

FACT SHEET:

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT WORKING WITH YOUR LOCAL USDA SERVICE CENTER

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has two agencies that offer services directly to farmers and ranchers—the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Working through their local FSA and NRCS offices, farmers and ranchers can access financial assistance through conservation programs, beginning farmer loans, and disaster assistance, and get connected to other local resources and organizations that can help them achieve their goals.

FARM SERVICE AGENCY (FSA)

FSA supports farmers and ranchers through credit and loan programs and conservation, and commodity, disaster, and farm marketing programs. A wide variety of programs are available, making FSA a valuable resource for almost any agricultural business operation.

FSA also administers farm numbers, which is how farmers and ranchers identify themselves as they participate in USDA programs. See the next page for more on how to get a farm number.

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE (NRCS)

NRCS supports farmers and ranchers by working to conserve and protect natural resources. The service offers financial assistance (such as cost-share) and technical assistance (conservation planning and design) for farmers interested in implementing conservation practices on their farms.

USDA SERVICE CENTER LOCATIONS

Find local USDA service centers at farmers.gov/service-center-locator. Farmers and ranchers should stay in contact with their local office to learn about programs available in their area. Although not required, calling ahead to make an appointment is strongly recommended.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR A VISIT TO A USDA SERVICE CENTER

The best way for new or prospective farmers and ranchers to determine which programs are right for them is to visit their local USDA Service Center. Farmers and ranchers should remember they are entering into a partnership with USDA through any of these programs, and they should be prepared to negotiate and compromise. And, they are most likely to find the best programs to fit their needs if they can clearly explain what their priorities are. Good first questions to ask include:

- What resources are available for beginning farmers like myself?
- If I rent my land, what does that mean for programs and loans?
- Are there any local watershed initiatives available to me?
- What practices or enhancements are available to address soil erosion/water quality/wildlife habitat?
- What are some most-used practices for this program? Are there any new practices available this year?

To help service staff understand what options might work for an operation, farmers and ranchers should also be prepared to talk about their operations and their conservation goals, as well as practices they've heard of or are thinking of implementing. Farmers and ranchers looking for loans will have more success if they have some experience and approach FSA with solid plans.

Because some offices may not offer all services, all programs allow farmers to apply through another office.



REQUESTING A FARM NUMBER, WHY THEY ARE IMPORTANT

Any farmer or rancher who is interested in conservation programs through NRCS is required to have a farm number for the application process.



Farm numbers are issued for free and allow access to key USDA programs including working lands conservation, farm loans, and others that require farm records to be shared as part of the application process.

There is no minimum acreage requirement to register as a farm. Having a farm number also makes the farmer eligible to vote in county FSA elections and to serve on their local FSA county committee.

Unlike other ways to identify farmers, such as the Schedule F tax form, farm numbers stay with the land, not the farmer. Farmers who buy or rent land from someone who already has a number do not need to register for one, but the landowner may need to update boundaries and acreage figures. Ask your landowner whether the land has a farm number.

To register for a farm number, set up an appointment at the FSA office, and take along the following documents:

- Proof of identity: driver's license or Social Security number/card.
- Proof of ownership: a copy of the recorded deed or rental agreement as evidence of land ownership or control. Farmers and ranchers do not need to own property to participate in FSA programs.
- Entity identification and status: This is only applicable for those who may have partnership agreements, trust, estate documents, or articles of cooperation.
- Financial and production records: these are particularly important if you apply for a farm ownership or operating loan.

FSA will then enroll the farm or ranch in the FSA database, which involves creating a map that outlines the boundaries with acreage figures. Be prepared to spend 30 minutes to an hour on this process.

REQUESTING A RECEIPT FOR SERVICE

A receipt for service is a form FSA or NRCS staff gives to a farmer or rancher for any approved, denied, or requested services. The receipt creates a record of whether a request was approved or denied and why. These receipts are a good way to document interactions with local service center staff, no matter the outcome of the meeting.

While some offices may not be in the habit of providing receipts for service, the 2008 farm bill mandated they do so, upon request, for all interactions with USDA agencies. Receipts can be requested for in-person, phone, and email interactions.

Anyone who experiences problems obtaining a receipt for service can contact the USDA Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement at 800.880.4183 or partnerships@usda.gov.



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