

Producer Resources

by Christina Morris, Blessed Acres Farm

Starting or expanding a farm may seem like a daunting task; however, there are many resources that exist that may be able to help both the new and existing farmers. The Farm Service Agency (FSA), the Natural Resource Conservation Services (NRCS) and Kentucky Proud offer several programs that help provide funding for farmers. We at Blessed Acres Farm have utilized programs from all three of these and have found it to be very beneficial.



FSA is part of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). FSA offers low interest loans to farmers that cannot obtain financing elsewhere. According to FSA, they offer many

different types of loans to “family-sized farmers and ranchers who cannot obtain commercial credit from a bank” (n.d.). Farm Credit System institution, or other lender.” FSA offers loans such as farm ownership loans, operating loans, microloans, emergency loans, and conservation loans. These loans can be used to purchase land, livestock, equipment, buildings and improvements, as well as needed supplies. Each year, there is money set aside by FSA to provide loans for beginning farmers, those farming less than ten years, as well as those individuals that are identified as being subject to racial, ethnic, or gender prejudice. Individuals that fit into this group include American Indian, Asian, African American, Pacific Islander, Hispanic or female. Direct loans are made and serviced by FSA. FSA is responsible for providing the borrower with credit counseling as well as helping applicants “evaluate the adequacy of their real estate and facilities, machinery and equipment, financial and production management, and goals” (FSA, n.d.). Borrowers must be able to show proof of farming 3 out of the last 10 years and have a written business plan. If considering a loan through FSA, be prepared for a lot of paperwork. We applied for the farm ownership loan in March and finally completed all the steps and closed on the farm in August. It is a long process that requires an understanding, patient seller. Livestock and operating loans are not as tedious of



a process, but, depending on the location of your property, adding additional buildings to your property can require several steps such as an archaeological site check. We had to have an archaeological site check when we applied for a loan to build a barn because there were noted Native American findings within so many miles of our property. Even though the process can be exhaustive, the low interest rate and financing for those that cannot obtain it elsewhere, is well worth it. The typical FSA loan payment is made once a year; however, recently they have provided the option for automatic monthly bank draft. Contact your local FSA office for more information about these and other programs they offer.



Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) is also part of the USDA. NRCS focuses on conservation improvements. Several different programs are offered through them, one being the Environmental Quality Incentives Plan (EQIP). According to the NRCS Kentucky website, EQIP “provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers to address natural resource concerns and deliver environmental benefits such as improved water and air quality, conserved ground and



surface water, increased soil health and reduced soil erosion and sedimentation, improved or created wildlife habitat, and mitigation against increasing weather volatility” (2020). This program is based on conservation practices that the land owner is willing to implement on their farm. The EQIP program allows NRCS to provide financial assistance, which they refer to as co-investing, and mentoring to plan and implement improvements that will help improve the land and agricultural practices. There is an application process that is point based. Signup for the program is year round and at certain times throughout the year, NRCS ranks applications and begins a funding cycle in which applications are approved for the year. Field visits are made after an application has been received and NRCS helps the producer write a required conservation plan for their farm based on the resource concerns on the land and any that the applicant may have as well. EQIP can provide planning and financial assistance for measures such as:

- grazing management which includes fencing, water systems, planting pasture and prescribed grazing;
- nutrient and pest management which includes manure storage, nutrient application and management plans and crop and pest control;
- erosion control, including controlled grazing on waterways;
- and many other practices such as wildlife habitat enhancement, forest management, and energy conservation.



We applied for the EQIP program and were awarded co-investing from NRCS that enabled us to put up cross-fencing along our creek and pond, allowing us to add eight additional rotational fields to our property, three automatic waterers, and to plant a small field of gamma grass. All of these additions allow us to better conserve our pasture and our waterways. Creek beds and around ponds are still able to be grazed, but must be done intentionally and in moderation. It is important to understand that the amount of money awarded is based on each of the projects that you agree to implement on your farm, the more you plan to do, the more points toward your application. It is also important to understand that the money that is

❖ USEFUL WEBSITES ❖

www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/equip/

www.kyagr.com/marketing/documents/KYP_GrantApplication_Fillable.pdf

www.fsa.usda.gov/about-fsa/structure-and-organization/farm-loans/index



awarded is based on specific amounts for specific projects. For example, if putting up cross fencing, NRCS will pay a certain amount per foot no matter what the actual cost. Typically, you have to pay or make arrangements to pay for the products and/or services you are implementing before NRCS provides the funding; however, recently historically underfunded applicants have been given the opportunity to receive an advance for at least 50% of the amount being awarded. NRCS is very helpful and willing to come out at any time to walk over your farm and help write a conservation plan, whether you apply for funding or not. This is a free service.

Kentucky Proud offers 50% cost share funding for advertisement of KY Proud products, including livestock, through its Promotional Grant. We utilized this program to help pay for farm shirts and hats, farm decals for our vehicles, and a farm sign. It can also be used for television and radio advertisements, and web expenses. The nine

page Kentucky Proud Promotional Grant application can be found online and is accepted all year long. To receive the grant, you must be a KY Proud Member. Maximum grant amount is \$8000, with a \$36,000 lifetime maximum.

I have heard from several goat producers throughout the United States that say they were everything but laughed at by FSA and/or NRCS when they went to apply for loans for grants and informed them that they raised goats. This was not our case; however, we were the first goat producers in our county to apply for FSA loans. Don't give up! Be persistent.

Christina Morris, along with her husband, Jason, own and operate Blessed Acres Farm in Crofton, KY. With the help of their two teenage boys, Micah and Eli, they raise registered and commercial Kiko goats and Akbash livestock guardian dogs.