

Iowa Bulletin: 440-26-3

Date: April 1, 2026

Subject: PGM – Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 Environmental Quality Incentives
Program (EQIP) Timelines and Guidance

Action Required By: August 15, 2026

Purpose: To provide the Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) timelines and guidance to all Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) conservation planners and partners.

Expiration Date: September 30, 2026

Explanation: This bulletin provides program deadlines, program guidance, and eligibility requirements for EQIP. The NRCS can accept applications at any time.

EQIP Timeline

Deadline	Activity
January 15, 2026	Application Batching Deadline. To be eligible applications must be entered into ProTracts by deadline.
April 24, 2026	Application Ranking Deadline. Complete assessment and ranking in the Conservation Assessment and Ranking Tool (CART)
May 11, 2026	Preapprovals will be released pending all RCPP preapprovals are released; Note: No RCPP undo/redo of preapproved applications will happen until EQIP preapprovals are all released.
June 30, 2026	State Obligation 80% Completion Status Deadline.
August 15, 2026	Obligation Deadline.
December 4, 2026	All EQIP Contract Cancellation and Termination requests need submitted to State Office to guarantee completion before the end of the calendar year.

Note: If an additional application batching and ranking deadline are required, it will be announced later.

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New Updates for FY 2026

The EQIP cost list will not include Cost of Living Adjustments (COLAs).

FY 2026 EQIP Ranking Guidance

General:

- Ranking will consist of four ranking pools - one for each area. These pools will be the same for each area, except for geospatially based questions. Applications will rank in only one area ranking pool with the ability to select multiple categories if the categories selected are pertinent to the application. Some exceptions apply, refer to B(ii). The order of selections will address our national targets (i.e., wildlife, source water protection, livestock, beginning and socially disadvantaged farmer, regenerative pilot program) first before selecting state-only targets (i.e., high tunnel, specialty ag, organic etc...). Reminder, applications are selected from highest to lowest ranking scores in the ranking pool category. If your ranked application is not in the 'submitted' status in CART, it won't be considered.

Ranking Category Guidance:

- Animal Feeding Operation (AFO) applications must be a separate application entered into Protracts and separate practice schedule in CD. Only AFO practices are allowed to rank in the AFO category in the ranking pool. AFO applications cannot rank in any other categories. If you have AFO practices mixed with cover crops, these are separate applications and must rank separately.
- Category selection criteria – planners must only select applicable categories for their applicants to ensure the conservation plan facilitates the intentions of the category selected.

Regenerative Pilot Program (RPP) is a farmer first, outcomes-based approach to conservation designed to return the agency to its core mission by addressing whole-farm resource concerns. This is a new national target and 25 percent of Iowa's EQIP funds will be allocated to implement regenerative agriculture conservation practices. Contracts will include a whole-farm assessment that follows program-specific policy. For EQIP, a subset of land under control of the operator/customer (i.e., a single tract offered for financial assistance) is allowable.

- Contract length must be a minimum of 5 years and not exceed 10 years.
- Contract must include at least one primary regenerative agriculture practice to be implemented and/or is actively being implemented (existing), by the end of the contract.
- Participants must complete soil health testing CEMA (216) in the first and last year of the contract, at a minimum. Additional years may be planned.
- The soil and water resource concern categories must be met to the threshold level by the end of the contract.

Note: Additional information for planning and contracting RPP can be found on the Programs SharePoint site under folder FY 2026.

EQIP will not utilize the ACT NOW ranking process, unless it's needed for specific situations, such as disaster assistance.

An updated NRCS-CPA-1200 dated December 2025 is available on Programs SharePoint and USDA eForms. Only December 2025 and October 2024 versions will be accepted in FY 2026. The changes include revising the advance payment question into a statement and a new check box for applicants to indicate their preference to receive communications email.

Per national policy updates to Title 440 Conservation Programs Manual (CPM), Part 530, the below changes are reflected for FY 2026.

- 440 CPM § 530.23A(1)(a): Stipulates that if NRCS receives an NRCS-CPA-1200 application form submitted by anyone other than the applicant, the agency must verify its authenticity.
- 440 CPM § 530.6B(2): Stipulates that private consultants must not submit the NRCS-CPA-1270 "Consent to Release or Receive Information for NRCS Program Participation," form on behalf of customers and this form must be on file before NRCS can work with a third party on the customer's behalf.
- 440 CPM § 530.22C(3): Newly established exception to the AGI limitation - If 75 percent or more of the AGI is from farming, then the AGI limitation does not apply.
- 440 CPM § 530.42A(2): Clarifies preapproved applications could be canceled if an eligible applicant fails to respond by the date requested. When NRCS has not made an eligibility determination and the applicant fails to respond or provide required information by the date requested, NRCS will consider the application ineligible.
- 440 CPM § 530.71A: Removed the requirement to conduct preobligation quality assurance reviews. Iowa preobligation checklists are still a requirement to be completed.

National Instruction (NI) Title 440 Part 306, "Guidance for Working with Private Consultants" was published. It provides guidance on working with private consultants and tools to help NRCS staff manage these relationships properly. This NI includes two attachments.

1. NRCS Conservation Program Application Checklist - this document is intended to assist private consultants who want to ensure they are completing all necessary steps on behalf of their client when applying for NRCS programs.
2. Private Consultant Warning Letter - this letter will only be sent from the state office.

Payment Schedules have undergone a streamlining process led by our national payment schedule core team. Please utilize the documents housed on the Programs SharePoint for reference. The FY 2026 Financial Assistance Limitations Booklet, cost estimator and the pipeline conversion calculator will be housed there.

Reminders

Iowa will continue to have 10 high priority practices identified to receive an increased payment rate of 90 percent for the following practices: brush management (314), conservation cover (327), constructed wetlands (656), denitrifying bioreactor (605), saturated buffers (604), silvopasture (381), tree & shrub establishment (612), wetland creation (658), wetland enhancement (659), and wetland restoration (657).

Exterior fence is eligible for EQIP financial assistance when the land where fence is planned supports prescribed grazing (528) to improve management and resource concern(s) are

identified on at least one side of the fence (i.e., grazing cover crops or stalks on crop ground and grazing on existing pastures). The fence factsheet can be found on Programs SharePoint. Due to the State of Iowa's Fence law, NRCS requires the participant to provide an agreement signed by both landowners, prior to obligation, when the contract includes property line fence. The agreement must state that both landowners agree on installation and operation and maintenance requirements. The agreement does not need to include who is responsible for the installation, operation and maintenance of the fence.

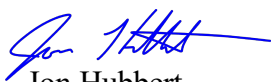
Per national policy located in 440 CPM § 530.71C "Administrative Review of Participant Certification," states are no longer required to conduct a five percent random spot check on historically underserved participant's self-certifications. Do not attempt to verify a person's self-certification as a member of a socially disadvantaged group as no verification process exists for this certification type.

Payment caps are in place for Soil Carbon Amendments (336) at \$65,000/per contract/per individual and \$75,000/per contract/per HU individual. Iowa NRCS is not offering Grain Dryer replacement funding this year due to no payment scenarios available. Grain Dryer replacement funding will be reconsidered as future funding scenarios and policy allow.

Conservation planners will evaluate resource conditions to determine if they meet minimum acceptable condition levels established by the National Resource Concern List and Planning Criteria. CART is the business tool used to document the resource concern assessment. Guidance, forms and additional information can be found on the IA Ecological Sciences SharePoint and eFOTG.

1. The following must be completed before ranking applications:
 - a. Evaluate all Special Environmental Concerns (NRCS-CPA-52 Sections G and J) for existing conditions, no action impacts, and preferred alternative impacts.
 - b. Cultural resources process, except consultation (if required).
 - c. All applicable Threatened and Endangered Species Assessments consultation, if required, will be initiated.
 - d. If permits are required but not obtained, the permits must have a high likelihood of approval. List all required permits on the Environmental Evaluation (NRCS-CPA-52 Section K) (e.g., U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 404 permit, Iowa Department of Natural Resources floodplain permit, county floodplain permit, etc.). Document on the Environmental Evaluation permits must be approved before construction starts.
2. The following must be completed before obligating applications:
 - a. Entire cultural resources review procedures (including consultation if required).
 - b. Consultation for Threatened and Endangered species completed.
 - c. Environmental Evaluation (NRCS-CPA-52) completed and signed.

Contact: If you have questions about EQIP, please contact Jessica Downey, EQIP Program Coordinator, at jessica.downey@usda.gov.



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