

Tool 3: A Landowners Guide to Seeking Funding from the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) in Vermont

About the Natural Resource Conservation Service

The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) is a nation-wide agency within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). It provides technical assistance to private landowners to help them conserve, maintain, and improve their natural resources. The NRCS works in partnership with local conservation districts and other private and public partners to implement conservation practices. Every state in the country has the NRCS which can be of assistance to private landowners.

NRCS Programs for Funding Invasive Plant Treatment in Vermont

In Vermont, as of 2011, the NRCS has two programs that are intended to help landowners seek funding for invasive plant treatment and control management, among other conservation practices.

1. **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP):** This program offers financial and technical assistance to assist eligible participants to install or implement structural and management practices on eligible agricultural or forest land. For example, manure pits and barnyards are commonly installed on farmsteads to improve water quality while in forest land invasive plant populations or erosion on skid roads are often addressed. NRCS also uses EQIP to help landowners develop a Forest Management Plan to improve stewardship and to identify conservation practices that address resource concerns (e.g. erosion, insufficient habitat, impaired water quality, etc.).
2. **Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP):** This program provides technical and financial assistance to establish and improve fish and wildlife habitat. NRCS and/or partners will work with the private landowners to develop a fish and wildlife habitat plan to address habitat issues or opportunities on the participant's property.

Funds for NRCS conservation programs comes from the 2008 Farm Bill. Both of these programs are **cost-sharing programs**. **Financial assistance to implement practices** is provided to the landowner as a 'payment rate.' This is a set rate for each practice that is intended to represent about 75% of the overall cost in a typical setting. Depending upon the site conditions, availability of contractors, etc. the payment rate may or may not cover 75% of the actual cost of the practice. Limited resource producers, beginning farmers and forest landowners, and socially disadvantaged farmers may be eligible for up to a 90% payment rate, but may or may not cover 90% of the actual practice cost.

Who Can Apply for WHIP and EQIP

Currently, EQIP and WHIP programs only provide assistance to private landowners. There is no minimum acreage needed to be eligible to receive funding from the NRCS, but projects are evaluated and funded by the level of resource impairment. In addition, projects that address priority habitat improvements in target areas will be funded first.

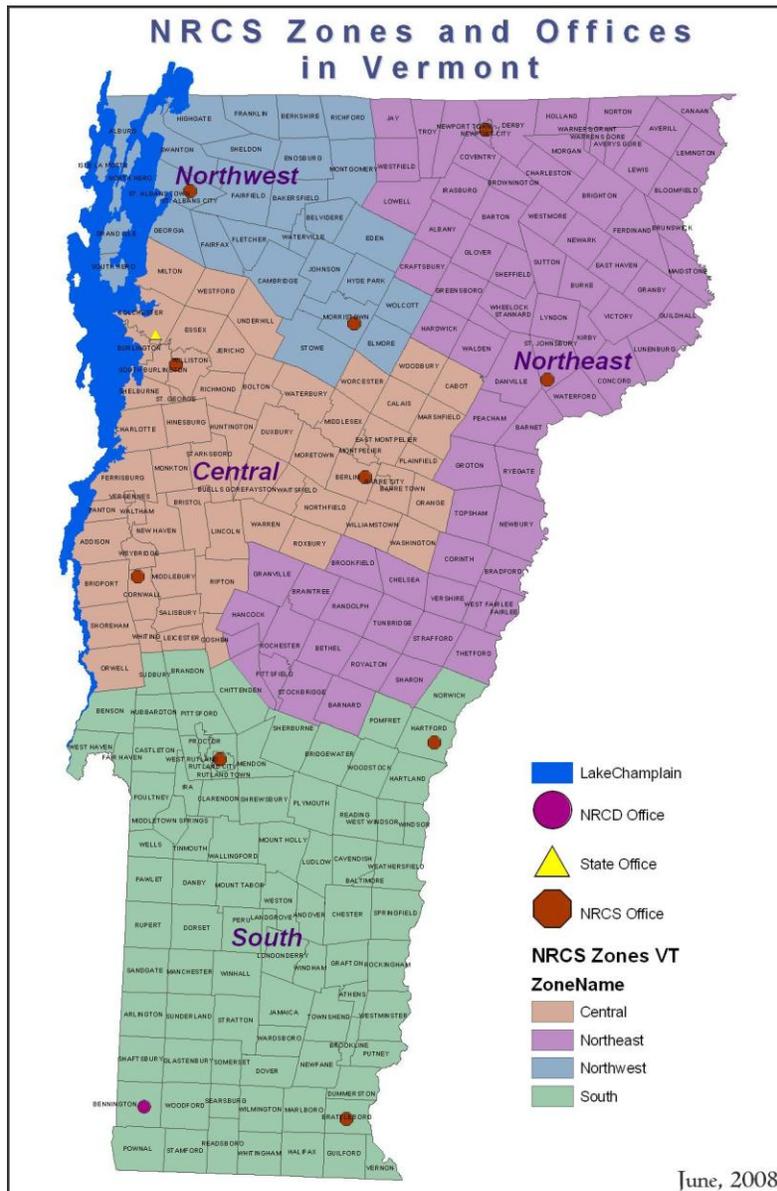
For EQIP, eligible participants will be engaged in agricultural production or forestry management or have an interest in the agricultural or forestry operation. The applicant must document that \$1,000 in agricultural products has been produced, sold, or both from the applicant's operation or from the land in which the applicant has an interest.

Applicants requesting assistance on nonindustrial private forest land are exempt from the \$1,000 in agricultural production requirement. EQIP participants who will have practices applied in forest land must provide NRCS a copy of a forest management plan (at least to a Use Value Appraisal standard) prior to applying a conservation practice.

For WHIP, owners of private agricultural land or non-industrial private forest land are eligible for WHIP. There is no requirement for a forest management plan to be eligible for WHIP. However, certain practices do require a forest management plan before the practices can be put in a contract. These include forest stand improvement, forest trails and landings and access road.

How to Seek WHIP or EQIP Funding

1. Landowners who wish to seek financial assistance for invasive plant treatment must **apply** for WHIP or EQIP. Landowners can sign up for a conservation program at anytime but application deadlines are typically set in late summer or fall to establish a pool of applicants for the next fiscal years' funds. Programs are competitive and not all applications are approved and funded.
2. Applicants seeking to address invasive plants on their land can either seek funding solely for invasive plant treatment work, or can also address additional resource concerns on the property using practices such as Forest Stand Improvement and Forest Trails and Landings. Applications that incorporate several priority land conservation practices in certain settings may be considered more competitive than those that include only one practice. A NRCS staff member can help the landowner decide which program and conservation practice is most appropriate for the landowner's application and resource concerns on the land.
3. To apply, landowners must **contact their local USDA Service Center; this is where NRCS and the Farm Service Agency (FSA) are co-located. Landowners can also download the application from the link below. Before you stop by the office for assistance, call to be sure someone will be available to help you through the application process. Landowners will also have to fill out some eligibility forms with the FSA. Completed applications must be submitted to the NRCS at the local USDA Service Center.** A map and a list of Service Centers are provided below.
4. As a landowner, it is a good idea to know what invasive plant infestations exist on your property. You should discuss this with your land manager or forester. Landowners and land managers applying for WHIP or EQIP are encouraged to include a simple map of the infestations found on the property. This can be done using a map of the property and hand drawing infestations, by using iMapInvasives, a free web-based invasive species mapping tool or by using a more sophisticated mapping tool such as GIS. Use *Tool 1: Landowner Guide to Invasive Plant Assessment* to help you conduct a good assessment and develop a useful map. In addition, land managers or landowners can complete a simple form, *Tool 8: Invasive Terrestrial Plant Assessment Form*, to describe the invasive plant infestation in more detail. The map and the assessment will help the NRCS better understand the extent of the problem on your property. These downloadable resources and tips on how to use iMap can be found at www.vtinvasives.org.
5. A NRCS employee can provide the necessary assistance to the landowner during the application process. This may also include a site visit from NRCS or NRCS partner staff members.



(map courtesy of the VT NRCS).

NRCS Service Centers:

Berlin, 802-828-4493	Rutland, 802-775-8034
Brattleboro, 802-254-9766	St. Albans, 802-527-1296
Middlebury, 802-388-6748	St. Johnsbury, 802-748-1296
Morrisville, 802-888-4935	White River Jct., 802-295-7942
Newport, 802-334-6090	Williston, 802-865-7895

For more information and downloadable application:

The VT NRCS Program page: <http://www.vt.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/>
 For WHIP applications: <http://www.vt.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/WHIP/Index.html>
 For EQIP applications: <http://www.vt.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/EQIP/OI/Index.html>

Getting the Work Done

1. Once an application is approved for funding, the landowner will be given a conservation plan and contract that will include information about size of treatment area, when the work should be completed and the reimbursement rates the landowner will receive once the work is completed. A Plan map will be part of the package showing where the treatment areas are located on the property. Since invasive plant control is a complicated practice, there will be additional information given to the landowner including information about herbicides and contacts, species specific information sheets, general invasive control information, a control plan and landowner record keeping sheet.
2. It is the landowner's responsibility to ensure that the work is completed within the time constraints of the plan and contract.
3. The landowner is responsible for completing the work. This can be completed by the landowner or the landowner can hire a qualified contractor to complete the work.
4. Depending on the nature of the work, hiring a contractor may be necessary. Invasive plant treatment work that uses the application of restricted use herbicides will require a State of Vermont licensed applicator. For a list of certified pesticide applicators in Vermont contact the Pesticide Certification and Training Coordinator at 802-828-2431.
5. Landowners may apply Class B herbicides (e.g. roundup pro) to their land and often do at a small scale. For large infestations it is advisable to at least consider a certified pesticide applicator as it is complicated, difficult and sometimes hazardous work.

Reimbursement Process and Rates

1. Reimbursement rates for invasive plant treatment work are determined on a per acre basis, based on the level of intensity of the infestation. NRCS staff members determine level of infestation and treatment acreage during a site visit. Initial input from foresters and land managers will help the NRCS locate potential treatment sites on the property.
2. Invasive plant treatment work is intended to be completed in two phases, with an initial treatment and a follow-up treatment. Landowners will get reimbursed in the same two-tier fashion, one payment following each treatment. A NRCS staff member or partner will inspect the work to ensure that the work is complete according to the plan and practice standard. After two treatments, 95-100% control (of original cover) is expected for the work to be deemed complete. Note: areas that have recently completed treatment work funded by the NRCS cannot receive funding again on the same lands previously contracted.
3. Reimbursement rates are subject to change annually. For the most up-to-date reimbursement rates, contact the NRCS.

Roles/Responsibilities of the landowner*

- ✓ Seek funding from the NRCS by contacting the local NRCS office
- ✓ Complete the necessary forms for the WHIP or EQIP application
- ✓ If and when the application is approved, sign the contract with the NRCS
- ✓ If hiring a contractor, you can grant permission to the NRCS field staff to discuss their NRCS conservation plan and map with the hired contractor
- ✓ Ensure that the necessary treatment work is completed within the time constraints of the NRCS contract
- ✓ Complete the necessary forms for the reimbursement process
- ✓ If your land is enrolled in Current Use (UVA) be sure to contact the county forester to discuss your proposed practices on the forest land and get his/her agreement

*There are some helpful tools and/or steps that you can use that will help the NRCS staff better understand your property. These are not required by the NRCS for the landowner to sign up for WHIP or EQIP.

1. *Tool 1: Landowner Guide to Invasive Plant Field Assessment and Tool 6: Developing an Invasive Plant Management Plan* can be used to help you gather information about your property and understand your invasive plant infestation better. In addition, this can be submitted to the NRCS field staff or guide your conversation with the field staff when signing up for WHIP or EQIP.
2. *Tool 8: Invasive Terrestrial Plant Property Assessment Form* can be completed after you or your land manager have assessed your property. This form can be submitted by you, or your land manager to guide NRCS field staff. In addition, a map of the property with infestations noted can also be helpful to the NRCS field staff. You can use iMapInvasives at www.vtinvasives.org to help create a field map for this purpose or your land manager can submit a land management or forest management map instead.

Roles/Responsibilities of the forester or land manager*

- ✓ Talk with landowners about invasive plant infestations on their property
- ✓ Include invasive plant infestation descriptions and locations in forest or land management plans
- ✓ Encourage landowners to treat invasive plants; and to seek funding from the NRCS for invasive plant treatment work if appropriate
- ✓ Provide forest or land management plan to NRCS staff if so desired, provide verbal input to the NRCS staff
- ✓ If requested by the landowner, provide suggestions of contractors who are capable of completing the work

*There are additional helpful steps a forester or land manager can take to assist the landowner and the NRCS staff during this process. These are not required from the NRCS for the landowner to sign up for WHIP or EQIP.

1. *Tool 8: Invasive Terrestrial Plant Property Assessment Form* can be completed after you or the landowner has assessed your property. This form can be submitted by you, or the landowner to guide NRCS field staff. In addition, a map of the property with infestations noted can also be helpful to the NRCS field staff. You can use iMapInvasives at www.vtinvasives.org to help create a field map for this purpose or you can submit a land management or forest management map instead.

Roles/Responsibilities of the NRCS or Partner staff member

- ✓ Provide technical assistance to the landowner during the application process
- ✓ Conduct the necessary site visits to determine level and extent of invasive plant infestations
- ✓ Solicit information from the forester or other land manager if necessary
- ✓ Complete the contract between the landowner and the NRCS
- ✓ If requested by the landowner, provide a list of contractors who are capable of completing the work
- ✓ Clearly convey and/or place flagging around the area scheduled for treatment
- ✓ Inspect the treatment work after it is completed
- ✓ Oversee the financial reimbursement process for the landowner

Roles/Responsibilities of a hired contractor

- ✓ Discuss with the landowner when and how the treatment work will be completed
- ✓ Provide the landowner with an estimate of how much it will cost to complete the treatment work
- ✓ Notify the landowner and or NRCS staff member when the treatment work is completed
- ✓ Provide information to landowner for NRCS record keeping sheet
- ✓ Report herbicide use to the State of Vermont