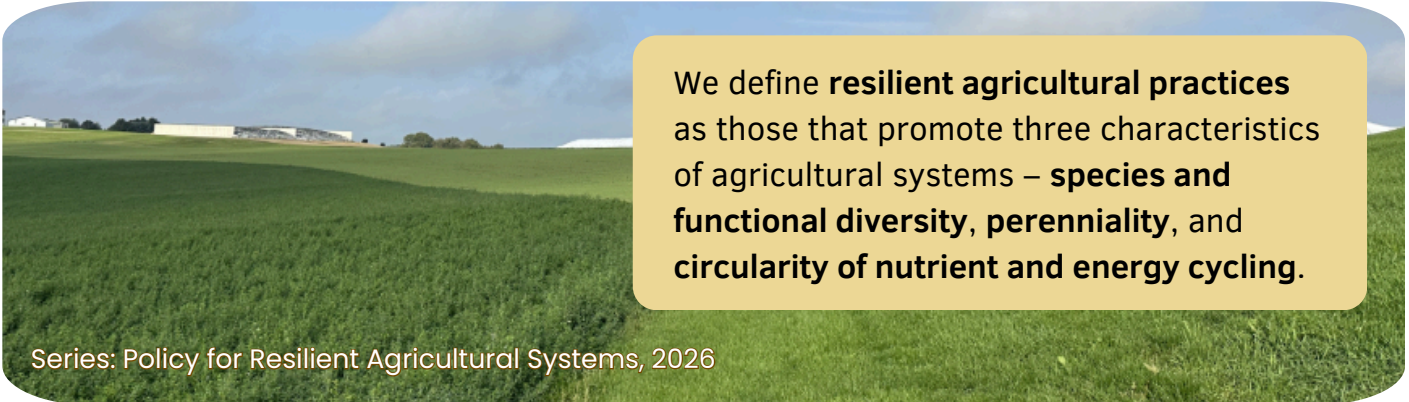
Current technical assistance staffing does not effectively serve farmers at local, state, and federal levels.

Recommendations:

- The federal government provides adequate NRCS and FSA staffing levels, restoring them at minimum to pre-pandemic levels, and increases availability of staff during evening and weekend hours.
- State and local governments build technical assistance capacity by investing in staffing of state and/or county offices that serve farmers in order to best leverage available state and federal working lands conservation funding.
- State governments reinvest in Extension personnel and programming to provide tailored technical assistance to farmers and landowners on resilient agriculture systems. Extension is also well-placed to conduct a needs assessment and comparison of the effectiveness and reach of agricultural technical assistance through Extension, federal programs, and industry/retail offerings.

Technical assistance for farmers is crucial for providing access to information about more resilient practices. For farmers using or transitioning to resilient practices, guidance and ongoing support from informed technical assistance providers is critical. Sufficient USDA technical assistance staffing has been an ongoing challenge, both in terms of numbers of FTE, and also in providing services during evening or weekend hours when many farmers are more available to access services.

The federal government has increased funding for cost-share to farmers for USDA conservation practices over the last few years, but recently cut technical assistance staff. The federal budget bill passed in July 2025 preserved increases to working lands conservation programs introduced in the Inflation Reduction Act in 2022.



We define **resilient agricultural practices** as those that promote three characteristics of agricultural systems – **species and functional diversity, perenniality, and circularity of nutrient and energy cycling.**



However, **since January 2025, USDA staffing has decreased by about 20%**, with many leaving state and local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA) offices. Decreasing staff capacity may exacerbate the tendency of USDA staff to focus on processing fewer, more costly contracts to allocate available state funding each year. **This reduces the number of farmers receiving cost-share support for conservation practices and decreases the types of conservation practices and diversified cropping systems being implemented across each state.** Often smaller contracts involve fewer acres where farmers are using or transitioning to resilient practices, practices that can provide higher ecological benefits per program dollar. In addition to USDA staff reductions, University Extension services have faced cuts over the last two decades. Historically, the Cooperative Extension System has been a successful means of providing region-specific technical assistance to farmers.

Technical Assistance Connections

Farmers lack opportunities for farmer-to-farmer and farmer-to-advisor connection and relationship development.

Recommendation:

USDA and state governments increase support for programs that create opportunities for in-person relationship development and information exchange, such as watershed groups, field days, and demonstration farms.

Programs and **events that highlight farmer-to-farmer relationships, such as farmer watershed groups, field days, and demonstration farms, are recognized as valuable by both farmers and technical assistance providers.** NRCS and other local government conservation staff often attend farmer-to-farmer events, either to present on subject matter or cost-share programs. These farmer-centered events are a key way that these professionals build relationships with farmers and the natural resources conservation community.



Technical Assistance Expertise

Farmers report that their local staff are often not sufficiently knowledgeable about a range of resilient practices.

Recommendation:

USDA prioritizes and increases support for cooperative agreements with nonprofit organizations to provide resilient agriculture technical assistance to farmers. Agreements encourage flexibility and creativity in technical assistance delivery to bridge existing program and practice structures of local USDA offices and include professional development opportunities for USDA staff.

Across USDA offices, staff knowledge and capacity to advise on resilient agricultural practices vary greatly. **Farmer-serving nonprofit organizations have a long track record of filling the gap** by providing planning and implementation technical assistance, especially for emerging farmers transitioning to resilient practices. In some instances, nonprofits also provide professional development to staff at local USDA and county offices, along with introductions to farmers who have successfully implemented resilient practices.

Technical Assistance Financial Support

New and low-resourced farmers face challenges to accessing available financial assistance for implementing conservation practices, which is exacerbated by decreased staffing at USDA offices.

Recommendation:

USDA identifies and lowers financial assistance program barriers to be more accessible and user-friendly for emerging farmers.

USDA financial assistance programs greatly benefit emerging farmers, many of whom are interested in implementing resilient practices. **By changing some components, programs may be more accessible. Potential changes could include, for example:** expand the availability of 50% advanced payments for new or low-resourced farmers; reduce farmer match requirements; extend the timeframe for expending funds to at least 120 days; and offer exemption opportunities for critical challenges beyond farmer control, such as rapid increases in input costs or lack of availability of materials or contractors necessary to complete projects.