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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

USDA offers information and programs to help Maine farmers address drought

Sign-up period for funding open Jan. 1 - March 17, 2017

BANGOR, Maine (Nov. 15, 2016) – The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is offering information and programs to help farmers in Maine make their operations more resilient in the face of future drought.

Widespread drought conditions during the 2016 growing season have affected farms across Maine and New England, resulting in the USDA designating Androscoggin, Kennebec, Lincoln, Oxford, and Sagadahoc Counties as primary natural disaster areas because of the dry summer. Farmers and ranchers in Cumberland, Franklin, Knox, Somerset, Waldo and York Counties also qualify for natural disaster assistance because their counties are contiguous. This designation made low-interest emergency loans available through the USDA’s Farm Service Agency (FSA).

“Maine farmers understand firsthand that drought conditions can lead to significant crop loss and affect the overall productivity of their land,” NRCS-Maine State Conservationist Juan Hernandez said. “Eroded soil and limited water supplies are just a few of the risks that farmers face during a drought, so we have established a Drought Mitigation Strategy for this fiscal year to help those farms more easily and knowledgeably deal with various resource concerns.” NRCS-Maine established a \$500,000 statewide pool using Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funds to help farmers address the concerns of water availability, and water holding capacity and infiltration.

The sign-up period for the funding is open from Jan. 1 - March 17, 2017.

“Our strategy for this funding pool is to target and mitigate the resource concerns of insufficient water and degraded plant conditions on a farm, as well as improve soil health, decrease soil erosion, and augment soil and water quality,” Hernandez added.

The practices available for addressing these concerns are:

- 430-Irrigation Pipeline
- 436-Irrigation Storage Reservoir
- 441-Irrigation system, Microirrigation
- 442-Irrigation System, Sprinkler
- 449-Irrigation Water Management
- 500-Obstruction Removal
- 533-Pumping Plant
- 587-Structure for Water Control
- 642-Water Well
- 328-Conservation Crop Rotation
- 329-Residue and Tillage Management, No-Till/Strip Till/Direct Seed
- 340-Cover Crop
- 484-Mulching

People with questions are encouraged to visit the NRCS office at their local USDA Service Center and find out if they qualify for financial help to implement these conservation practices. There are [14 USDA Service Centers located throughout Maine](#).

NRCS soil scientists also offer the following recommendations for farmers and landowners facing drought conditions:

Save the soil. Increasing soil organic matter levels is the key to building healthy soil. Soil organic matter acts like a sponge and holds large quantities of water; soil organic matter can hold 18 to 20 times its weight in water and recycles nutrients for plants to use. Consequently, soils with high levels of soil organic matter lose less water to runoff and evaporation and require less irrigation. Soil organic matter levels increase as farmers reduce tillage and keep the soil covered with plant residues or cover crops.

One percent of organic matter in the top six inches of soil would hold approximately 27,000 gallons of water per acre! Farmers can increase soil organic matter in three to 10 years if they adopt conservation practices to achieve this goal, including planting cover crops, residue management, converting to crops that use less water, or mulching.

Stretch every drop of water. Farmers who want to make every drop of water count can develop an irrigation water management plan with their NRCS conservation planner. Financial assistance may be available to improve irrigation systems to produce a crop with less water.

Additional information can be found online at: [NRCS-Maine Drought Resources](#).

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