



Florida

Annual Report - Fiscal Year 2024



Greetings from the State Conservationist

NRCS received an unprecedented increase in conservation program funding during Fiscal Year 2024 to provide technical and financial assistance to farmers and help them complete conservation practices on their agricultural land. To say we saw an increase in workload across the state to meet program signup obligations is an understatement. Florida also experienced three major hurricanes between August and October (Debby, Helene and Milton), with two making landfall within just two weeks of each other. Despite these challenges, we did very well in managing our deadlines, with nearly 1,000 conservation program contracts obligated.

I truly appreciate each of our NRCS employees and contracted partners for rising to these workload and disaster related challenges as we continue to strive for excellence in serving Florida's farmers, ranchers and agricultural landowners. That being said, we have even more work cut out for us in the new fiscal year 2025. With funding possibly changing to meet the needs of the new Administration, we will continue to work together to serve the conservation needs of our agricultural landowners, farmers and ranchers.

A huge Thank You goes to our employees and conservation partners for a successful year! With your help we will continue to Help People Help the Land!

Juan C. Hernandez



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*Take care of the land and the
land will take care of you...*

~ Hugh Hammond Bennett, "Soil Conservation
in the World Ahead," Journal of Soil and Water
Conservation 2 (January 1947)

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FARM BILL PROGRAMS

Much of the conservation work completed on private lands, through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), is done with financial assistance through the Farm Bill. The **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)**, **Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)**, **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)**, **Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)**, and various initiatives are all funded through the Farm Bill. Additional funds received for EQIP in 2024 were through Emergency Recovery Funds and through Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funds. Total payments for **FY 2024** were nearly **\$14.76 million**.

Financial Assistance (FA) By Programs:

CSP Classic

- Contracts – 156
- Obligations – \$9,322,985.15
- Payments – \$1,144,623.75
- Acres – 58,850.9

CSP IRA

- Contracts – 61
- Obligations – \$6,058,309
- Payments – \$492,367.85
- Acres – 31,917

EQIP Classic*

- Contracts – 491
- Obligations – \$22,870,978.96
- Payments – \$4,957,512.32
- Acres – 111,501

CSP Classic

- Contracts – 156
- Obligations – \$9,322,985.15
- Payments – \$1,065,763.75
- Acres – 58,850.9

EQIP IRA*

- Contracts – 286
- Obligations – \$29,026,001.21
- Payments – \$6,089,210.06
- Acres – 120,945.7

HURRICANE IDALIA

- Contracts – 53
- Obligations – \$1,068,580.85
- Payments – \$929,320.34
- Acres – 17,833.70

RCPP Land Management

- Contracts Awarded – 53
- Obligations – \$931,514.63
- Payments – \$80,501.87
- Acres – 9,397.61

**EQIP Classic/IRA include Hurricane Idalia emergency assistance totals.*

EASEMENTS

NRCS **Agricultural Conservation Easements** protect a total of **290,252 acres** in Florida. In **FY 2024**, a total of **16,825 acres** were enrolled for the **Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE)**, **Agricultural Land Easements (ALE)** and **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)**, combined.

Conservation easements provide habitat for wetland dependent species and improve water quality by filtering sediments and chemicals. They also reduce flooding, recharge groundwater, protect biological diversity, and provide opportunities for educational, scientific and recreational activities.

ALE

- Applications Received – 10
- Contracts Awarded – 7
- Acres Enrolled – 5,376
- Funds Obligated – \$12,090,575.50

WRE

- Applications Received – 12
- Contracts Awarded – 2
- Acres Enrolled – 1,644
- Funds Obligated – \$18,934,244.28

RCPP

- Applications Received – 39
- Pending Contracts – 23
- Pending Acres – 6,134.20
- Pending NRCS Cost Share – \$15,773,623

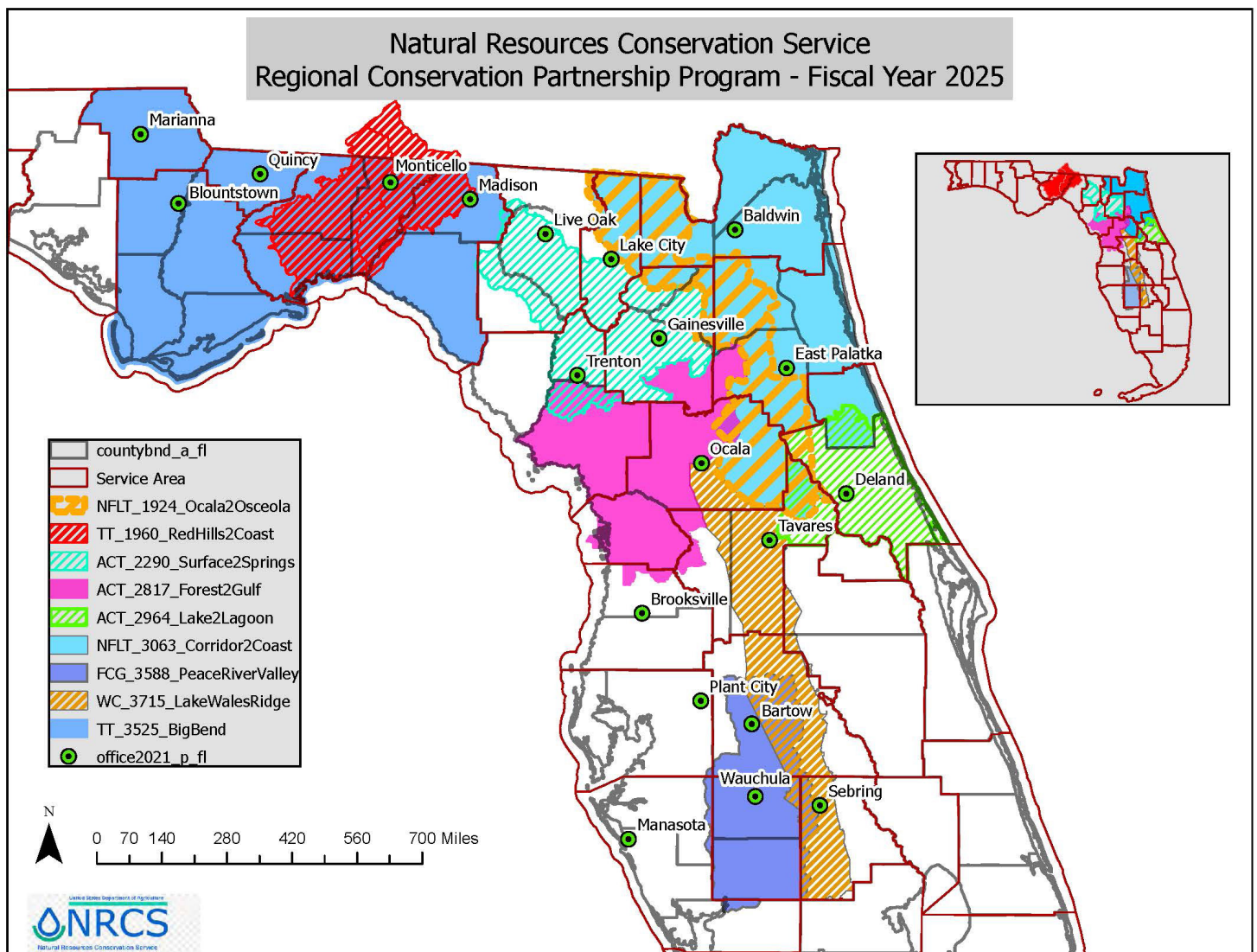
Regional Conservation Partnership Program

Through the **Regional Conservation Partnership Program** (RCPP), NRCS demonstrates the power of public-private partnerships in delivering results for agriculture and conservation where it can have the most impact. To date, NRCS Florida has funded **105 RCPP LMR Agreements** for a cumulative total of nearly **\$2.14 million** on **18,845 acres** (since 2018).

In FY 2024, three **Classic RCPP Projects** were awarded to Florida totaling **\$71.25 million**:

- **Tall Timbers Research**, Florida's Big Bend – \$25 million
- **Florida Conservation Group**, Peace River Valley – Protecting Charlotte Harbor – \$21.25 million
- **Wildlands Conservation**, Lake Wales Ecosystem – \$25 million

A total of **\$635,500** was **obligated** for **RCPP Easement Agreements** on approximately **685 acres**.



Soil Surveys and Mapping

The **NRCS Florida Soils** team completed the **Indian River Subaqueous Soil Survey Special Project, Region Coastal Zone Soil Survey** on **46,840 acres**.

Continuous Mapping

- Everglades National Park
- Biscayne National Park
- Dry Tortuga Park, incorporated in Monroe County Non Major Land Resource Area (MLRA) Subset
- Ecological Site Descriptions (ESD) available for the public
- Two (2) ESD for MLRA - 154 acres

Technical Soil Services and Collaborations

- Farmland Protection Policy Act - 125 requests
- Department of Transportation pre-evaluations for Farmland Protection Policy Act
- National Food Security Act: Wetland Compliance and Highly Erodible land requests completed:
- Highly Erodible Land: 83
- Wetland Conservation: 50
- Southwest Water Management District, Agricultural Ground and Surface Water Management - four (4) on-site technical determinations
- Natural Resource Inventory sites - 58 segments
- State and County Land judgments Department of Health Septic Program mediations - three (3)
- Training provided to the state - three (3) in-person Area 3 training sessions on AD-1026
- Aerial Interpretation
- Hydric soils identification (environmental professionals)



Photo by Isabelle Giuliani, State Soil Scientist, NRCS Florida.

Cooperative and Contribution Agreements

NRCS awarded **\$6,819,650** in **Cooperative and Contribution Agreements for Technical Assistance** to agricultural producers and landowners in Florida. In total, **17 agreements** were funded through the Farm Bill and Inflation Reduction Act to expand access to conservation technical assistance and increase the use of conservation practices throughout the state.



Plant Materials Center

PMC Partners with UF on New Conservation Plant Release

Sunrise Germplasm eastern gamagrass is a joint release by the USDA NRCS **Brooksville Plant Materials Center** (PMC) and University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS)

Eastern gamagrass (*Tripsacum dactyloides*) is a native bunchgrass that occurs throughout most of the eastern United States and northern Mexico but is now rare due to overgrazing. In addition to its utility as a high-quality forage crop, eastern gamagrass is an excellent option for conservation and restoration purposes. The PMC program has previously released eastern gamagrass cultivars or germplasm originating from Arkansas, Kansas, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas which are less suitable for use in subtropical climate.

Sunrise Germplasm was collected from Polk County, Florida, in 1990 and was one of approximately 100 Florida accessions collected to develop a subtropical climate adapted eastern gamagrass. Sunrise Germplasm distinguished itself from other Florida accessions and releases from other states for its superior biomass and seed production which, coupled with good establishment and survival after direct seeding, makes this a valuable solution for conservation planning in the southeast. Demonstration plantings of this gamagrass in southern Georgia have proven its adaptation outside of Florida. Sunrise Germplasm will provide valuable food and cover for wildlife in



Sunrise Germplasm (far left), at the NRCS Brooksville Plant Materials Center, demonstrates superior performance in Florida alongside eastern gamagrass releases from other states. Photo by Victor Guerra, Study Leader, and Acting State Agronomist, NRCS Florida.

habitat restoration plantings and be useful for filter strips, field borders, contour buffer strips, and cross-wind trap strips for erosion control.

Ecological Sciences Top 5

The Top 5 most used Ecological Conservation Practices in Florida in FY 2024 were:

1. Herbaceous Weed Treatment
2. Fence
3. Prescribed Burning
4. Brush Management
5. Firebreak



Fencing at a cattle ranch in Okeechobee, Florida, that is part of an NRCS easement. Photo by Cynthia M. Portalatin, State Public Affairs Specialist, NRCS Florida.

Emergency Watershed Program

Hurricane Ian - In FY 2024, NRCS Florida funded four EWP projects with four sponsors, totaling nearly **\$4.1 million** for debris removal and channel stabilization in five counties as a result of Hurricane Ian.

Hurricanes Sally and Ian

NRCS reimbursed 14 sponsors a total of **\$45.9 million** for recovery work for damage caused by Hurricanes Sally and Ian.

The **Emergency Watershed Protection** (EWP) program responds to emergencies created by natural disasters. It is designed to help people and conserve natural resources by relieving imminent hazards to life and property caused by floods, fires, windstorms, and other natural occurrences. All EWP projects, except for the purchase of floodplain easements, must be sponsored by a legal subdivision of the state, such as a city, county, general improvement district, conservation district, or any Native American tribe or tribal organization as defined in Section 4 of the Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act.



The Gatewood Ditch EWP project, pictured here, was completed in response to damage caused by Hurricane Sally in Escambia County. A new concrete lined ditch and grade stabilization structure were constructed to address the slope and velocity of water in the ditch. Photo by Jason Strenth, State Conservation Engineer, NRCS Florida.

Engineering Top 5

The Top 5 Engineering Practices most used in Florida in FY 2024 were:

1. Watering Facility
2. Livestock Pipeline
3. Heavy Use Area Protection
4. Pumping Plant
5. Water Well



A concrete watering facility and concrete heavy use area protection in Osceola County. The watering facility provides drinking water to cattle, while the heavy use area protection protects the area around the watering facility from erosion due the frequent use by the cattle. Photo by Jason Strenth, State Conservation Engineer, NRCS Florida.

Conservation Programs Outreach



NRCS participated in **72 agricultural events** across the state in **FY 2024** through active engagement at producer meetings, farm visits, agricultural tradeshow events, field days, and other partner, local, state, and community outreach events designed to inform farmers, ranchers, and the public about NRCS' conservation programs, disaster assistance, and employment opportunities.

CattleCon

NRCS participated in the National Cattlemen's Beef Association annual CattleCon held in Orlando, Florida. Thousands of ranchers and farmers attended what is considered to be the largest cattle industry event in the country. NRCS representatives were among five USDA agencies present that included: Agricultural Marketing Service, Farm Service Agency, National Agricultural Statistics Service, and Risk Management Agency.

Vera Farm, LLC - Sheep Farm & Plant Nursery

Vera Farm LLC, a sheep operation and ornamental plant nursery in Sebring, Florida, received NRCS assistance for a pasture management system with fencing for rotational grazing. The farm was also approved for installing a high tunnel system with financial assistance from NRCS. The "Fridays on the Farm" NRCS blog featured a story on Farmers.gov.

Organic Food & Farming Summit

NRCS' inaugural participation in this summit tailored to organic farmers included visits to local farms, on-farm landowner engagement, an evening networking event, tradeshow displays, and participation in concurrent workshops and panel discussions. (See top left photo.)

Military Agriculture Tour

NRCS' first time participating in this event geared toward veterans and their spouses included tours of Hillsborough County farms and offered opportunities to learn about the diversity of agriculture and the various career opportunities that agribusiness offers. Tour sites included a cattle operation, blueberry farm, strawberry farm and market, tropical aquaculture farm, and a visit to the UF/IFAS Gulf Coast Research and Education Center in Wimauma, Florida. (See top right photo.)

Photos by Rochelle Urquhart, State Outreach Coordinator.



Helping People Help the Land