



ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK FOR CONSERVATION: IRA freeze and DOGE cuts limit farmer access to popular conservation programs

Written by Michael Happ
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By Michael Happ
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy

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SUMMARY

IATP has been analyzing farmer participation in two of the United States' most popular conservation programs since 2021. In our latest analysis, we find that in fiscal year 2025 (FY2025), approximately 24% of applicants to the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and 37% of applicants to the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) were awarded contracts.¹ This is a sharp dropoff from FY2024 in which approximately 43% of applicants to EQIP and 54% of applicants to CSP were awarded contracts,² and is similar to acceptance rates seen before the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). This national dropoff in applications accepted is mirrored in most U.S. states and territories.

Between fiscal years 2024 and 2025, the number of EQIP contracts awarded in the U.S. decreased by approximately 17,650 and the number of CSP contracts awarded decreased by around 2,877.³ This is a 38% and 21% decrease, respectively. Not a single state saw an increase in EQIP contracts awarded from FY2024 to FY2025, and only eight states saw an increase for CSP contracts.

This all occurred as a higher number of farmers applied to both programs from one year to the next. FY2025 saw 29,353 applicants to CSP and 118,377 applicants to EQIP, up from 25,719 (14% increase) and 106,794 (11% increase) respectively the year before.⁴

Why do EQIP and CSP matter to farmers?

Farmers have long used conservation methods to build soil health, prevent soil erosion, increase yields, protect water, and manage for pests and disease. Farmers implement conservation independently of public programs, but public financial support can help offset costs borne by the farmer, especially if there isn't a clear financial return on certain conservation practices. In this current farm economy where costs are rising and many farmers expect to lose money, financial help is crucial, but a sense of stewardship of the land is perhaps more critical when a farmer seeks to improve environmental outcomes on their farm.⁵

For some farmers to take the first step on conservation, they need financial support. Conservation cost-share contracts through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) can provide that help. An NRCS contract may be the only time some farmers implement conservation on their farm, or it could be the first step in a lifelong conservation journey. There are plenty of barriers to farmers implementing conservation, from fears of yield loss and a lack of peer farmers implementing conservation to policy barriers such as oversubscribed conservation programs, conservation practices that aren't well suited to their size or type of operation, or payments that don't keep pace with inflation.⁶ Research has shown that EQIP in particular has had a measurable positive impact on cover crop adoption in the U.S.⁷ Cover crops can be a good "gateway" conservation practice for farmers who





Windbreak restoration in Nebraska.

wish to address natural resource issues across their whole farm. EQIP exists to address single-resource concerns,⁸ and CSP acts as that next step, helping farmers address more long-term concerns like soil health, water quality, and wildlife habitat throughout their operation.⁹

Impacts of DOGE, IRA funding freeze, and OBBBA

In January 2025, state NRCS branches were instructed to pause on spending funds from the IRA. In July 2025, President Trump signed into law the budget reconciliation bill known as the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) that rescinded all unobligated IRA funds, instead incorporating them into the Farm Bill baseline. These IRA funds were in addition to existing baseline Farm Bill funds for EQIP and CSP, for the express purpose of funding “climate smart mitigation activities.”¹⁰ The rescission of IRA funds and their inclusion into the Farm Bill baseline removed the climate smart requirement, or the “guardrails.” These baseline funds can now be used for any practice or activity within EQIP and CSP, not just those deemed “climate smart.”

After a state NRCS’s deadline for applications to EQIP and CSP (each state has a unique deadline¹¹), they begin the process of ranking applications and obligating funds, or determining which farmers will be funded for a conservation contract. Obligating funds happens continually after the ranking date. In many states, how quickly or slowly NRCS staff were able to rank and obligate funds had a large role in determining how many EQIP and CSP contracts were awarded.

The initial pause on IRA funds happened as billionaire Elon Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, fired thousands of federal employees, including over 25% of NRCS staff.¹² With the reduction in staff, many of whom worked in farmer-facing county offices, the workload increased dramatically. Counties have adapted by opening offices only a few days a week and rotating staff between counties rather than leaving their offices empty. According to the Office of Personnel Management, there are now 141 counties in the U.S. without a single NRCS employee, all of which previously had staffing. Fifty three percent of counties saw a loss in staff between January 2025 and January 2026.

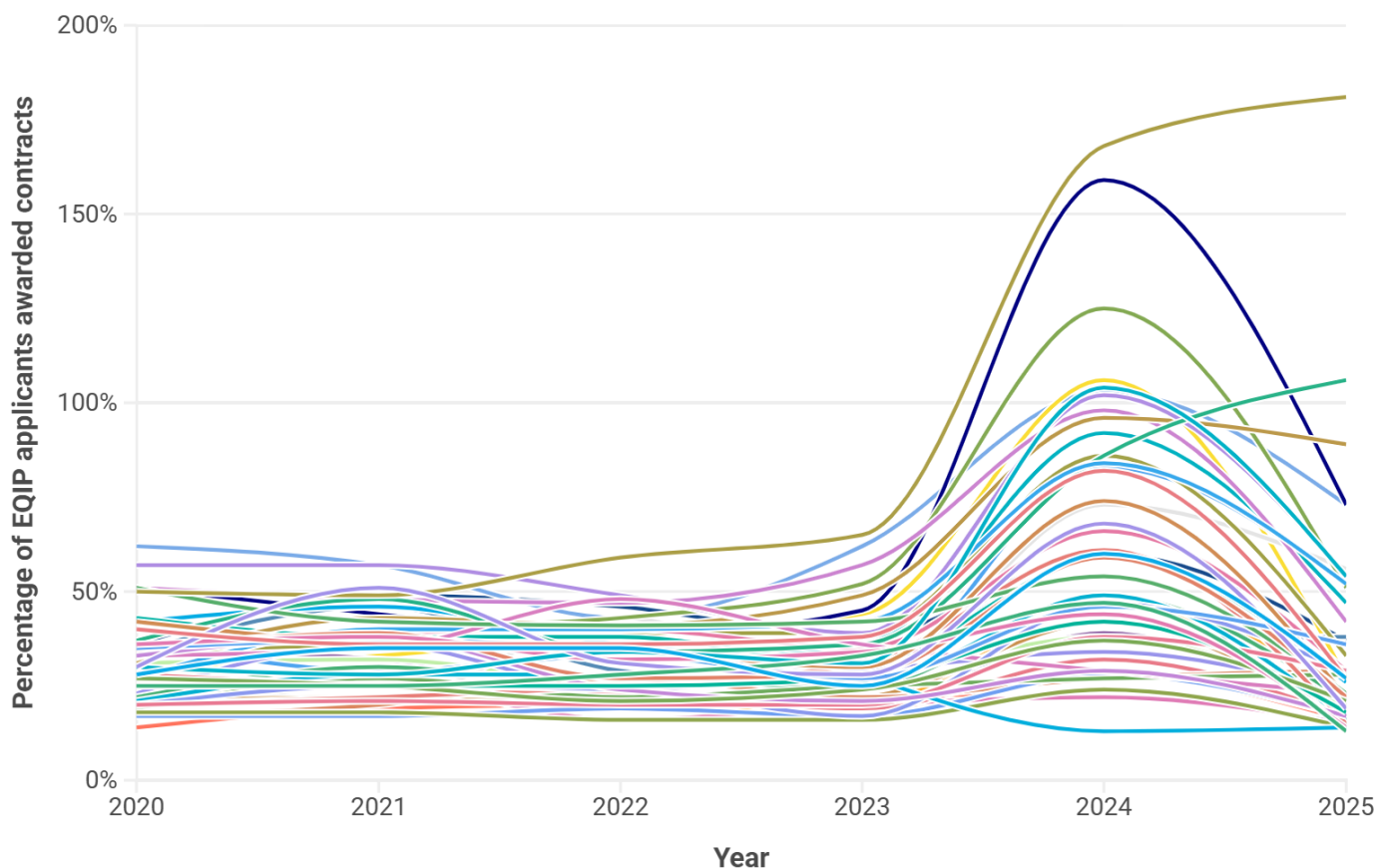
Theoretically, the inclusion of IRA funds into the baseline of the Farm Bill through the actions of the OBBBA would encourage more EQIP and CSP contracts in future years, at the expense of farmer applications in the near term.¹³ As the IRA was written, funds allocated to programs such as EQIP and CSP stairstepped up until peaking in FY2026, then would stairstep down until the funds are extinguished in FY2031. Now that funding extends further into the future as permanent Farm Bill baseline, but not without tradeoffs.

Which states did well and which didn't?

Nationally, approximately 24% of applicants to EQIP were awarded contracts in FY2025, down from 43% in FY2024. As in previous years, the percentage of farmer applicants able to access EQIP varied widely across

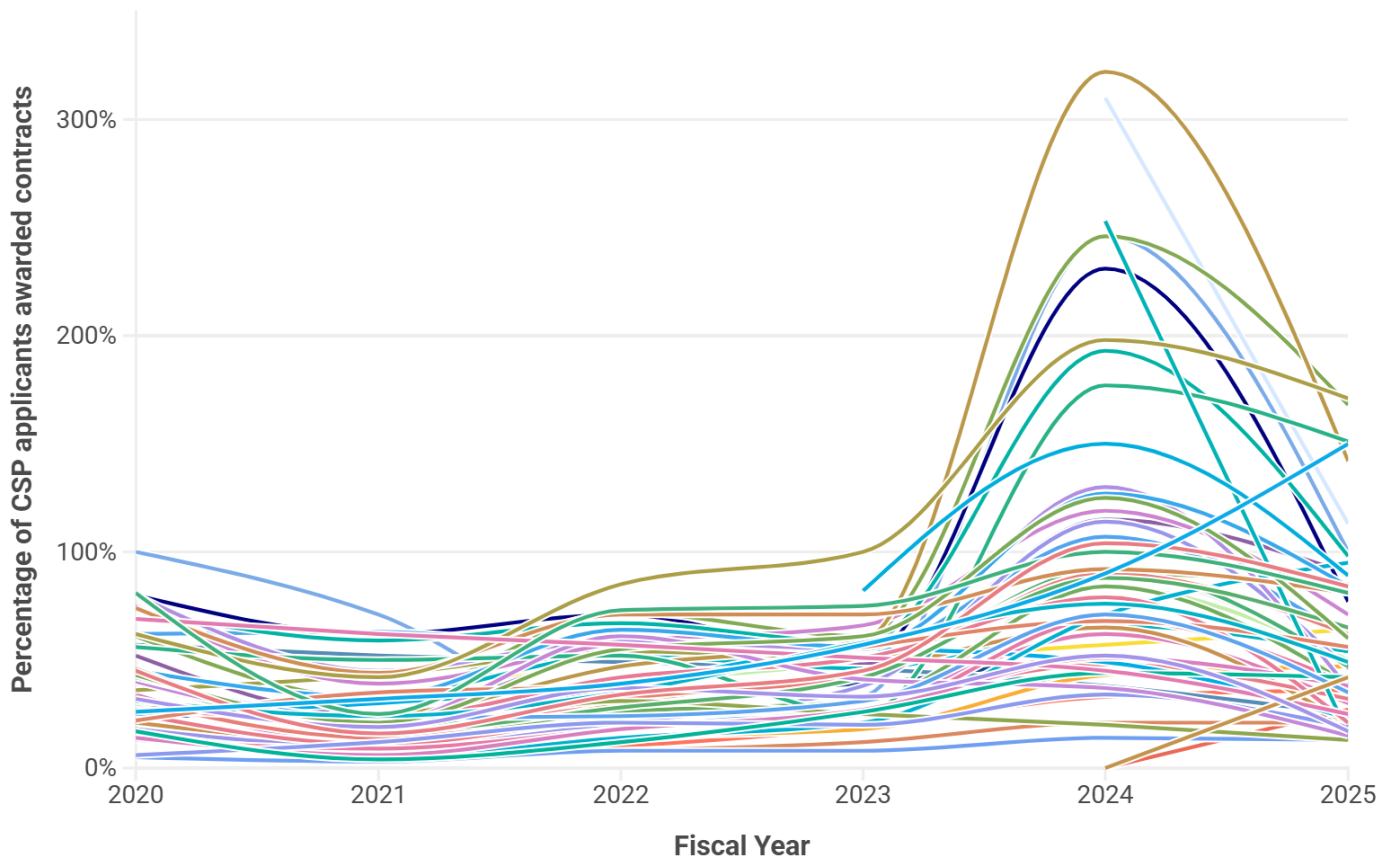
states. States such as Rhode Island and New Jersey were still able to connect many of their EQIP applicants with contracts. In both states, we show that over 100% of applicants were awarded contracts. Similar to our tracking in [a previous report](#), this percentage above 100% indicates that these states were able to address applications in their backlog **in addition to** those who applied and were ranked for FY2025. West Virginia awarded the smallest percentage of EQIP contracts — just 241 of its 1,864 applicants (12.89%) were awarded with EQIP contracts in FY2025. Other states and territories that awarded fewer than 20% of its applicants with contracts include Arkansas, Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, South Carolina, South Dakota, Vermont, and Washington.

Figure 1: Percentage of EQIP applicants awarded contracts in all states, 2020-2025
EQIP acceptance rates increased significantly in most states in 2024, and dropped in 2025
 See the online version of this report for individual state graphs.



Note: For states with percentages above 100%, this indicates states that awarded more contracts than applications in a year. Many of the contracts awarded were deferred applications from previous years. For most territories, we only have usable data for FY2025 and were unable to compare acceptance rates to previous years.

Figure 2: Percentage of CSP applicants awarded contracts in all states, 2020-2025
CSP acceptance rates increased significantly in most states in 2024, and dropped in 2025
 See the online version of this report for individual state graphs.



Note: For states with percentages above 100%, this indicates states that awarded more contracts than applications in a year. Many of the contracts awarded were deferred applications from previous years. For most territories, we only have usable data for FY2025 and were unable to compare acceptance rates to previous years.

With CSP, a few more states and territories were able to make progress on their backlog. Nationally, 37% of CSP applicants were awarded contracts, down from 54% in FY2024. Alaska, American Samoa, Idaho, Nevada, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Wyoming were all able to award more contracts than applications this year. On the other end of the spectrum, North Carolina was only able to award contracts to 13.28% of its CSP applicants, just 227 out of 1,709. Other states and territories that awarded contracts to fewer than 20% of its applicants include Alabama, Mississippi, the Northern Mariana Islands, and Washington.

What was the dropoff from FY2024 to FY2025?

In large part due to the freeze in IRA funds, there was a steep dropoff in EQIP and CSP contracts awarded between FY2024 and FY2025. From one year to the next, the number of EQIP contracts awarded in the U.S. decreased by approximately 17,650, or around 38%, and the number of CSP contracts awarded decreased by around 2,877, or around 21%. No state increased EQIP contracts awarded from one year to the next, and only eight states saw an increase for CSP contracts.

Table 1: EQIP applications and contracts by state, Fiscal Year 2025

Note: For states with percentages above 100%, this indicates states that awarded more contracts than applications in a year. Many of the contracts awarded were deferred applications from previous years. We provided ranges when exact numbers could not be determined from NRCS data. States and territories with ranges were ranked according to the average of the minimum and maximum values of their range. With more exact data, the rankings would likely shift.

Ranking by % approved	State	Number of applications	Number of contracts awarded	% of applicants awarded contracts
1	Rhode Island	110	200	181.82%
2	New Jersey	245	257-260	104.90-106.12%
3	Nevada	131	117	89.31%
4	Guam	31	23	74.19%
5	Alaska	68	48-51	70.59-75.00%
6	Connecticut	292	212	72.60%
7	American Samoa	30	17	56.67%
8	Delaware	200	111-114	55.50-57.00%
9	Virginia	962	523	54.37%
10	New Hampshire	462	248	53.68%
11	Hawaii	281	147	52.31%
12	New York	857	443	51.69%
13	Idaho	1012	517	51.09%
14	Indiana	1632	770	47.18%
15	Massachusetts	411	174	42.34%
16	Florida	1504	574	38.16%
17	Alabama	3273	1215	37.12%
18	Texas	7571	2750	36.32%
19	Maryland	804	266	33.08%
20	Minnesota	3027	876	28.94%
21	Montana	1294	374	28.90%
22	Pennsylvania	2502	718	28.70%
23	Oklahoma	3783	1085	28.68%
24	Missouri	3500	996	28.46%
25	Arizona	353	96	27.20%
26	Wisconsin	3557	960	26.99%
27	Wyoming	815	219	26.87%
28	Michigan	2210	593	26.83%
29	Georgia	5546	1471	26.52%
30	Northern Mariana Islands	68	18	26.47%
31	Maine	1378	362	26.27%
32	Oregon	1693	392	23.15%
33	Kansas	2721	620	22.79%
34	North Dakota	1563	353	22.58%
35	Ohio	3090	684	22.14%

EQIP applications and contracts, contd.

Ranking by % approved	State	Number of applications	Number of contracts awarded	% of applicants awarded contracts
36	Tennessee	3796	827	21.79%
37	Kentucky	3286	696	21.18%
38	Utah	1161	245	21.10%
39	U.S. Virgin Islands	49	10	20.41%
40	Colorado	1675	337	20.12%
41	Washington	1864	356	19.10%
42	South Dakota	1641	298	18.16%
43	South Carolina	3643	631	17.32%
44	Louisiana	2543	437	17.18%
45	California	5643	958-961	16.98-17.03%
46	Mississippi	8987	1494	16.62%
47	Nebraska	3497	568	16.24%
48	Arkansas	7614	1183	15.54%
49	Iowa	3233	496	15.34%
50	New Mexico	1077	158	14.67%
51	Illinois	3516	512	14.56%
52	Puerto Rico	1501	216	14.39%
53	North Carolina	3671	521	14.19%
54	Vermont	1134	160	14.11%
55	West Virginia	1870	241	12.89%
	Total U.S.	118377	28,773-28,788	24.31-24.32%

Table 2: CSP applications and contracts by state, Fiscal Year 2025

Note: For states with percentages above 100%, this indicates states that awarded more contracts than applications in a year. Many of the contracts awarded were deferred applications from previous years. We provided ranges when exact numbers could not be determined from NRCS data. States and territories with ranges were ranked according to the average of the minimum and maximum values of their range. With more exact data, the rankings would likely shift.

Ranking by % approved	State	Number of applications	Number of contracts awarded	% of applicants awarded contracts
1	Rhode Island	24	41	170.83%
2	Idaho	75	126	168.00%
3	New Jersey	50	74-77	148-154%
4	Wyoming	20	30	150.00%
5	Nevada	19	27	142.11%
6	American Samoa	31	35	112.90%
7	Alaska	7	7	100.00%
8	Michigan	669	657	98.21%

CSP applications and contracts, contd.

Ranking by % approved	State	Number of applications	Number of contracts awarded	% of applicants awarded contracts
9	Nebraska	290	275	94.83%
10	California	366	330	90.16%
11	Puerto Rico	111	99	89.19%
12	Maryland	122	102-105	83.61-86.07%
13	Wisconsin	1046	879	84.03%
14	New York	170	142	83.53%
15	Ohio	519	419	80.73%
16	West Virginia	298	240	80.54%
17	Connecticut	64	48-51	75-76.69%
18	Massachusetts	70	50	71.43%
19	Oregon	305	198	64.92%
20	Arizona	44	28	63.64%
21	New Mexico	132	82	62.12%
22	Utah	182	108-111	59.34-60.99%
23	Hawaii	51	29-32	56.86-62.75%
24	Tennessee	776	438	56.44%
25	Indiana	662	357	53.93%
26	Colorado	212	104-107	49.06-50.47%
27	Virginia	566	276	48.76%
28	Delaware	22	9-12	40.91-54.55%
29	Georgia	765	362	47.32%
30	Kentucky	717	335	46.72%
31	Kansas	260	120	46.15%
32	South Dakota	687	291	42.36%
33	U.S. Virgin Islands	6	1-4	16.67-66.67%
34	Montana	341	133	39.00%
35	Missouri	1429	557	38.98%
36	North Dakota	458	173	37.77%
37	New Hampshire	173	64	36.99%
38	Arkansas	1285	467	36.34%
39	Texas	493	169	34.28%
40	Louisiana	726	234	32.23%
41	Illinois	1214	370	30.48%
42	Guam	26	7	26.92%
43	Florida	687	173-176	25.18-25.62%
44	Vermont	274	68	24.82%
45	Maine	113	26	23.01%
46	Pennsylvania	853	181	21.22%
47	Minnesota	2014	420	20.85%


CSP applications and contracts, contd.

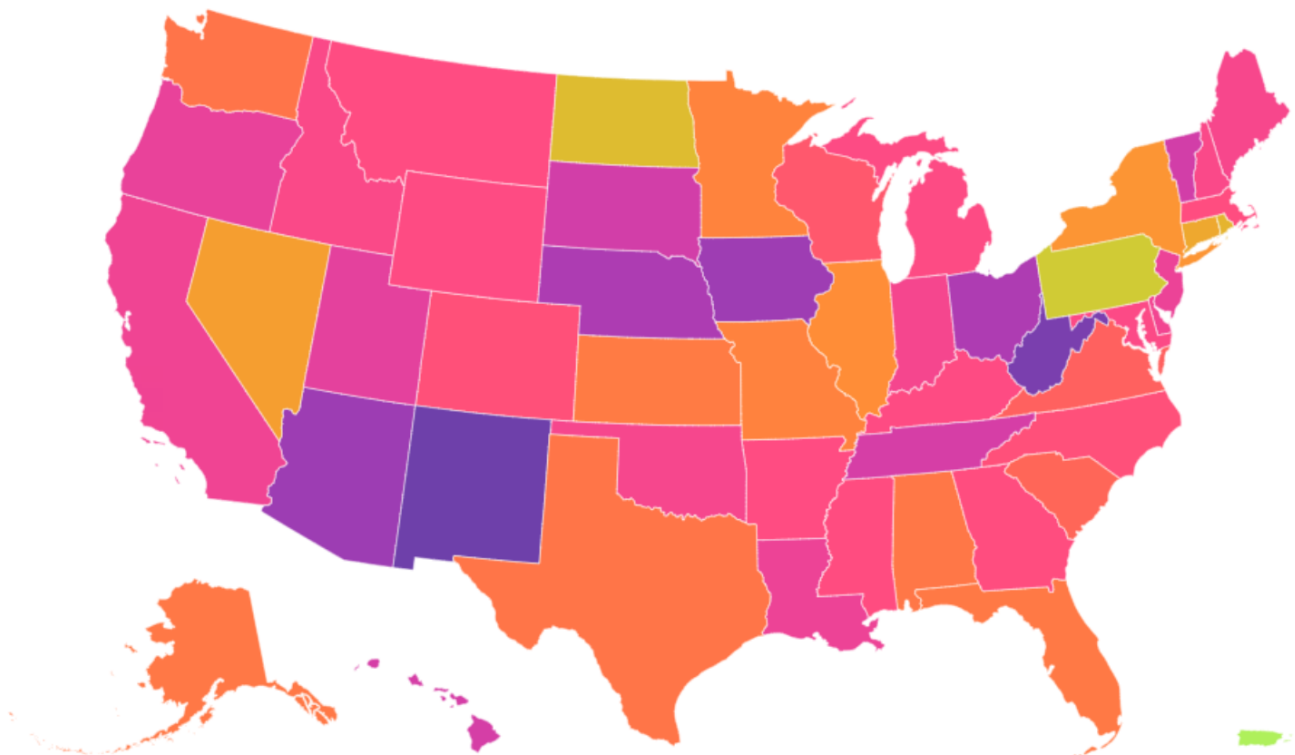
Ranking by % approved	State	Number of applications	Number of contracts awarded	% of applicants awarded contracts
48	Iowa	1570	319	20.32%
49	Oklahoma	923	177-180	19.18-19.50%
50	Alabama	675	130	19.26%
51	Washington	630	110	17.46%
52	Northern Mariana Islands	44	7	15.91%
53	South Carolina	1666	245	14.71%
54	Mississippi	2715	364	13.41%
55	North Carolina	1709	227	13.28%
	Total U.S.	29356	10,940-10,973	37.27-37.38%

Looking at EQIP contracts awarded by state, the sharpest decreases in contracts awarded from one year to the next came in states like Iowa, Nebraska, New Mexico, and West Virginia. New Mexico saw the sharpest decline with 323 fewer EQIP contracts

awarded between FY2024 and FY2025, a decline of 67%. Puerto Rico was the only state or territory where contracts awarded remained stable or increased slightly (Map 1).

Map 1: Percentage change in EQIP contracts awarded, 2024-2025


Percentage change -67.15  0.47

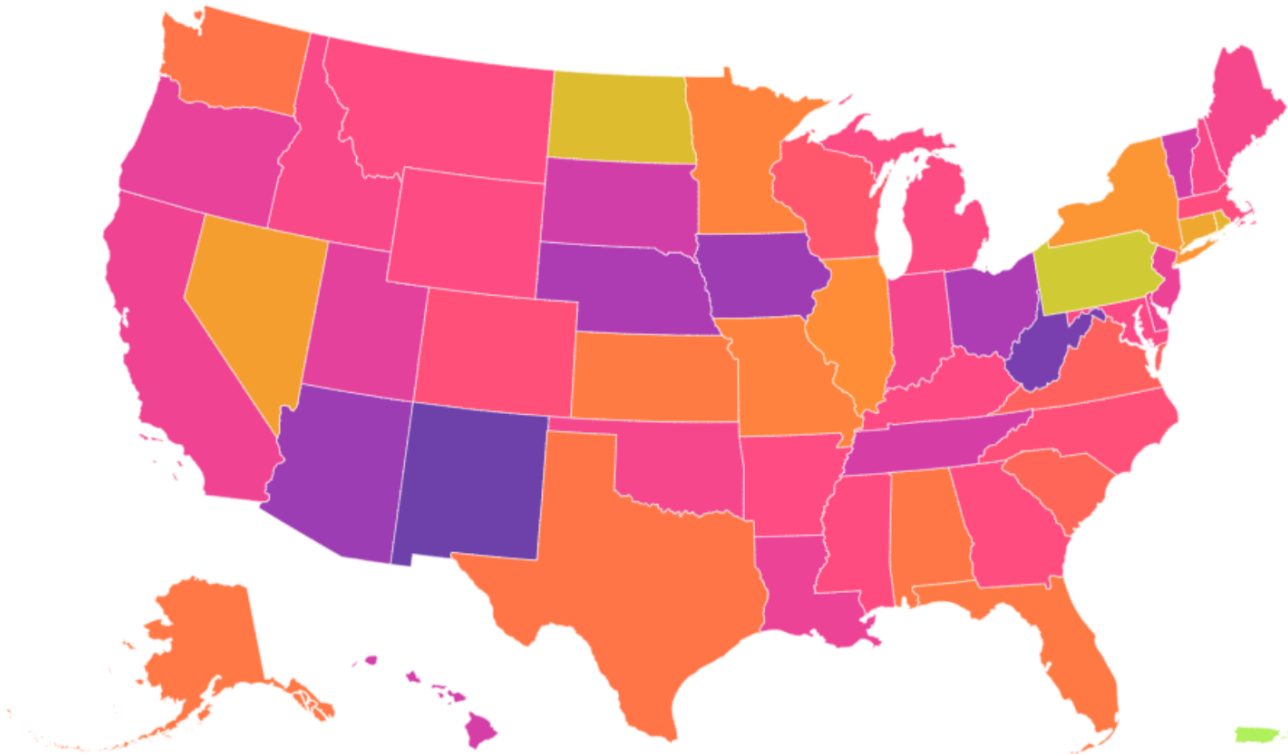


Source: Natural Resources Conservation Service

**For some states and territories, the numbers provided are estimates.*

Map 2: Percentage change in CSP contracts awarded, 2024-2025

Percentage change -67.15  0.47



Source: Natural Resources Conservation Service

**For some states and territories, the numbers provided are estimates.*

We see a similar story with CSP, though more states and territories were able to increase their contracts awarded from one year to the next. The sharpest dropoff is seen in New Hampshire, where nearly 52% fewer contracts went out the door in FY2025 than in the previous year. Again, Puerto Rico is a success story, with nearly 50% more CSP contracts being awarded in FY2025 than in FY2024 (Map 2).

How to conserve when federal funding is scarce

IATP and others have done plenty of work looking at the costs of different EQIP practices, showing that smarter implementation — even without more total funding for EQIP and CSP — can connect more farmers to contracts.¹⁴ Paying 10 farmers \$10,000 to address conservation needs on their farms can be more impactful than paying one farmer \$100,000.

The kinds of conservation practices that are more expensive include structural practices like anaerobic digesters and manure lagoons,¹⁵ while the practices most people think of when they think of agricultural conservation, such as cover crops, cost on average a little over \$9,000 per contract.¹⁶ Looking specifically at Minnesota, every federal dollar spent on conservation leads to a \$1.81 return.¹⁷ That means federal dollars for conservation are being spent in local communities, including on direct costs such as materials and labor, as well as indirect costs such as meals and transportation. Targeting EQIP resources to more farmers, with an emphasis on practices that serve small and mid-scale farms, can help keep farmers on the land and dollars in the local community.

In that regard, instituting lower payment limits on EQIP payments can spread finite resources to more farmers across the country. As policy currently stands, a farmer can receive up to \$450,000 over the course of five years from EQIP — a limit that is impossible



Managed rotational grazing in Maryland.

for most farmers to reach. USDA does not disclose exactly how many farmers reach the \$450,000 limit, but only a small fraction of farmers who participate in EQIP get anywhere close to that number.

Without restored staffing in local USDA offices, however, contracts will continue to disproportionately benefit large farms. Researchers at the University of Wisconsin analyzed the relationship between county conservation staff in Wisconsin and the kinds of practices implemented on the ground and found that low levels of NRCS staffing leads to fewer, larger, more industrial-scale practices included in EQIP contracts, while higher levels of staffing lead to more, smaller-scale, and regenerative practices being utilized.¹⁸ In order to truly serve farmers and the land, NRCS staffing needs to be restored across the country.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR ON THE DATA USED IN THIS REPORT

The data used in this report was obtained via a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to NRCS. I calculated the number of applications to EQIP and CSP by adding together all categories of applications, including those classified as eligible, ineligible, cancelled, preapproved, and deferred. Regardless of their final status, all of these involve a farmer submitting an application to NRCS. The number of contracts awarded can include applications from previous years.

As noted in the graphics used in the report, there are instances where over 100% of applicants are shown as being awarded contracts. In situations where this occurs, it indicates that states were able to make meaningful progress on application backlogs from previous years. I had heartburn about displaying data in this way, but I chose to maintain consistency in methods between years. In a sense, it is to compare “apples to apples” from previous years’ data.

Additionally, for some states, NRCS did not give exact numbers. If there are four or fewer contracts of any category in a state, NRCS redacted this data in its response to our FOIA. For some states, this means that the number given is an average of the lowest and highest possible number of contracts. For example, in Alaska, the lowest possible number of EQIP contracts is 48, and the highest is 51. The average of those two numbers is 49.5, which we rounded up to 50 for the purposes of the graphs. In no state or territory is the range wider than this.

For EQIP, the states this applies to are Alaska, California, Delaware, New Jersey, and Ohio. For CSP, this applies to Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Maryland, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Endnotes

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