

Seasonal High Tunnel System for Crops

Interim Conservation Practice Information Sheet

PA798



Photo Source: www.hightunnels.org

Definition

A crop production system using a plastic covered high tunnel structure, at least 6 feet in height, used to extend the growing season of vegetable and other specialty crops planted in the natural soil profile within the covered area in a resource conserving manner.

Purpose

The purpose of the seasonal high tunnel system is to improve plant and soil quality, reduce nutrient and pesticide transport, improve air quality through reduced transportation inputs, and reduce energy use through local consumption..

Where used

A seasonal high tunnel system may be used where existing vegetable or other specialty crops are grown in open field conditions and extension of the growing season is needed to continue providing fresh local crops due to climate conditions. The practice does not apply to greenhouses, low tunnel systems that cover single crop rows, or crops grown on tables, benches, portable pots, etc.

The high tunnel structure covers several crop rows, is wide enough to allow the crop to grow to maturity under the tunnel, and is tall enough to accommodate spraying, cultivating, and harvest within the intact tunnel.

General Description

High tunnel structures must be planned, designed, and constructed according to manufacturer's recommendations to withstand local climatic conditions for the 4 year lifespan of the practice.

Commercially available structures are made in numerous widths and lengths typically ranging 14-30 feet wide by 30-96 feet long. They must be constructed of metal, wood, or durable plastic bow frames and covered with (as a minimum) 6 mil greenhouse-grade, UV resistant polyethylene. Passive ventilation is achieved by means of a combination of roll-up side vents, end vents, and occasionally, roof vents. Generally, the end walls are framed-in to create door and ventilation areas.

Resource Conservation

In general, a single layer of plastic on the high tunnel may provide one hardiness zone of protection from cold temperatures. A second layer of plastic or a individual row cover can be used within the structure to provide another possible zone of protection.

Water runoff from the structure or from other nearby sources can cause erosion and ponding issues that must be addressed by appropriate combinations of other practices such as infiltration trenches, diversions, underground outlets, and critical area plantings. Additional management practices including irrigation water management, nutrient and pest management, or conservation crop rotation may be necessary to

achieve conservation purposes.

USDA Financial Assistance for Seasonal High Tunnel System for Crops, Interim Practice

Financial Assistance in Pennsylvania

In Pennsylvania, the interim practice is being offered through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Organic Initiative.

Financial assistance is available to fund up to 2,178 square feet of high tunnel space at a rate of \$2.60 per square foot, \$3.10 per square foot for historically underserved customers.

Interim Practice Pilot Study

Successful applicants will be required to maintain annual records for the three year pilot study period to help NRCS verify if high tunnels are effective in reducing pesticide and nutrient applications, improving plant and soil quality, conserving energy, and providing other benefits to growers.

How Does a Producer Apply?

Contact the local USDA NRCS or Conservation District office: <http://offices.usda.gov>

Complete an application for EQIP.

When do I Apply?

NRCS conservation programs accept applications on a continuous basis throughout the year with periodic cutoff dates to evaluate, rank, prioritize and select applicants. Applications will be pooled for ranking on February 3, March 30, and June 1, 2012.

For Additional Information Contact

Gwendolyn Crews - 717-237-2218
gwendolyn.crews@pa.usda.gov

Are All Producers Eligible?

To be eligible for EQIP, producers must have sales of crops or livestock and must have cropland with a resource concern that can be addressed by a high tunnel.

Both organic and conventional producers qualify for high tunnel funding through EQIP – High Tunnel Initiative and/or Air Quality Initiative.

Producers interested in organic certification can apply through the EQIP Organic Initiative and must also satisfy the requirements of the Organic Initiative:

- Certified – the applicant must submit a copy of their current approved Organic System Plan and contact information of the certifying agent as proof of organic certification. Producers selling less than \$5,000 of organic sales are “exempt” according to the National Organic Program and can apply through the Certified category.
- Transition – the applicant must submit a signed statement agreeing to develop and implement practices consistent with an Organic System Plan and provide NRCS with the contact information of a certifying agent that has already been contacted to begin the certification process.

Applicants with existing high tunnel structures are eligible for the practice. They will not be able to receive any payment on the existing structure(s), but can apply for additional high tunnels.

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