

USDA Updates Watershed Programs to Improve Access for Tribal Communities

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USDA Updates Watershed Programs to Improve Access for Tribal Communities
NRCS is improving access to its watershed programs to better enable Alaska Native Villages, tribes and tribal organizations to get funding for infrastructure and recovery projects.

Note: the release was updated on Dec. 9 to include the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations (WFPO) Program.

WASHINGTON, Dec. 9, 2024 – The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is improving access to its watershed programs to better enable Alaska Native Villages, tribes and tribal organizations to get funding for infrastructure and recovery projects. This is part of a broader effort by USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to strengthen support of tribal communities, including updating programs and practices to better serve tribal producers and releasing a new strategy for federally recognized tribes.

NRCS updated its program rule for the [Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Operations \(WFPO\) Program](#) which no longer requires eminent domain authority for tribes. Not all tribes have eminent domain authority, which has long been a barrier for tribes to apply as a project sponsor. Through this change, 30 tribes and tribal organizations, currently undertaking watershed projects in nine states, now have a path to move forward.

“We have taken a hard look at our programs as well as welcomed feedback on how we can make them work better for communities and agricultural lands,” said NRCS Chief Terry Cosby. “We are proud of these improvements that better fit cultural and project needs for Alaska native villages and other tribal communities. This move is part of a broader effort at NRCS to better serve tribal communities.”

The [NRCS Watershed Programs](#) provides technical and financial assistance to communities, to help implement conservation methods that prevent erosion, restore infrastructure, improve water and air quality, increase water filtration, enhance wildlife habitat and provide other natural resource benefits. All watershed projects require a [local sponsor](#) who meet mandated program eligibility requirements.

This rule change is important in places like Alaska Native villages, where erosion, flooding and thawing permafrost pose environmental threats to lives and infrastructure. More than 70 out of over 200 Alaska Native villages face significant environmental threats. [View the rule on the Federal Register.](#)

Other Tribal Support

Last month, NRCS announced its Tribal Relations Strategy, demonstrating the agency’s commitment to honoring its federal trust relationship with the 574 federally recognized tribes and Alaska Native Villages that have sovereign interest in more than 119 million acres of land across the United States. [Read the strategy.](#)

Additionally, in recent years, NRCS took steps to integrate Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and Indigenous Stewardship Methods (ISM) into conservation programs and practices. This included the creation of the new Indigenous Stewardship Methods Evaluation conservation evaluation and monitoring activity. [Learn more.](#)

More Information

For more than 90 years, NRCS has helped farmers, ranchers and forestland owners make investments in their operations and local communities to improve the quality of our air, water, soil, and wildlife habitat. NRCS uses the latest science and technology to help

keep working lands working, boost agricultural economies, and increase the competitiveness of American agriculture. NRCS provides one-on-one, personalized advice and financial assistance and works with producers to help them reach their goals through voluntary, incentive-based conservation programs. Now, with additional funding from the Inflation Reduction Act, NRCS is working to get even more conservation practices on the ground while ensuring access to programs for all producers. For more information, visit nrcs.usda.gov.

USDA touches the lives of all Americans each day in so many positive ways. Under the Biden-Harris administration, USDA is transforming America's food system with a greater focus on more resilient local and regional food production, fairer markets for all producers, ensuring access to safe, healthy and nutritious food in all communities, building new markets and streams of income for farmers and producers using climate smart food and forestry practices, making historic investments in infrastructure and clean energy capabilities in rural America, and committing to equity across the Department by removing systemic barriers and building a workforce more representative of America. To learn more, visit usda.gov.

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