



BUREAU OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND RURAL RESOURCES
AGRICULTURAL RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, CONSERVATION & FORESTRY

Maine Healthy Soils Program Top-off Incentive Program (TIP)

Grant Funding Opportunity Request for Applications (RFA)

RFA#: ARDTIP27

Released: September 23, 2026

RFA Coordinator	All communication regarding the RFA must be made through the RFA Coordinator identified below. Name: Matthew Boucher Title: State Soil Scientist Email: matthew.boucher@maine.gov
Information Session	The RFA Coordinator will offer online information sessions on: Wednesday, September 30, 2026, 1:00 p.m. ET REGISTER HERE Wednesday, October 7, 2026, 2:00 p.m. ET REGISTER HERE Thursday, October 15, 2026, 9:00 a.m. ET REGISTER HERE
Written Questions	All written questions must be submitted via email to matthew.boucher@maine.gov by 12:00 noon, ET on 10/21/2026. Please use ARDTIP27 QUESTION as the subject line in your email. Please review the Questions and Answers subsection of this RFA for further requirements and instructions.
Application Submission Deadline	DACF must receive applications by the Application Submission Deadline: 11/6/2026, no later than 12:00 noon, ET. Applications must be submitted according to the instructions provided in this RFA. APPLICATION LINK
Further Resources	Additional information and resources can be found on the program website linked here: Maine Healthy Soils Program website.

	For timely information about this RFA and other DACF grant opportunities, enroll in the Maine DACF “Agricultural Grants and Loans” email listserv online.
Eligible Applicants	Farmers in Maine are eligible to apply, eligible applicants must: • Own and/or operate a farm operation located in Maine. • Have a USDA-NRCS EQIP contract with eligible practice codes as listed in Section 1E of this RFA. • Have completed work or plan to complete work on a USDA-NRCS EQIP contract between January 1, 2022 and June 30, 2031. • Produce agricultural products with a gross annual value of at least \$2,000 that are intended to be sold commercially in one (1) of the last three (3) years. ALTERNATIVELY, applicants may be a farm operation that produces agricultural products with a gross annual value of at least \$2,000 to support community access to agricultural products. • Have <u>access</u> to at least one (1) acre of farmable land. This land does NOT need to be contiguous, and you do NOT need to have one full acre of production (the land may be rested, forest, generally out of production, etc.). • Enroll in the Maine Healthy Soils Program by signing up for program email updates. If you have yet to enroll in email updates, you may do so via this link.

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1. OVERVIEW

A. Background and Purpose

This solicitation and Request for Applications (**RFA**) identifies the eligibility criteria for the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry's (**DACF**) Top-off Incentive Program (**TIP**) and provides the instructions for submitting an application. The TIP is a payment-for-practice program that offers funds to farmers based on their participation in Environmental Quality Incentives Program (**EQIP**) contracts through the United States Department of Agriculture (**USDA**) Natural Resource Conservation Service (**NRCS**). TIP is an initiative within DACF's Maine Healthy Soils Program (**MHSP**), which was created by the 131st Legislative Assembly (12 M.R.S.A., Chapter 7) to promote and increase farmer participation in federal soil health programs.

B. Eligible Applicants

Farmers in Maine are eligible to apply, eligible applicants must:

- Own and/or operate a **farm operation** located in Maine.
- Have a **USDA-NRCS EQIP contract** with eligible practice codes as listed in Section 1E of this RFA.
- Have completed work or plan to complete work on a USDA-NRCS EQIP contract between January 1, 2022 and June 30, 2031.
- Produce **agricultural products** with a gross annual value of at least \$2,000 that are intended to be sold commercially in one (1) of the last three (3) years. ALTERNATIVELY, applicants may be a **farm operation** that produces **agricultural products** with a gross annual value of at least \$2,000 to support community access to **agricultural products**.
- Have access to at least one (1) acre of farmable land. This land does NOT need to be contiguous, and you do NOT need to have one full acre of production (the land may be rested, forest, generally out of production, etc.).
- Enroll in the Maine Healthy Soils Program by signing up for program email updates. If you have yet to enroll in email updates, you may do so via [this link](#).

C. Funding Available and Payment Structure

All eligible applicants who submit a request for payment for eligible **practice codes** will receive a TIP payment.

- DACF anticipates awarding up to \$500,000 through this RFA process.
- Payment amounts are determined formulaically based on 1) the amount of funding made available by DACF; 2) the total number of applicants to the program; 3) the practice code **cost per unit** as outlined in each EQIP contract; 4) the number of units for a given practice code as outlined in each EQIP contract; 5) the **cost-share percentage** paid by USDA-NRCS as outlined in each EQIP contract.
- For each practice code, payments may not exceed the difference between the **total cost per unit** and the cost per unit defined in the contract between the farmer and the USDA-NRCS. For example, if the total cost per unit is \$400 and the cost per unit defined in the contract is \$300, then the farmer would be eligible to receive a maximum of \$100 per unit for that practice code.
- If the total payment request from all applicants exceeds the amount of funding made available by DACF, then each applicant would receive a payment proportional to the **collective request** submitted by all applicants. For example, if DACF made \$1,000 available and received 5 applications with a collective request of \$2,000, then you would receive a payment based on the percentage of the collective request that was yours. If you requested \$500 (25% of the total submitted request), then you would be eligible for a payment of \$250 (25% of the funding made available by DACF).
- You may “stack” eligible practice codes in your payment request. For example, if you have 3 eligible practice codes: A, B, and C, where practice code A is eligible for a TIP payment of \$100 per unit at 5 units; practice code B is eligible for a TIP payment of \$150 per unit at 10 units; and practice code C is eligible for a TIP payment of \$50 per unit at 100 units, then you would may request a total TIP payment of \$7,000.
- You may request an advance payment for contract items scheduled in future years. Advance payments for contract items scheduled in 2026 and 2027 will be paid upon completion of a written participation agreement with DACF. Advance payments in 2028 and beyond will be paid annually after verification forms are submitted (NRCS-CPA-1245 or NRCS-CPA-1156) to the RFA coordinator. For example, if you have an EQIP contract from 2026 – 2030 and you are eligible to receive a TIP payment of \$3,000 for each year of the contract (totaling \$15,000), then you would receive an advance payment of \$6,000 to cover 2026 and 2027. Once you complete your 2026/2027 EQIP contract work and submit form NRCS-CPA-1245 to the RFA coordinator, you will receive the advance payment for 2028. You will repeat the verification process annually through the end of your EQIP contract term. Alternatively, if you modify the implementation schedule between you and the USDA-NRCS, you will submit form NRCS-CPA-1156 to the RFA Coordinator. In this

scenario, you will NOT be paid a second time for rescheduled work. However, you will receive an advance payment for work originally scheduled for the upcoming year. When available, you must submit form NRCS-CPA-1245 verifying completion of rescheduled work.

- You may only submit ONE application for a TIP payment. The USDA-NRCS EQIP contract(s) for which you are submitting a request must have been active during the date range indicated in Section 1B of this RFA.
- DACF may award all or some of the available funding through this RFA process, may make multiple awards, and reserves the right to increase the amount of funding made available through this RFA process.

D. Funding Priorities

This payment-for-practice program offers payment ONLY for the practice codes listed in Section 1E of this RFA, which prioritizes practice codes that advance soil health on your farm. Payments are determined formulaically based on the terms in your individual contract with the USDA-NRCS. No practice codes listed in Section 1E are prioritized over others.

E. Allowable Costs

The following practice codes are eligible for payment through the TIP.

PRACTICE CODE	CODE NAME
101	CNMP Design and Implementation Activity
102	Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan
110	Grazing Management Plan
116	Soil Health Management Plan
138	Conservation Plan Supporting Organic Transition
140	Transition to Organic Design
148	Pollinator Habitat Design
157	Nutrient Management Design and Implementation Activity
159	Grazing Management Design
162	Soil Health Management System Design
163	Irrigation Water Management Design
164	Improved Management of Drainage Water Design
204	Adaptive Management for Soil Health
216	Soil Health Testing
217	Soil and Source Testing for Nutrient Management
219	Prescribed Grazing Conservation Evaluation
311	Alley Cropping
313	Waste Storage Facility
314	Brush Management

315	Herbaceous Weed Treatment
316	Animal Mortality Facility
317	Composting Facility
324	Deep Tillage
326	Clearing and Snagging
327	Conservation Cover
328	Conservation Crop Rotation
329	Residue and Tillage Management, No Till
330	Contour Farming
332	Contour Buffer Strips
336	Soil Carbon Amendment
340	Cover Crop
342	Critical Area Planting
345	Residue and Tillage Management, Reduced Till
362	Diversions
367	Roofs and Covers
378	Pond
379	Forest Farming
380	Windbreak/Shelterbelt Establishment and Renovation
381	Silvopasture
382	Fence
384	Woody Residue Treatment
386	Field Border
391	Riparian Forest Buffer
393	Filter Strip
412	Grassed Waterway
422	Hedgerow Planting
430	Irrigation Pipeline
436	Irrigation Reservoir
441	Irrigation System, Microirrigation
442	Sprinkler System
449	Irrigation Water Management
468	Lined Waterway or Outlet
472	Access Control
484	Mulching
490	Tree/Shrub Site Preparation
511	Forage Harvest Management
512	Pasture and Hay Planting
528	Prescribed Grazing
533	Pumping Plant
558	Roof Runoff Structure
561	Heavy Use Area Protection
578	Stream Crossing
585	Stripcropping
590	Nutrient Management

600	Terrace
606	Subsurface Drain
607	Surface Drain, Field Ditch
612	Tree/Shrub Establishment
629	Waste Treatment
635	Vegetated Treatment Area
638	Water and Sediment Control Basin
805	Amending Soil Properties with Lime
812	Raised Beds

F. Unallowable Costs

- Practice codes not listed in Section 1E of this RFA are not eligible for TIP payments.
- Your contract with the USDA-NRCS may include ineligible practice codes. This does NOT disqualify your contract from eligibility; you simply may not request payment for ineligible practice codes.
- You may NOT request payment for any work completed or to be completed for which you previously received TIP funds.

G. Payment-for-Practice Spending Timeframe

- DACF anticipates making payments by the end of each **state fiscal year** for which your EQIP contract is active. Once payment rates for each applicant are finalized, you will receive a written notice informing you of your payment amount.
- The scope of work for which you receive a TIP payment is defined by your contract with the USDA-NRCS. Payments are made as a reimbursement for work completed on these contracts. If you are requesting an advance, then you must verify that work for which you were advanced funds was completed prior to receiving future advances.
- The **official** payment terms will be finalized in a written participation agreement.
- **No payments will be issued for work completed outside of the timeframe defined in Section 1B of this RFA.**
- Reporting requirements for TIP payment recipients will be outlined in a written participation agreement and will include submission of forms NRCS-CPA-1245 and/or NRCS-CPA-1156 annually to the RFA coordinator. Future TIP payments will not be processed until these forms are received. The Department may include additional reporting requirements in the participation agreement as necessary.

2. APPLICATION PROCESS

A. Timeline and Key Dates

Application Opens, RFA is released	September 23, 2026
Information Sessions (Online)	Wednesday, September 30, 2026, 1:00 p.m. ET Wednesday, October 7, 2026, 2:00 p.m. ET Thursday, October 15, 2026, 9:00 a.m. ET
Written Questions Deadline	October 21, 2026, 12:00 noon, ET
Questions & Answer Summary posted to the program website listed in this RFA	October 23, 2026, 5:00 p.m. ET
Application Submission Deadline	November 6, 2026, 12:00 noon, ET
Conditional Awards Announced (anticipated month, may vary)	December 2026

B. Application Checklist

- ✓ Applicants must apply online using the link provided on the program website and listed on the cover page of this RFA.
- ✓ Applicants must submit Supplemental Documentation files as needed via email to the RFA Coordinator listed on the cover page of this RFA by the application deadline. These files include:
 - A completed ARDTIP27 Invoice Request Form available on the program website;
 - A copy of form NRCS-CPA-1155 for EACH contract for which a TIP payment is requested.
 - All AVAILABLE form(s) NRCS-CPA-1245 for EACH contract for which a TIP payment is requested to verify which contract items have already been completed.
- ✓ Applications must be received by the deadline listed on the cover page of this RFA by 12:00 noon, Eastern Time.

Application Steps

- ☐ Download and review 1) the entirety of this RFA (including appendices); 2) the ARDTIP27 Invoice Request Form; and 3) any frequently asked questions, tutorials, and/or examples. All materials needed to apply for this grant, except for required USDA-NRCS forms, are available on the program website listed on the cover page of this RFA.

- Attend a live information session and/or submit any written questions to best understand/clarify the application process, eligibility, practice codes, etc. **It is the responsibility of all applicants and other interested parties to examine the entire RFA and seek clarification in writing or at the information session if they have specific questions.**
- Reach out to your [local USDA - NRCS Service Center](#) to retrieve a digital copy of forms NRCS-CPA-1155 and NRCS-CPA-1245 for each EQIP contract for which you are requesting payment. These forms contain all the information you need to submit an ARDTIP27 Invoice Request Form.
- Fill out and submit the online **ARDTIP27 Application Form**. This is an online form available on the program website. Once you click the 'SUBMIT' button on the form, a copy of your form is automatically sent to the RFA coordinator.
- Download, fill out, and submit the **ARDTIP27 Invoice Request Form**. There is a tutorial available on the program website demonstrating how to fill out this form. You will need a copy of your **NRCS-CPA-1155 Form** to complete this form.
- Email the **ARDTIP27 Invoice Request Form**, the **NRCS-CPA-1155 Form(s)**, and any **NRCS-CPA-1245 Form(s)** to matthew.boucher@maine.gov. NRCS forms must be emailed in .pdf format and ARDTIP27 Invoice request form must be submitted as .xlsx. Include the name of your farm in the subject line of the email.

C. Information Session

- DACF staff will offer online question-and-answer office hours on the date(s) listed on the cover page of this RFA. **Register for the Information Session using the link on the cover page of this RFA.**
- In the information session, the RFA coordinator will review the grant RFA, application requirements, and take questions from participants.
- The RFA Coordinator will post a written summary of the session's questions and answers on the program website by the date stated on the RFA cover page.
- All interested parties are responsible for going to the program website listed in this RFA to obtain a copy of the Question & Answer Summary.

- Only those answers issued in writing on the program website will be considered binding.

D. Questions and Answers

Questions

- All questions must be submitted to matthew.boucher@maine.gov.
- Questions may not be submitted via phone call, text, or other means not listed in this RFA.
- The Written Questions deadline is **Wednesday, October 21, 2026 by 12:00 p.m. ET.**
- Only questions about application technology will be answered after the written question deadline (e.g. technical challenges with the application form and/or supplemental file submission). **Plan to allow at least two business days for a response.** Technology and/or submission troubleshooting questions must be directed to the RFA coordinator via email or phone call.
- We **CANNOT** guarantee technical support in the final 2 business days of the application window.

Answers

- The RFA Coordinator will post a written summary of the questions submitted, along with the corresponding answers, on the program website stated on the cover page.
- Responses will be written and publicly posted at least seven (7) calendar days before the application deadline.
- All interested parties are responsible for going to the program website listed in this RFA to obtain a copy of the Question & Answer Summary.
- Only those answers issued in writing on the program website will be considered binding.

3. APPLICATION QUESTIONS

You are HIGHLY encouraged to review any FAQs, tutorials, examples, and/or how-tos made available on the program website PRIOR to completing your application.

A. Applicant Information

1. What is your farm business name?
2. What is your legal first name?

3. What is your legal last name?
4. What is your email address?
5. What is your phone number? (xxx-xxx-xxxx)
6. Are you a Historically Underserved Farmer or Rancher according to the United States Department of Agriculture, as defined by the federal Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (2018 Farm Bill)? (Check all that apply)
7. What is the street address of your farm?
8. What is the town your farm is located in?
9. What is the ZIP code of the town your farm is located in?
10. What is the county that the farm is located in?
11. Is your mailing address different from your farm's physical address? (YES or NO)
12. What is your mailing street address? (Enter NA if not different from farm address)
13. What is the town your mailing address is located in? (Enter NA if not different from farm address)
14. What is the ZIP code of the town your mailing address is located in? (Enter NA if not different from farm address)
15. What is the county of your mailing address? (Enter NA if not different from farm address)
16. Have you received funding from any of the following DACF funding sources before? (Check all that apply)

B. Farm Information

1. What is the primary use of your farmland? (Select the best option from the dropdown menu, see application workbook for details)
2. How many acres are devoted to the PRIMARY farming use? (Enter a number)
3. What is the secondary use of your farmland? (Select the best option from the dropdown menu, see application workbook for details)
4. How many acres are devoted to the SECONDARY farming use? (Enter a number)
5. What is the TERTIARY use of your farmland? (Select the best option from the dropdown menu, see application workbook for details)
6. How many acres are devoted to the TERTIARY farming use? (Enter a number)
7. How many combined acres are devoted to your primary, secondary, and tertiary uses? (Enter a number)
8. Estimate the combined gross income generated from the agricultural products produced from your primary, secondary, and tertiary farmland uses.
9. How many years have you been farming on the farmland described above? (Enter a number)
10. Estimate the percentage of your farmed land that is owned versus leased.
11. Is any part of your farm CERTIFIED Organic? (Yes or no)
12. Describe how you will reinvest this incentive payment in soil health on your farm.

4. REQUIRED SUPPLEMENTAL AND VERIFICATION DOCUMENTATION

All supplemental documentation labeled ‘Required’ below must be submitted as a supplemental file. For documentation labeled ‘If applicable’, consult with your local NRCS office to see if you have those forms for the contract(s) for which you are submitting a TIP request. **Include your farm’s name in the subject line of the email.** All Supplemental Documentation must be emailed to matthew.boucher@maine.gov.

1. ARDTIP27 Invoice Request Form (Required)
 - a. Submit ONE completed copy of this form as part of your initial application.
2. NRCS-CPA-1155 Form(s) (Required).
 - a. Submit a form for EACH contract for which you are requesting payment as part of your initial application.
3. NRCS-CPA-1245 Form(s) (If applicable).
 - a. Submit this form ONLY if you are requesting payment for **contract items** that are ALREADY completed as of application submission.
 - b. You will need to submit this form annually as verification that work was completed before future TIP payments can be paid.
4. NRCS-CPA-1156 (If applicable).
 - a. This form is NOT submitted as part of your initial application and is only used for verification/reporting purposes.
 - b. You will need to submit this form ONLY if your schedule of operations is modified after your initial application for a TIP payment was submitted.
 - c. This form is used to verify that work for which an advance TIP payment was made is still planned.

5. SCORING RUBRIC

A. Pass/Fail

All applications are assessed pass/fail based on the following criteria. Applications **MUST** earn a ‘Pass’ score on all criteria listed below to receive funding.

Criteria	How is it scored?	Important Information
Eligibility	Pass/Fail	The applicant meets the eligibility criteria described in Section 1B of this RFA. Eligibility is assessed based on the information provided in the ARDTIP27 Application Form and in the Supplemental Documentation.
ARDTIP27 Application Form	Pass/Fail	The online form was completed and submitted by the application deadline.
ARDTIP27 Invoice Request Form	Pass/Fail	The form was completed and submitted by the application deadline. Only ONE

		form was submitted. Form was submitted in .xlsx format. Each row contains all requested data and is accurate when cross-checked with NRCS_CPA-1155 form(s).
NRCS-CPA-1155 Form(s)	Pass/Fail	A form was submitted for EACH contract for which an applicant is requesting payment. Form(s) were submitted by the application deadline. Forms were submitted in .pdf format. Submitted form(s) contain ALL data entered in ARDTIP27 Invoice Request Form.
NRCS-CPA-1245 Form(s)	Pass/Fail	A form was submitted for EACH contract for which an applicant is requesting payment. Form(s) were submitted by the application deadline. Forms were submitted in .pdf format. Submitted forms show all contract items that have been completed and paid out by NRCS as of application submission.

6. APPENDIX A: RFA TERMS and DEFINITIONS

Advance: A TIP payment made to support contract item implementation prior to completion of that contract item. Future TIP payments may not be made until submission of either form NRCS-CPA-1245 or NRCS-CPA-1156 to verify that work for which funds were advanced was completed or rescheduled.

Agricultural Products: Plants and animals useful to humans, including but not limited to, forages and sod crops, grains and food crops, dairy products, poultry and poultry products, bees, livestock and livestock products, fiber, fruits, berries, vegetables, flowers, seeds, grasses, Christmas trees, annual and perennial ornamental plants, ornamental trees, and other similar products.

Applicant: An eligible Farm Owner/Operator that is applying for the Top-Off Incentive Program.

Beginning Farmer or Rancher: Per the USDA, an individual who has not operated a farm or ranch, or who has operated a farm or ranch for not more than 10 consecutive years, and who

- Will materially and substantially participate in the operation of the farm or ranch.
- In the case of a contract with an individual, individually or with the immediate family, material and substantial participation requires that the individual provide substantial day-to-day labor and management of the farm or ranch, consistent with the practices in the county or State where the farm is located.

Collective request: The sum of all payment requests submitted by all eligible TIP applicants.

Commissioner: The Commissioner of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

Contract item: A specific, numbered line item in your EQIP contract (form NRCS-CPA-1155) that defines:

- The practice code to be implemented and a description of the practice code
- The tract(s) of land and specific field(s) on which the practice will be implemented
- The year the practice is planned to be implemented and the lifespan of the practice
- Whether or not the farmer/rancher is considered historically underserved
- The planned amount (number of units) intended to be implemented
- The unit cost of the practice code (how much the farmer/rancher will be paid per unit implemented)

- The year in which payment from NRCS is expected to be made

Cost-share percentage: The percentage of the total cost per unit that the NRCS will pay for a given practice code. The cost-share percentage is usually 75% or 90% of the total cost per unit.

Cost per unit (unit cost): The dollars per unit that a farmer is paid for implementation of a given practice code. This value is described for each contract item in your NRCS-CPA-1155 form. This value is 75% or 90% of the total cost per unit.

DACF/Department: The Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

EQIP: Environmental Quality Incentives Program. USDA-NRCS' flagship conservation program that helps farmers and ranchers integrate conservation into working lands. The MHSP Top-Off Incentive program is designed to encourage and support farmer/rancher enrollment in this program.

Farmland: Any tract or tracts of land used to produce agricultural products for a farm operation that consists of at least one (1) acre and has produced agricultural products with a gross annual value of at least \$2,000 in one (1) of the last three (3) years.

Farm Operation: An entity that uses farmland to produce agricultural products with the intent that they be sold commercially to generate income or otherwise creates access to farmland for historically underserved farmers.

Funding Cycle: The dates during which a funding initiative is active and accepting applications.

FY2027: Fiscal year 2027, beginning July 1st, 2026 - June 30, 2027.

Healthy soils best practices: Agricultural and land management practices that:

- A. Enhance the continuing capacity of soils to function as a vital, living biological system, increase soil organic matter, improve soil structure, strengthen water holding and nutrient holding capacity, improve nutrient cycling and result in net long-term greenhouse gas drawdown;
- B. Continuously improve the capacity of soils to host a diversity of beneficial organisms, grow vigorous crops, enhance agricultural resilience, including, but not limited to, the ability of crops and livestock to tolerate and recover from drought, temperature extremes, pests and other stressors, and help regulate the global climate by converting organic residue into stable soil organic matter and retaining nutrients, including, but not limited to, nitrogen and phosphorus;

- C. Continuously improve the health of soils by considering all relevant factors, including, but not limited to, depth of topsoil horizons, water infiltration rate, water holding capacity, organic carbon content, biologically accessible nutrient content, bulk density, biological activity and biological and microbiological diversity; and
- D. Follow the principles of minimizing soil disturbance and external inputs: keeping soil covered, maximizing biodiversity, maximizing the presence of living roots and integrating animals into land management, including grazing animals, birds, beneficial insects and keystone species, such as earthworms.

Limited Resource Farmer or Rancher: Per the USDA, a farmer or rancher with direct or indirect gross farm sales not more than the current indexed value in each of the previous two years, and who has a total household income at or below the national poverty level for a family of four, or less than 50 percent of county median household income in each of the previous two years.

Maine Healthy Soils Program Top-off Incentive Program (TIP): A payment-for-practice program that provides funding that incentivizes participation in the USDA – NRCS EQIP program.

NRCS: Natural Resources Conservation Service. An agency within the USDA focused on providing technical support to farmers and landowners to improve conservation initiatives on working lands.

Practice code: A three-digit code that identifies a given conservation practice supported by NRCS. Conservation practices are activities that the USDA funds through EQIP contracts. Each practice code has specific implementation requirements and payment rates, as defined between the farmer/rancher and the USDA in a contract. The Maine Field-Office Technical Guide contains a complete list of practice codes supported by Maine NRCS.

RFA: Request for Applications. This document is the RFA and contains all relevant information required to apply for MHSP TIP payment(s).

Socially Disadvantaged Farmer or Rancher: Per the USDA, an Individual or entity who is a member of a socially disadvantaged group. A socially disadvantaged group is a group whose members have been subject to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual qualities.

- Socially disadvantaged groups consist of the following:
 - American Indians or Alaskan Natives
 - Asians

- Blacks or African Americans
- Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders
- Hispanics.
- For an entity, at least 50 percent ownership in the farm business must be held by socially disadvantaged individuals

Note: Gender alone is not a covered group for the purposes of NRCS conservation program authorities. The term entities reflect a broad interpretation to include partnerships, couples, legal entities, etc.

State: State of Maine

State fiscal year: The time period between July 1st of a given year and June 30th of the following year during which financial transactions with the state may take place.

Total cost per unit: The actual cost of implementing a given practice code, as determined by the USDA-NRCS. Farmers with an EQIP contract are usually paid 75% or 90% of the total cost per unit.

USDA: The United States Department of Agriculture

USDA-NRCS EQIP Contract (EQIP contract): A contract between the USDA and all participating parties that defines which practice codes will be implemented on specific tracts of land. The contract contains an implementation schedule. Generally, the contract includes the following:

- Conservation Program Contract (form NRCS-CPA-1202)
- Appendix to NRCS-CPA-1202
- Plan Schedule of Operations (form NRCS-CPA-1155) and any modifications (form NRCS-CPA-1156)
- Practice Approval and Payment Application(s) (Form NRCS-CPA-1245). This is verification paperwork, not part of the initial contract. This form is included in your file as contract items in your Schedule of Operations are verified as complete and cost-share is paid to you.

Veteran Farmer or Rancher: Per the USDA, a farmer or rancher who served in the United States Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, or Coast Guard, including the reserve component thereof; was released from service under conditions other than dishonorable; and:

- Has not operated a farm or ranch, or has operated a farm or ranch for not more than 10 years; or
- Who first obtained status as a veteran during the most recent 10-year period.

A legal entity or joint operation can be a Veteran Farmer or Rancher only if all individual members independently qualify.

7. APPENDIX B: APPLICANT TIPS

To help ensure that an application is accurately submitted and well prepared for review, please consider the following advice when preparing your application:

- Do not wait until the last minute to prepare or submit the application. Allow ample time for drafting, asking questions, reviewing answers, proofreading, and submission.
- Ensure that all documentation to be submitted via email is in the correct file format (.pdf, .xlsx).
- Do not submit any documentation not specifically requested in the RFA.
- Attend the Information Session and visit the program website frequently to access and review materials provided to assist you in completing your application.
- Submit written questions according to the instructions provided in this RFA.
- Keep in mind that changes cannot be made after the application is submitted.

8. APPENDIX C: APPLICATION CONDITIONS

The following conditions apply to ALL applicants:

- Once the application has been submitted, no changes can be made. Proof of timely submission is automatically recorded using an electronic date/time stamp generated when the application is successfully received.
- An applicant may NOT submit more than one application for any reason, including to correct errors, UNLESS they submit a written request to the RFA coordinator via email and receive written approval from the RFA coordinator to do so. The RFA coordinator will assess these requests on a case-by-case basis. Submission of multiple applications by the same applicant without receiving written permission from the RFA coordinator will result in all applications submitted by the applicant being disqualified.
- Additional materials submitted beyond those requested explicitly in this RFA will not be used to evaluate an application and may result in the applicant's disqualification.
- Applications must be submitted in accordance with the delivery and formatting requirements outlined in this RFA. Any application submission materials received after the 12:00 noon ET deadline may be rejected.
- DACF assumes no liability for ensuring the accurate/complete/on-time email/online form transmission and receipt of emails and online application forms.
- Applications that do not comply with the instructions specified in this RFA, or that fail to submit all required documents, may result in the application being disqualified, at the discretion of the RFA Coordinator.
- Applicants must submit their best proposal based on the intent of their application and understanding of this RFA. The Department has no duty to request any additional information to be submitted for application evaluation.
- The Department may request an interview or written clarification to help clarify an applicant's eligibility, litigation status, financial situation, risk assessment, and/or other information that may be used to determine program/fund eligibility, award, and/or contract specifics.
- The Department will consider the materials provided in the application and internal departmental information regarding previous contract history with the applicant (if applicable).

- The Department reserves the right to consider other reliable references and publicly available information in evaluating the applicant's experience and capabilities.

9. APPENDIX D: EVALUATION AND PAYMENT PROCESS

- All applicants who submit an eligible application according to this RFA will receive some amount of funding.
- After the application deadline, the RFA Coordinator will review all applications according to the pass/fail criteria described in Section 5 of this RFA.
- After all applications are assessed, the RFA Coordinator will determine the collective request by summing all TIP payment requests from all applicants. If the collective request exceeds the pool of available funding stated in Section 1C of this RFA, then each applicant will be eligible for a portion of their TIP payment request equal to their proportion of the collective request. Example scenarios are available on the program website to illustrate how this process may play out.
- Final decision-making authority for offering awards rests with the Commissioner, based upon the program requirements and selection criteria found in this RFA and the recommendations of the RFA Coordinator.
- All eligible applicants will be notified of their TIP award amount in writing following the Commissioner's decision.
- The TIP award amount is the TOTAL amount you will be paid through this program across the life of your EQIP contract. Your TIP award will be paid in annual installments following verification.
- When you submit a TIP payment request, you are requesting payment according to the schedule of operations defined in your EQIP contract. This may mean that some work has been completed while other work has not.
- Payments for work completed before the application deadline require submission of an NRCS-CPA-1245 form at the time of application to verify that the work was completed.
- For work that has not yet been completed, you will be advanced funds annually.
- Your first TIP payment, expected in January 2027, will cover work to be completed in 2026 and 2027.
- After that initial payment, you must submit an NRCS-CPA-1245 form verifying that this work has been completed before you can receive your TIP payment for future years.

- If you had to reschedule work for 2026 and/or 2027, you must submit an NRCS-CPA-1156 form to show how the schedule of operations has changed.
- This verification process is required annually until your TIP award is fully paid out.
- Failure to provide verification as requested means you will not receive your annual TIP installment.
- Failure to submit verification may result in clawback of any initially advanced funds.

10. APPENDIX E: GENERAL PROVISIONS

- i. From the time this RFA is issued until award notification is made, all contact with the State regarding this RFA must be made through the RFA Coordinator identified on the cover page of this RFA. No other person/State employee is empowered to make binding statements regarding this RFA. Violation of this provision may lead to disqualification from the application process at the State's discretion.
- ii. To ensure all communications are received, applicants should add the email address of the RFA Coordinator listed in this RFA to their email safe sender's list, address book, or contact list.
- iii. Issuance of the RFA does not commit DACF to issue an award or to pay expenses incurred by an Applicant in the preparation of a response to the RFA. This includes attending personal interviews or other meetings, as applicable.
- iv. All amendments (if any) released regarding this RFA will be posted on the program website stated on the cover page of this RFA. Only those amendments posted on this website are considered binding.
- v. DACF reserves the right to revise, suspend, or terminate this RFA at its sole discretion. In such an event, DACF will inform all applicants as soon as reasonably possible. DACF also reserves the right to extend the deadline for proposal submissions or to solicit additional proposals under this RFA.
- vi. The issuance of a grant solicitation or any grant award decision does not obligate DACF to make any award. Nor does it obligate DACF to make an award in the amount requested. In instances where the amount awarded differs from what was sought by the applicant, DACF will provide a written explanation for the record.
- vii. All applications must adhere to the instructions and format requirements outlined in the RFA and all written supplements and amendments (such as the Summary of Questions and Answers) issued by DACF. Failure to use the instructions specified in this RFA, or failure to respond to all questions and instructions throughout the RFA and application process, including submitting any required supplemental documents, may result in the application being disqualified as non-responsive or receiving a reduced score. DACF and its review committee have sole discretion to determine whether a variance from the RFA specifications will result in either disqualification or a reduction in the scoring of an application. DACF, at its sole discretion, reserves the right to recognize and waive minor informalities and irregularities found in applications received in response to the RFA.

- viii. Additional materials submitted beyond those requested explicitly in this RFA will not be used to evaluate or score an application and may result in the applicant's disqualification.
- ix. DACF assumes no liability for ensuring the accurate/complete/on-time email/online form transmission and receipt of emails and online application forms.
- x. Applications and emails containing links to file-sharing sites or online file repositories will not be accepted as submissions.
- xi. Encrypted attachments received that require opening attachments and logging into a proprietary system will not be accepted as submissions. It is the applicant's responsibility to check with its organization's information technology team to ensure that security settings will not encrypt its application or email submission.
- xii. File size limits are 25 MB per email. Applicants may submit files separately across multiple emails, as necessary, due to file size concerns. All emails and files must be received in accordance with all the instructions listed in the RFA.
- xiii. Grant solicitations shall be publicly posted and available online. DACF shall announce the grant opportunity request for applications (RFA) at least fourteen (14) calendar days before the application submission deadline.
- xiv. Information sessions, if any are held, shall be scheduled at least two weeks before the deadline for submitting a grant application.
- xv. The deadline for questions shall be at least ten (10) calendar days before the application deadline.
- xvi. A written summary of the questions and answers raised during office hours and/or written questions submitted shall be posted on the program website at least seven calendar days before the application submission deadline.
- xvii. In evaluating the eligibility and award determination of applications submitted in response to this RFA, the DACF will consider materials provided in the application, information obtained through interviews/presentations (if any), and internal Departmental information of previous contract history with the Applicant (if any). DACF also reserves the right to consider other reliable references and publicly available information in evaluating the Applicant's experience and capabilities.

- xviii. Applicants must submit their best proposal based on the intent of their application and understanding of this RFA. DACF is not permitted to request any additional information to be submitted for application evaluation and scoring. DACF may request an interview or written clarification to help clarify an applicant's eligibility, litigation status, financial situation, risk assessment, and/or other information that may be used to determine program/fund eligibility, award, and/or contract specifics. DACF will consider the materials provided in the application, any information obtained through interviews/presentations (if applicable), and internal departmental information regarding previous contract history with the applicant (if applicable). DACF also reserves the right to consider other reliable references and publicly available information in evaluating the applicant's experience and capabilities.
- xix. The application must be submitted by, or with the express permission of, a person authorized to legally bind the Applicant into a contract agreement.
- xx. DACF reserves the right to determine the number of awards and modify, partially fund, or increase awards at the Department's discretion, which may include the offering of partial awards at amounts less than requested.
- xxi. DACF may select one or multiple award recipients as a result of this RFA.
- xxii. Grant applicants will be informed in writing of the final grant award decisions.
- xxiii. The RFA and the awarded Applicant's application, including all appendices, attachments, or updated documents requested by DACF, will be the basis for the final contract, as determined by DACF.
- xxiv. Following the announcement of an award decision, all submissions in response to this RFA will be public records, available for public inspection pursuant to the State of Maine Freedom of Access Act (FOAA) (1 M.R.S. § 401 et seq.).
- xxv. All applicable laws, whether or not herein contained, shall be included by this reference. It shall be the Applicant's responsibility to determine the applicability and requirements of any such laws and to abide by them.

11. APPENDIX F: APPEAL RIGHTS

An aggrieved applicant (Petitioner) may request an appeal hearing on a grant award decision by submitting a request for appeal to the Department Commissioner, in writing, no later than fifteen (15) calendar days from the date of the award decision (date applicant is notified if they have been selected, or not selected, to move forward for award).

The written request for appeal must identify one or more of the appeal indicators listed below and must describe the specific nature of the grievance. The Commissioner shall grant an appeal hearing unless it is determined that:

- i. The petitioner is not an aggrieved person; or
- ii. The written request for appeal was submitted more than fifteen (15) calendar days after notification of award.

The burden of proof within the hearing of appeal lies with the petitioner. The evidence presented must specifically address and be limited to one or more of the following appeal indicators:

- i. Violation of law;
- ii. Irregularities creating fundamental unfairness; or
- iii. Arbitrary or capricious award.

Notice of the appeal proceeding shall follow the requirements of 5 M.R.S. § 9051-A(2) and be provided to those entities as determined applicable by the Commissioner. The notification must include the date and location of the hearing and the name of the Hearing Officer. Appeal proceedings may be held in person, virtually, or in a hybrid format at the discretion of the Hearing Officer. Failure to appear for a scheduled hearing may be grounds for default.