USDA to launch high tunnel pilot study to increase availability of locally grown foods

Local News

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USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) recently announced a new pilot project under the “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” initiative for farmers to establish high tunnels – also known as hoop houses – to increase the availability of locally grown produce in a conservation-friendly way.

“There is great potential for high tunnels to expand the availability of healthy, locally-grown crops – a win for producers and consumers,” said State Conservationist Roylene Rides at the Door. “This pilot project is going to give us real-world information that farmers all over the country can use to decide if they want to add high tunnels to their operations. We know that these fixtures can help producers extend their growing season and hopefully add to their bottom line,” she said.

The 3-year, 38-state study will verify if high tunnels are effective in reducing pesticide use, keeping vital nutrients in the soil, extending the growing season, increasing yields, and providing other benefits to growers.

Made of ribs of plastic or metal pipe covered with a layer of plastic sheeting, high tunnels are easy to build, maintain and move. High tunnels are used year-round in parts of the country, providing steady incomes to farmers – a significant advantage to owners of small farms, limited-resource farmers and organic producers.

Washington is one of 38 states participating in the project. NRCS will provide financial assistance for the project through its Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the EQIP Organic Initiative. One high tunnel per farm for qualified applicants, covering as much as 5 percent of 1 acre, may be funded.

“On our farm here in the Puget Sound region, high tunnels are essential for heat loving crops,” said Ann Vandeman, executive director of Left Foot Organics near Olympia, Washington. “We can grow tomatoes, basil and peppers without them, but the yields are not high enough to cover the costs of production,” she said.

To sign up or learn more about EQIP assistance for high tunnel projects, producers should contact a local NRCS office.