

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Safety Technical Assistance Programs for Specialty Crop Producers

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Foodborne illness occurs when a person gets sick after consuming a food contaminated with pathogens, or harmful microbes. Produce and other specialty crops may be especially susceptible to contamination because of how they are grown, processed, sold, and consumed. According to Food and Drug Administration (FDA) estimations, the annual cost of all foodborne illnesses attributable to produce is \$2.5 billion. The FDA Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA; P.L. 111-353) expanded FDA's food safety oversight authorities, including those related to produce and other specialty crops. Congress provided FDA with authority to establish first-time food safety requirements for farms producing fruits and vegetables, and to issue additional requirements for participants across the food supply chain, among other authorities.

FDA issues guidance and regulations based on emerging science. The Preventive Controls for Human Foods Rule, the Produce Safety Rule, the Pre-harvest Agricultural Water Rule, and the Food Traceability Rule are some FDA regulations that may generally apply to the specialty crop industry. Additionally, retailers may require producers to verify their adherence to food safety best practices by completing certain food safety certifications. Producers may find federal and state food safety laws, FDA regulations, and buyer-required certifications challenging to understand or implement across different specialty crop production systems. For instance, farms, packinghouses, food manufacturing facilities, and others along the supply chain may have differing food safety considerations depending on their operation size, commodities, production systems, and regional practices. In addition, scientific understanding of and associated best practices for food safety continue to evolve.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers two programs that provide funding and technical assistance to help specialty crop producers implement food safety laws and regulations and obtain certifications: the Food Safety Outreach Program (FSOP) and the Food Safety Certification for Specialty Crops Program (FSCSC). FSOP and the FSCSC program have provided specialty crop producers with opportunities for food safety technical assistance through different pathways. Since 2015, Congress has provided discretionary funding to FSOP for educational programs and initiatives that have outreach and technical assistance components for eligible categories of producers as identified by Congress. More recently, the FSCSC program has temporarily provided subsidies for specialty crop producers to attend FSOP trainings, pay for food safety certifications, subsidize water testing analyses, and hire food safety consultants.

Congress authorized the FSOP competitive grant program under FSMA. Congress originally defined the target audiences for FSOP competitive grants as "small and medium-sized farms, beginning farmers, socially disadvantaged farmers, small processors, and/or small fresh fruit and vegetable merchant wholesalers." In the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-334), Congress expanded the target audiences to include military veteran farmers and ranchers. Since FY2015, Congress has appropriated funds for competitive grant projects, including pilot projects as well as multistate education and training, community outreach, collaborative education and training, and grant writing skills projects. Authorization of appropriations for the program is \$10 million annually through FY2026, and Congress has provided that amount annually since FY2021.

In FY2022, USDA administratively established the FSCSC program. The Secretary of Agriculture announced that the program would help offset costs for specialty crop producers to comply with regulatory and market-driven food safety certification requirements and would provide support to small and very small specialty crop producers. The 2022 funding announcement included \$200 million available for subsidizing eligible specialty crop producers' food safety certifications issued between 2022 and the end of 2023. In June 2024, USDA announced the availability of \$19 million for this program for certification expenses incurred in calendar years 2024 and 2025. Per USASpending.gov, USDA obligated \$683,480 from 2022 through July 31, 2025.

Congress may consider the effectiveness of FSOP and the FSCSC program in providing technical assistance to specialty crop producers. Congress also may consider whether additional statutory language is needed to authorize or otherwise influence future program activities. For example, Congress may consider whether to authorize the FSCSC program or allow it to remain as a temporary program and whether or not to direct USDA to continue providing CCC funding. Congress may also consider the funding level for FSOP in future fiscal years and whether to authorize changes to the program.

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Introduction

Foodborne illness may occur when a person consumes food containing pathogens, or harmful microbes. Many types of foods have been associated with foodborne illness outbreaks, including produce, seafood, meat, poultry, dairy products, and processed foods. *Produce* and other *specialty crops* may be especially susceptible to contamination, resulting in foodborne illness due to how they are grown, processed, sold, and consumed.¹ Public health agency estimates indicate that some categories of specialty crops are more frequently associated with foodborne illnesses and represent a significant proportion of total foodborne illnesses caused by *Salmonella*, *E. coli* O157, and *Listeria*.²

Several federal agencies have roles related to food safety and foodborne illness, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). FSIS regulates major species of meat and poultry and certain egg products, while FDA regulates the rest of the food supply. CDC is a regulatory agency responsible for public health matters, including tracking and investigating foodborne illness outbreaks. Various other agencies across federal, state, and local governments also support the safety of the food supply through inspections, education and outreach, and reporting across jurisdictions, among other activities.

In 2010, Congress passed the FDA Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA; P.L. 111-353), which expanded FDA's food safety oversight authorities, including those related to produce and other specialty crops. Following enactment, FDA began promulgating regulations to implement FSMA. Some specialty crop producers may find FSMA regulations complex and challenging to understand and implement.³ Produce and specialty crops introduced into the food system often originate from a variety of production systems, operations that range in size, and different domestic and international regions. Additionally, understanding of routes of contamination and factors that impact risk assessments are evolving as research continues.⁴

¹ The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) defines *produce* as any fruit or vegetable, including mushrooms, sprouts, peanuts, tree nuts, and herbs (21 C.F.R. §112.3). *Specialty crops* are defined in statute as "fruits and vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, and horticulture and nursery crops (including floriculture)." 7 U.S.C. §1621 note. Overlap exists between food items considered produce and those considered specialty crops. Varying definitions are sometimes used across agencies and programs. For more information on specialty crops, see CRS Report R48625, *Specialty Crops: Selected Farm Bill Programs*.

² For 2022, approximately 70% of *E. coli* O157 illnesses were attributed to consumption of specialty crops. Approximately half of total illnesses due to both *Salmonella* and *Listeria* were similarly attributed to consumption of specialty crops. Interagency Food Safety Analytics Collaboration (IFSAC), "Foodborne Illness Source Attribution Estimates for 2022 for Salmonella, Escherichia coli O157, and Listeria monocytogenes Using Multi-year Outbreak Surveillance Data, United States," December 13, 2024 (hereinafter IFSAC, "Foodborne Illness Source Attribution Estimates for 2022").

³ Gregory Astill et al., *U.S. Produce Growers' Decisionmaking Under Evolving Food Safety Standards*, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Economic Research Service (ERS), Economic Information Bulletin (EIB) no. 210, June 2019, https://ers.usda.gov/sites/default/files/_laserfiche/publications/93242/EIB-210.pdf?v=14549 (hereinafter Astill et al., *U.S. Produce Growers' Decisionmaking Under Evolving Food Safety Standards*).

⁴ See, for example, Emily Ready, "Preventing Foodborne Outbreaks Starts in the Field," American Society for Microbiology, April 21, 2025, <https://asm.org/articles/2025/april/preventing-foodborne-outbreaks-starts-in-the-field> (hereinafter Ready, "Preventing Foodborne Outbreaks Starts in the Field").

Congress has authorized programs, provided funding, and directed federal agencies to provide specialty crop producers with technical assistance for compliance with FSMA regulations.⁵ This report describes two programs administered by USDA that provide technical assistance to specialty crop producers for food safety law compliance and implementation: the National Institute of Food and Agriculture's (NIFA's) Food Safety Outreach Program (FSOP) and the Farm Service Agency's (FSA's) Food Safety Certification for Specialty Crops Program (FSCSC).⁶ This report does not address other activities or funding provided by federal agencies that may support FSMA compliance.

Food Safety in Specialty Crop Production

Produce is especially vulnerable to microbial contamination that can lead to foodborne illness. In 2024, FDA investigated at least 14 foodborne illness outbreaks linked to produce. These outbreaks were responsible for at least 1,169 illnesses, 248 hospitalizations, and 2 deaths.⁷

Common pathogens that can cause foodborne illness reside naturally throughout the environment, such as in water or soil, and can multiply quickly and spread easily during food production if given the appropriate conditions. Water used for irrigation and post-harvest activities,⁸ agricultural workers, animals, and unclean surfaces and equipment are all potential routes for microbial contaminants to come into contact with produce. In addition, produce is often consumed raw or without processes that can reduce harmful microbes.⁹

Specialty crop producers and others along the food supply chain may undertake food safety practices to reduce the risk of microbial contamination. At a farm, these practices may include workers not harvesting produce that has visible contamination (e.g., an apple with bird droppings on it) or that was near a contamination event (e.g., a working animal defecates between rows of leafy greens). A food manufacturing facility may take on certain measures, such as establishing process controls to ensure a product reaches the appropriate temperature for the required time to sufficiently reduce pathogens.¹⁰ Producers may implement cleaning and sanitizing procedures, train workers on health and hygiene standards, and ensure that post-harvest water is safe to use. Food safety practice implementation can vary widely among specialty crop operations, as regional, operational, and crop-specific differences may affect risk assessments. Science-based

⁵ 21 U.S.C. §399c(c) directs the Secretary of Health and Human Services to coordinate with the extension activities of USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) to advise producers and small processors on their transition to new practices as required by Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) regulations.

⁶ The term specialty crop in this report may refer to produce (i.e., raw or minimally processed foods, such as raw tomatoes, berries, cucumbers) and to processed food items made with specialty crops, including value-added products, shelf-stable food items, and frozen produce (e.g., canned tomato sauce, fruit jams, or frozen vegetable mixes).

⁷ Of the 26 closed outbreak investigations reported on the FDA website for 2024, 14 linked produce to the outbreak, and 6 did not have a food product linked to the outbreak. FDA, "Investigations of Foodborne Illness Outbreaks," accessed November 18, 2025, <https://www.fda.gov/food/outbreaks-foodborne-illness/investigations-foodborne-illness-outbreaks>.

⁸ *Post-harvest water* refers to water used in activities after a crop is harvested, such as to make ice, to cool off crops, in heat treatments for pests, to transport product within a facility, or to wash produce.

⁹ Some processes are used during food production that significantly reduce or eliminate pathogens; examples of these processes include cooking, pasteurization, drying and dehydration, and high-pressure processing. Actions taken to significantly reduce pathogens in food help decrease the likelihood of foodborne illness.

¹⁰ Process controls are specific times during the food production process that control an identified food safety hazard, with documented steps with parameters that must be achieved, such as minimum temperature needed or length of time for a particular treatment. Process controls depend on the food safety hazard and food item being produced, among other considerations. An example is monitoring and documenting the time and temperatures during pasteurization to ensure the food remained hot enough for long enough to kill harmful pathogens.

recommendations on produce safety risk assessments also may differ. No single, uniform recommended approach exists for specialty crop producers to prevent contamination.¹¹

To adopt new practices, specialty crop producers rely on an understanding of food safety concepts and regulations applied to the farm, post-harvest environment, and food manufacturing facilities. Such expertise may depend on the size of the specialty crop operation. Large specialty crop operations might have dedicated food safety personnel with specialized experience and knowledge.¹² Small specialty crop operations with fewer employees may have these food safety responsibilities assigned as part of an individual's responsibilities.¹³ Small farm produce growers interviewed as part of a 2019 USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) case study identified the limited supply of professionals with specialized technical knowledge of food safety or availability to provide technical assistance as implementation constraints for adopting new food safety practices.¹⁴

Grocery stores, schools, and other institutional buyers and retailers in some cases are requiring food safety certifications from specialty crop operations. Generally, for a specialty crop producer to obtain a food safety certification, a government or private entity verifies through audit that it meets regulatory or market-driven food safety standards. Specialty crop operations with buyer-required food safety certifications may have expanded market access, including to new markets.

FDA Food Safety Modernization Act

In 2010, Congress passed FSMA (P.L. 111-353), which expanded FDA's food safety oversight authorities.¹⁵ Overall objectives of FSMA are to prevent food safety problems before they occur and to emphasize data-driven foodborne illness and outbreak surveillance, primarily on foods regulated by FDA. FSMA amended FDA's existing structure and authorities and directed the agency to develop science-based, preventative standards and issue regulations to reduce foodborne illnesses across the food supply chain.¹⁶ FSMA also established new food safety programs and authorized their funding, including programs that offer the specialty crop industry technical assistance and support for complying with FSMA and reducing contamination risks.¹⁷

¹¹ Ready, "Preventing Foodborne Outbreaks Starts in the Field."

¹² Food safety professionals have said that effective and successful food safety technicians have specialized skills needed to complete their job responsibilities (e.g., mastery of regulations, science, and technology specific to the food being produced and the processes required for production). These employees often have microbiology knowledge and have received specialized training to understand how to control hazards on the farm or in specific foods. Bob Lijana, "Critical Attributes of a Successful Food Safety and Quality Organization: FSQA on the Floor," *Food Safety Magazine*, June 12, 2023.

¹³ Several ERS analyses highlighted that "smaller farms" (classified as less than \$350,000 in gross cash farm income) often rely on the principal operator and their spouse for labor, and larger farms rely on hired labor. Marcelo Castillo and James M. MacDonald, "Charts of Note: Smaller Farms Often Rely on the Principal Operators and Their Spouses for Labor, While Larger Farms Rely on Hired Labor," USDA, ERS, July 8, 2020.

¹⁴ Astill et al., *U.S. Produce Growers' Decisionmaking Under Evolving Food Safety Standards*.

¹⁵ CRS Report R43724, *Implementation of the FDA Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA, P.L. 111-353)*.

¹⁶ FSMA, §105. For more information, see CRS Report R46706, *Produce Safety: Requirements, Implementation, and Issues for Congress*.

¹⁷ Various federal programs address, but are not exclusively focused on, food safety technical assistance as an issue for specialty crop producers. Examples include the Agricultural Marketing Service's (AMS's) Local Agriculture Market Program and NIFA's Specialty Crop Block Grant Program and Agriculture and Food Research Initiative. AMS and NIFA are part of USDA.

As of September 2025, FDA has finalized 16 rules to implement FSMA.¹⁸ These rules cover topics such as intentional adulteration,¹⁹ verification programs for importers of foods, laboratory accreditation for food analyses, sanitary transportation and manufacturing considerations for human and animal food, considerations for fresh produce production, and additional recordkeeping requirements for certain foods. In some cases, these regulations build off of existing best practices, agency guidance, and food safety regulations prior to FSMA.²⁰

FSMA provided FDA with new regulatory authority for “fruits and vegetables that are raw agricultural commodities” and the facilities that hold, pack, transport, or process them.²¹ In order for a specialty crop operation to be subject to the FSMA rules, certain criteria must be met, and the criteria may differ from rule to rule. The criteria are based on factors such as business size, commodities produced or held, activities conducted on the operation, and consumers of the final food product.²² Four FSMA rules may be particularly relevant to domestic specialty crop producers: the Preventive Controls for Human Foods Rule (PCHF), the Produce Safety Rule (PSR), the Pre-harvest Agricultural Water Rule (Water Rule), and the Food Traceability Rule (Traceability Rule). These rules are described in the following text box.

Selected FSMA Rules Applicable to Specialty Crop Producers

- The Preventive Controls for Human Foods Rule (PCHF; 21 C.F.R. Part 117), finalized in 2015, modernized the current good manufacturing practices (21 C.F.R. Part 110) and added requirements regarding records that must be established and maintained. The PCHF “requires food facilities to have a food safety plan in place that include an analysis of hazards and risk-based preventive controls to minimize or prevent the identified hazards.” The rule applies to facilities that manufacture, process, pack, or hold human food. Examples of specialty crop operations subject to the PCHF are facilities that manufacture food products using specialty crops (e.g., pickled vegetables, fruit jams, or sauces) or minimally processed produce (e.g., bagged salads, fresh cut fruits and vegetables, or other ready-to-eat produce). All compliance dates have passed for this rule.
- The Produce Safety Rule (PSR; 21 C.F.R. Part 112), finalized in 2015, established the standards for growing, harvesting, packing, and holding produce for human consumption. Specific entities or specific raw agricultural commodities may be subject to these standards. All compliance dates have passed for this rule.
- The Pre-harvest Agricultural Water Rule (Water Rule; 21 C.F.R. Part 112, Subpart E), finalized in 2024, amended the preharvest agricultural water provisions of the PSR. The Water Rule removes requirements for testing for and meeting certain microbial criteria for preharvest agricultural water and instead utilizes a regulatory approach that requires systems-based assessments, with required testing in certain circumstances. Compliance dates for this rule are in 2025, 2026, and 2027 depending on business size.

¹⁸ This includes amendments to existing rules. FDA, “Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA),” February 5, 2024, <https://www.fda.gov/food/guidance-regulation-food-and-dietary-supplements/food-safety-modernization-act-fsma>.

¹⁹ 21 U.S.C. §342 describes various ways that a food may be deemed adulterated, including “if it bears or contains any poisonous or deleterious substance which may render it injurious to health.” FDA issued a final rule to “protect food from intentional acts of adulteration where there is an intent to cause wide scale public health harm.” FDA, “Mitigation Strategies to Protect Food Against Intentional Adulteration,” 81 *Federal Register* 34166, May 27, 2016.

²⁰ Three regulations implementing FSMA are the Produce Safety Rule (PSR; 21 C.F.R. Part 112), the Pre-harvest Agricultural Water Rule (Water Rule; 21 C.F.R. Part 112, Subpart E) and the Preventive Controls for Human Foods Rule (PCHF; 21 C.F.R. Part 117). The PCHF modernized the previously issued current Good Manufacturing Practices regulation (cGMP; 21 C.F.R. Part 110). The PSR and the Water Rule included similar language and risk assessment criteria to FDA and USDA’s 1998 best practices guidance in “Guide to Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables.” See, FDA, HHS, “Standards for the Growing, Harvesting, Packing, and Holding of Produce for Human Consumption Relating to Agricultural Water,” 89 *Federal Register* 37485, May 6, 2024.

²¹ 21 U.S.C. §321(r). The term *raw agricultural commodity* means any food in its raw or natural state, including all fruits that are washed, colored, or otherwise treated in their unpeeled, natural form prior to marketing.

²² 21 C.F.R. §§112.1-5 (Subpart A—General Provisions) describes requirements for farming operations to be subject to the PSR.

- The Food Traceability Rule (Traceability Rule; 21 C.F.R. Part 1, Subpart S), finalized in 2022, established additional recordkeeping requirements for persons who manufacture, process, pack, or hold foods that are considered high-risk and are located on the Food Traceability List. This rule applies to facilities that are specialty crop operations handling high-risk foods, including nut butters, fresh cut fruits, and fresh cucumbers, tomatoes, and leafy greens. Facilities subject to the PCHF, PSR, and the Water Rule may also be subject to the Traceability Rule. The compliance date for this rule was extended from 2026 to 2028 in August 2025.

Sources: FDA, “Current Good Manufacturing Practice, Hazard Analysis, and Risk-Based Preventive Controls for Human Food,” 80 *Federal Register* 55908, September 17, 2015; FDA, “Standards for the Growing, Harvesting, Packing, and Holding of Produce for Human Consumption,” 80 *Federal Register* 74354, November 27, 2015 (21 C.F.R. Part 112); FDA, “Standards for the Growing, Harvesting, Packing, and Holding of Produce for Human Consumption Relating to Agricultural Water,” 89 *Federal Register* 37448-37519, May 6, 2024; FDA, “Requirements for Additional Traceability Records for Certain Foods” 87 *Federal Register* 70910, November 21, 2022 (21 C.F.R. Part 1, Subpart S); and FDA, “Requirements for Additional Traceability Records for Certain Foods: Compliance Date Extension,” 90 *Federal Register* 38088, August 5, 2025.

Specialty crop producers may have operations subject to multiple FSMA regulations. As an operation changes in size, practices, complexity, or markets, it may become subject to more or fewer FSMA regulations. Congress specified that the FSMA regulations issued for produce safety and additional recordkeeping requirements are to “provide sufficient flexibility to be practicable for all sizes and types of facilities.”²³ To accommodate the diversity of the food industry, FDA asserts that its regulations set standards but do not always require specific practices to achieve those standards, which may allow operations the flexibility to address their unique situations.²⁴

Many of these standards rely on assessing risk to decrease rather than eliminate the likelihood of contamination.²⁵ This aims to identify hazards from on-farm food production to distribution and to establish practices to prevent the introduction of these hazards into the food supply. The framework allows for producers to apply evolving science to regional or commodity-specific practices to their operations, which may require producers to have a solid understanding of food safety topics, awareness of advances in science, and the ability to apply these concepts to their own regions, commodities, and production systems.

FDA continues to issue guidance and regulations to support FSMA implementation, in part to reflect advances in understanding about risks and routes of contamination.²⁶ These FDA rules may introduce new scientific concepts and requirements that may be unfamiliar to specialty crop producers. However, these rules, as well as buyer-required food safety certifications, may refer to agricultural and manufacturing practices known to be effective in minimizing microbial contamination in food production.

USDA Technical Assistance Programs

Some producers may find it challenging to meet the food safety requirements established by federal laws and regulations, as well as those required by retailers to access markets. Various

²³ 21 U.S.C. §§350h and 2223.

²⁴ FDA may exercise enforcement discretion on certain provisions and issue guidance for the industry that reflect the agency’s current thinking on a topic or practice and provide examples of best practices that clarify further.

²⁵ Marcel H. Zwietering et al., “All Food Processes Have a Residual Risk, Some Are Small, Some Very Small and Some Are Extremely Small: Zero Risk Does Not Exist,” *Current Opinion in Food Science*, vol. 39 (June 2021), pp. 83-92.

²⁶ For example, FDA issued the final rule on preharvest agricultural water in May 2024; the rule amended the agricultural water provisions (Subpart E) of the PSR. This updated regulatory approach claims to incorporate recent science with “[FDA] outbreak investigation findings to achieve improved public health protections as compared to the earlier requirements.” FDA, Final Water Rule.

USDA agencies provide support to the specialty crop industry, including NIFA, FSA, and the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS). FSOP and FSCSC are two programs USDA administers to provide specialty crop producers with funding and technical assistance to help them implement food safety laws and regulations and obtain certifications.

Food Safety Outreach Program

In 2010, Congress authorized the National Food Safety Training, Education, Extension, Outreach and Technical Assistance Program (now known as FSOP) through FSMA and directed FDA and USDA to establish a competitive grant program under FSOP.²⁷ The competitive grant program aims to support compliance with and understanding of food safety standards for farm owners and operators, small food processors, and small fruit and vegetable merchant wholesalers across a variety of agricultural production systems.²⁸ Congress directed the two agencies to facilitate the integration of food safety standards across various agricultural production systems, including conventional, sustainable, organic, conservation, and environmental practices.²⁹ FSOP is administered through USDA's NIFA and jointly managed through a partnership between FDA and USDA.³⁰ Since FY2016, NIFA has awarded over 200 grants to eligible institutions, including community-based organizations (CBOs), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), food hubs, farm cooperatives, extension services, and other local groups.³¹

National Training Infrastructure

FDA and USDA established a national food safety training infrastructure through four regional centers (one of which was selected to be the lead regional coordination center) before they began awarding competitive grants for FSOP. The agencies established this infrastructure to lead, manage, and coordinate the regional development and implementation of FSOP grants. FDA and USDA intended for the national infrastructure to ensure coordination and collaboration across regions for any planned training, education, or technical assistance programs.³² The agencies described this approach to be “consistent yet tailored to the differing needs of various areas of the country.”³³ The regional centers are located in the western, southern, northeast, and north central regions of the United States, as defined by the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy. As of August 2025, the western regional center is operated through Oregon State University in Portland, OR; the north central regional center is operated through Iowa State University in Ames, IA; the southern regional center is operated through the University of Florida in Lake

²⁷ FSMA amended the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act of 1938 and directed FDA and USDA to establish a competitive grant program within NIFA (21 U.S.C. §399c). FSMA also amended Title IV of the Agricultural Research, Extension, and Education Reform Act of 1998 (P.L. 105-185), adding a new section to implement the program (7 U.S.C. §7625).

²⁸ 7 U.S.C. §7625 and 21 U.S.C. §399c.

²⁹ 7 U.S.C. §7625.

³⁰ FSMA, §1011(d).

³¹ Grants.gov, “Food Safety Outreach Program [FY2016]: USDA NIFA,” Funding Opportunity no. USDA-NIFA-FSMA-005777, last updated April 14, 2016, <https://www.grants.gov/search-results-detail/282966>. Eligible entities include state cooperative extension services; nonprofit community-based organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); small to medium-sized producer organizations; institutions of higher education; and federal, state, local, or tribal agencies. FDA and the lead coordination center collaborate with NIFA to select awardees.

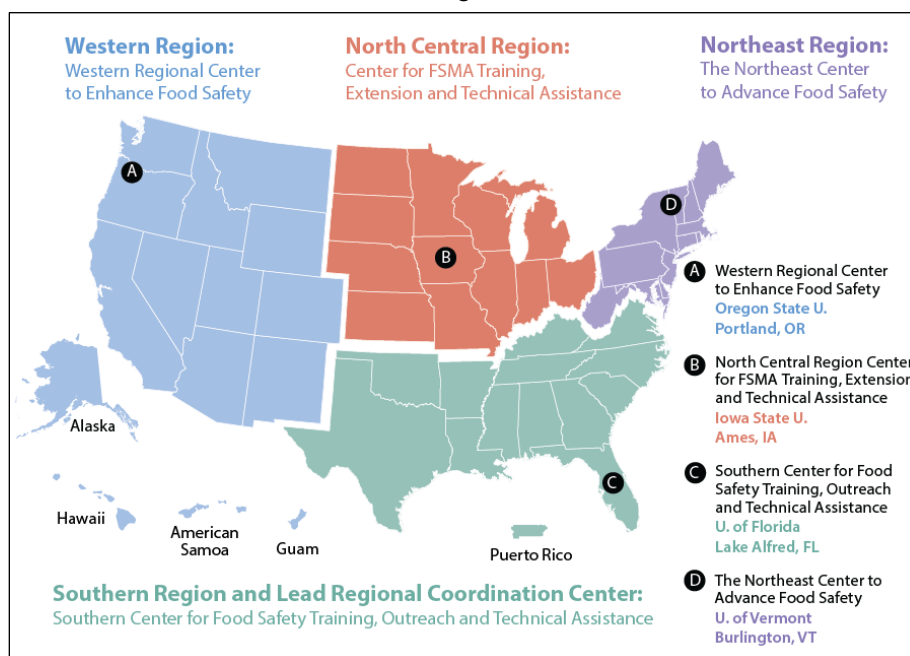
³² FDA, “Grants to Enhance Food Safety,” 2015. Awardees for the Food Safety Outreach Program (FSOP) are required to report project outcomes to their respective regional center to ensure nationwide integration.

³³ FDA, “Grants to Enhance Food Safety [Lead Regional Coordination Center].”

Alfred, FL; and the northeast regional center is operated through the University of Vermont in Burlington, VT. The southern regional center also acts as the lead regional coordination center.

Figure 1. Food Safety Outreach Program (FSOP) Lead Regional Coordination Center and Regional Centers

as of August 2025



Source: University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension, “USDA FSOP 2025 National Project Directors’ Meeting,” accessed November 18, 2025, <https://conference.ifas.ufl.edu/fsop/>.

Notes: FSOP = Food Safety Outreach Program. FSMA = FDA Food Safety Modernization Act (P.L. 111-353). Each region is depicted by a different color with corresponding letters indicating where each regional center is located. The southern regional center also serves as the lead regional coordination center.

Competitive Grants

Congress authorized FSOP to award competitive grants to “support training, education, extension, outreach, and technical assistance projects that will help improve public health by increasing the understanding and adoption of established food safety standards, guidance, and protocols.”³⁴

NIFA states that these competitive grants support “customized food safety education” to target audiences affected by the current guidelines established under FSMA.³⁵ The FSOP competitive grants fund eligible organizations to provide FSMA training and technical assistance to specialty crop producers, distributors, and wholesalers. Eligible entities for FSOP grants include state cooperative extension services; nonprofit CBOs and NGOs; small to medium-sized producer

³⁴ 7 U.S.C. §7625(e)(1).

³⁵ FSOP funds programs to develop and implement food safety training, education, extension, outreach, and technical assistance projects that address the needs of the targeted audiences. Target audiences include operators of small to midsize farms and food processing facilities; veteran, beginning, and underserved farmers and ranchers; and small-scale vegetable and fruit wholesalers. USDA, NIFA, “Food Safety Outreach Program,” accessed January 5, 2025, <https://www.nifa.usda.gov/grants/programs/food-safety/food-safety-outreach-program> (hereinafter NIFA, “Food Safety Outreach Program”).

organizations; institutions of higher education; and federal, state, local, or tribal agencies.³⁶ NIFA is also to ensure that nonprofit CBOs, NGOs, organizations representing owners and operators of small and midsized farms, small food processors, and small fruit and vegetable wholesalers can compete for funding or subcontracts through this program.

FSOP is to support on-the-ground food safety training projects that directly reach the targeted groups.³⁷ The intended audiences initially targeted in this competitive grant program were small and medium-sized farms, beginning farmers, socially disadvantaged farmers, small processors, and/or small fresh fruit and vegetable merchant wholesalers.³⁸ The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (2018 farm bill; P.L. 115-334) expanded the target groups to include veteran farmers or ranchers.³⁹ Over time, NIFA also has expanded the types of awards under FSOP in an effort to better serve the target audiences.⁴⁰ Program types funded by FSOP have included pilot programs, multistate education and training projects, community outreach projects, collaborative education and training projects, and grant writing skills projects.⁴¹

Grants Awarded by the Food Safety Outreach Program in FY2025 and FY2024

In 2025, USDA announced that the funds for FY2025 would not be distributed through a new request for applications but would instead be distributed “to existing projects or previously peer reviewed and meritorious but unfunded proposals.”⁴² USDA stated that this would allow the agency “to expedite distribution of Fiscal Year 2025 NIFA grant funds for the Food Safety Outreach Program.” In FY2024, 24 projects were funded across three types of projects: (1) community outreach, (2) collaborative education and training, and (3) technical assistance grant writing skills. The following describes each type of award, as well as selected supplemental awards.⁴³

Community Outreach Projects are intended to meet educational needs of small, specialized producers by expanding on existing food safety outreach programs. Awardees are expected to build food safety training capacity within communities to address any unmet FSMA knowledge gaps. Community Outreach Projects are expected to customize existing programs and training

³⁶ See 7 U.S.C. §7625(f). Collaborations between eligible entities or other appropriate entities as determined by the Secretary of Agriculture are also eligible for this grant program.

³⁷ U.S. Congress, U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations, *Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2016*, report to accompany S. 1800, 114th Cong., 1st sess., 2015, p. 25.

³⁸ 7 U.S.C. §7625.

³⁹ P.L. 115-334, §12306(e). A veteran farmer or rancher as defined in 7 U.S.C. §2279(a).

⁴⁰ Through a listening session and open comment period, NIFA requested stakeholder input to develop program priorities for FY2018. USDA, NIFA, “Notice of Stakeholder Listening Session and Request for Stakeholder Input,” December 12, 2016, <https://www.regulations.gov/document/NIFA-2017-0002-0001>.

⁴¹ NIFA, “Food Safety Outreach Program Frequently Asked Questions.”

⁴² FSOP requests for applications (RFAs) usually had been posted the year before the funding year. In August 2025, NIFA announced that there will be no RFAs for FY2025. USDA, NIFA, FSOP, “Notice,” accessed August 23, 2025, <https://www.nifa.usda.gov/grants/funding-opportunities/food-safety-outreach-program>. Iowa State University, North Central Region Center for FSMA Training, Extension, and Technical Assistance, “USDA NIFA FSOP Update,” August 20, 2025, <https://www.ncrfsma.org/usda-nifa-fsop-update>.

⁴³ The RFA for FSOP restricts the indirect costs (i.e., facilities and administrative costs) to not exceed 30% of total federal funds awarded. The National Agricultural Research, Extension, and Teaching Policy Act of 1977, §§1462(a) and (c), sets the indirect cost limitation authority (7 U.S.C. §§3310(a) and (c)). Depending on the indirect cost rate set by the receiving institution and NIFA, the funds available for program activities may be less than the listed award amounts.

curricula and provide specialized technical assistance to reach additional target groups spanning agricultural production and processing systems.⁴⁴

Collaborative Education and Training Projects are intended to support collaborations across states or regions with common food safety concerns or commodity-specific needs. Awardees are expected to have experience working with target audiences and capacity to develop and modify existing food safety curricula to meet new FSMA rules across agricultural production and processing systems.⁴⁵

Technical Assistance—Grant Writing Skills Projects are intended to support grant writing skill development and resources for specific entities. These entities (e.g., new applicants, CBOs, and minority-serving institutions) are expected to directly work with or be led by underserved producer groups, and these projects are meant to strengthen future FSOP applications. Projects are expected to work with the regional centers to coordinate and ensure broad coverage in their regions to better reach organizations that support FSOP's target audiences.⁴⁶

Collaborative Engagement Supplements may be awarded to applicants for any of the above project types that include significant collaborations with 1890 institutions; 1862 institutions; 1994 institutions; entities in Insular Areas; Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions; Hispanic-Serving Agricultural Colleges and Universities; Historically Black Colleges and Universities; and CBOs to increase outreach to minority communities. These supplements may be funded up to \$150,000 above the listed budget maximum.⁴⁷

Funding

Congress initially provided \$2.5 million in discretionary funding to NIFA for FSOP in FY2015 and since has regularly provided appropriations for FSOP.⁴⁸ **Table 1** lists FSOP congressional appropriations for FY2015-FY2026 in nominal and inflation-adjusted dollars.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ The maximum award request amount for Community Outreach Projects is \$300,000, and the grant duration is 24 months. Grants.gov, "Food Safety Outreach Program [FY2024]: USDA NIFA," Funding Opportunity no. USDA-NIFA-FSMA-010336, <https://grants.gov/search-results-detail/351306> (hereinafter Grants.gov, "FSOP RFA [FY2024]: USDA NIFA"). Specific information about Community Outreach Projects is provided on p. 9 of the full grant announcement, available to download at Grants.gov, "View Grant Opportunity," <https://grants.gov/search-results-detail/351306>.

⁴⁵ The maximum award request amount for Collaborative Education and Training Projects is \$550,000, and the grant duration is 36 months. Grants.gov, "FSOP RFA [FY2024]: USDA NIFA." Specific information about Collaborative Education and Training Projects is provided on p. 10 of the full grant announcement, available to download at Grants.gov, "View Grant Opportunity," <https://grants.gov/search-results-detail/351306>.

⁴⁶ The maximum award request amount for Technical Assistance—Grant Writing Skills Projects is \$300,000, and the grant duration is 36 months. Grants.gov, "FSOP RFA [FY2024]: USDA NIFA." Specific information about Technical Assistance, Grant Writing Skills Projects is provided on p. 12 of the full grant announcement, available to download at Grants.gov, "View Grant Opportunity," <https://grants.gov/search-results-detail/351306>.

⁴⁷ Grants.gov, "FSOP RFA [FY2024]: USDA NIFA," p. 26.

⁴⁸ Rep. Hal Rogers, "Regarding the House Amendment to the Senate Amendment on H.R. 83," explanatory statement, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 160, part 151 (December 11, 2014), p. 4.

⁴⁹ USDA budget request explanatory note documents contain a table with the estimated and actual distribution of federal payments for FSOP. NIFA's explanatory notes show obligations for the full appropriated amount minus federal administration costs for FY2015-FY2024. USDA, NIFA, "Congressional Justifications," <https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/general-information/staff-offices/office-budget-and-program-analysis/congressional-justifications>.

Table 1. Food Safety Outreach Program Appropriations, FY2015-FY2026

in millions of dollars

Fiscal Year	Nominal Amount	Inflation-Adjusted Amount
2015	2.5	3.2
2016	5.0	6.3
2017	5.0	6.2
2018	7.0	8.5
2019	8.0	9.5
2020	8.0	9.4
2021	10.0	11.4
2022	10.0	10.7
2023	10.0	10.3
2024	10.0	10.0
2025	10.0	—
2026	10.0	—

Sources: Compiled by CRS with calculations based on deflators for total nondefense spending included in the FY2026 White House Budget Historical Tables; and USDA, NIFA, *Budget Explanatory Notes FY2015-FY2026*.

Notes: Inflation-adjusted amounts are in millions of 2024 dollars using historical deflators presented in FY2026 White House Budget, Table 10.1- Gross Domestic Product and Deflators Used in the Historical Tables: 1940-2024. FY2025 and FY2026 are not adjusted for inflation.

The 2018 farm bill amended the authorization of appropriations for FSOP to be \$10 million annually.⁵⁰ The 2018 farm bill also removed the prohibition on an entity's ability to receive additional grant funding once it has received three years of grant funding; the three-year limit on individual grant terms remained unchanged.⁵¹ The 2018 farm bill also repealed the matching funds requirement for certain USDA awards.⁵²

The President's budget for FY2026 requested \$7.0 million for FSOP.⁵³ The Trump Administration stated that the \$3.0 million decrease in funding compared with FY2025 is to "direct funding to higher priority activities, that allow for greater focus on national priorities and is consistent with

⁵⁰ The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (2018 farm bill; P.L. 115-334) provided authorization of appropriations for the program through FY2023 (7 U.S.C. §7625(j)). Previously, authorization of appropriations was "such sums as may be necessary." The Further Continuing Appropriations and Other Extensions Act, 2024 (P.L. 118-22), extended the authorization of appropriations through FY2024, the American Relief Act, 2025 (P.L. 118-158, Division D), extended the authorization of appropriations through FY2025, and the Continuing Appropriations, Agriculture, Legislative Branch, Military Construction and Veterans Affairs, and Extensions Act, 2026 (P.L. 119-37, Division B), provided appropriations through FY2026.

⁵¹ The 2018 farm bill, §7301, strikes the prohibition on funding that restricted USDA from providing additional grant funding once an entity has received three years of grant funding; individual grants remain limited to a maximum of three years.

⁵² The 2018 farm bill repealed 7 U.S.C. §3371, which had implemented a matching funds requirement for certain USDA awards (P.L. 115-334, §7614). USDA, NIFA, "Food Safety Outreach Program Frequently Asked Questions." USDA NIFA, "NIFA-20-002 Current and Past Matching Requirements," accessed September 10, 2025, <https://www.nifa.usda.gov/nifa-20-002-current-past-matching-requirements>.

⁵³ USDA, NIFA, 2026 *USDA Explanatory Notes: National Institute of Food and Agriculture*, <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/21-2026-CJ-NIFA.pdf>.

the Administration’s policy.” The House and Senate Committees on Appropriations each recommended \$10.0 million for FSOP in the reports accompanying their respective FY2026 appropriations bills.⁵⁴ The joint explanatory statement accompanying Division B of the Continuing Appropriations, Agriculture, Legislative Branch, Military Construction and Veterans Affairs, and Extensions Act, 2026 (P.L. 119-37), extends FSOP funding through the end of FY2026.⁵⁵

Food Safety Certification for Specialty Crops Program

USDA administratively established the FSCSC program by using the authorities provided to the Secretary of Agriculture through Section 5 of the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) Charter Act (P.L. 80-806) as amended.⁵⁶ The CCC authority allows the Secretary a certain level of discretion in funding programs to fulfill the agency’s purpose of supporting U.S. agriculture. Under this authority, the Secretary of Agriculture may change or suspend programs at any time. USDA’s FSA began administering the FSCSC program with CCC funding in mid-2022 to assist specialty crop growers with expanding their markets or developing new and additional markets by subsidizing food safety certification costs.⁵⁷ Food safety certification refers to audits conducted by government or private entities to verify that specialty crop operations meet regulatory or market-driven food safety standards.⁵⁸

USDA states that the FSCSC program supports specialty crop producers’ market expansion and development by subsidizing eligible on-farm food safety program expenses incurred by producers attaining buyer-required food safety certifications.⁵⁹ The FSCSC program has provided funding

⁵⁴ The House Committee on Appropriations reported a bill (H.R. 4121, H.Rept. 119-172) on June 23, 2025. The Senate Committee on Appropriations reported a bill (S. 2256, S.Rept. 119-37) on July 10, 2025. The Senate-reported bill was incorporated into a minibuss appropriations bill, amended and passed in the Senate (Division B of H.R. 3944) on August 1, 2025. For more information, see CRS Report R48564, *Agriculture and Related Agencies: FY2026 Appropriations*.

⁵⁵ Sen. Susan Collins, “Sec. 4 of the Continuing Appropriations, Agriculture, Legislative Branch, Military Construction and Veterans Affairs, and Extensions Act, 2026,” Explanatory Statement, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 171, part 189 (November 9, 2025), p. S8045.

⁵⁶ The Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) Charter Act, §5, provides the Secretary a level of discretion to carry out many broad operations in support of U.S. agriculture (15 U.S.C. §714c). CCC and Farm Service Agency (FSA), “Notice of Funds Availability (NOFA) for the Food Safety Certification for Specialty Crops Program,” 87 *Federal Register* 36816, June 21, 2022 (hereinafter CCC and FSA, “NOFA for FSCSC Program,” 87 *Federal Register* 36816).

⁵⁷ Congress has provided the Secretary of Agriculture, through the CCC’s discretionary funds, with broad powers to fulfill its purpose to stabilize, support, and protect farm income and prices; assist with maintaining balanced and adequate supplies of agricultural commodities; and facilitate the orderly distribution of commodities (15 U.S.C. §714). One such authority is to “increase the domestic consumption of agricultural commodities (other than tobacco) by expanding or aiding in the expansion of domestic markets or by developing or aiding in the development of new and additional markets, marketing facilities, and uses for such commodities” (15 U.S.C. §714c(e)). In 2022, then-Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack announced funding availability for specialty crop producers and asserted, “by helping mitigate the costs of on-farm food safety certification, the Food Safety Certification for Specialty Crops (FSCSC) program will support fair, transparent food systems rooted in local and regional production and provide small-scale producers a real opportunity to bring home a greater share of the food dollar and help create jobs.” USDA, “USDA Announces Assistance for On-Farm Food Safety Expenses for Specialty Crop Growers,” press release, June 17, 2022, <https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/news/press-releases/2022/06/17/usda-announces-assistance-farm-food-safety-expenses-specialty-crop-growers> (hereinafter USDA, “Assistance for On-Farm Food Safety Expenses for Specialty Crop Growers”).

⁵⁸ CCC and FSA, “NOFA for FSCSC Program,” 87 *Federal Register* 36816-36820.

⁵⁹ Food safety certifications may support increased market access for specialty crop operations. CCC and FSA, “NOFA for FSCSC Program [2022],” 87 *Federal Register* 36816; USDA, FSA, “USDA Expands Funding Opportunities for Specialty Crop Growers to Help Offset On-Farm Food Safety Expenses for 2024 and 2025,” June 26, 2024, <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/news-room/news-releases/2024/usda-expands-funding-opportunities-for-specialty-crop> (continued...)

directly to eligible specialty crop operations in listed program years to offset these expenses.⁶⁰ The FSCSC program may subsidize up to 75% of costs associated with producers' efforts to obtain or renew food safety certifications and up to 100% for food safety trainings. Costs associated with food safety certifications may include those expensed by specialty crop operations to develop a written food safety plan, maintain or update an existing food safety plan, train workers and supervisors in food safety, conduct water or compost microbiological testing, and pay for certification upload and application fees.

Specialty crop operations subject to FSMA's PCHF are required to have a written food safety plan as part of the operation's food safety program.⁶¹ Although FSMA regulations do not require every specialty crop operation to have a written food safety plan, the development of this plan may better prepare a producer for FSMA compliance and may improve access to markets (e.g., through food safety certifications). Producers can use food safety plans to organize their food safety programs and to guide regulatory inspections and third-party audits. Producers may find developing, implementing, and maintaining a food safety plan to be technically challenging, time-consuming, and expensive to implement. The process requires an understanding of food safety concepts for each operation to identify and evaluate likely contamination risks and the ability to develop operation-specific practices to address such risks.

Eligibility

To be eligible to receive FSCSC program funds, an entity must be a specialty crop operation,⁶² meet the definition of a small or medium-sized business, and have incurred and paid eligible expenses related to food safety certification during the program year.⁶³ Prior to 2024, only small

growers-to-help-offset-on-farm-food-safety-expenses-for-2024-and-2025; and CCC and FSA, "Notice of Funds Availability (NOFA) for the Food Safety Certification for Specialty Crops Program," 89 *Federal Register* 53382, June 26, 2024, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2024-06-26/pdf/2024-14022.pdf> (hereinafter CCC and FSA, "NOFA for FSCSC Program," 89 *Federal Register* 53382).

⁶⁰ CCC and FSA, "NOFA for FSCSC Program," 87 *Federal Register* 36816. The NOFA issued in 2022 covered eligible expenses related to food safety certification for 2022 that were incurred between June 21, 2022, and December 31, 2022, or for 2023 food safety certification expenses incurred during the 2023 calendar year. The subsequent NOFA, issued in 2024, covers eligible expenses related to food safety certification incurred between June 26, 2024, and December 31, 2024, and during the 2025 calendar year.

⁶¹ 21 C.F.R. §171.126. A specialty crop operation may not be subject to the PCHF if the produce items remain raw agricultural commodities. Specialty crop operations that are subject only to FSMA's PSR are not required to have a written food safety plan.

⁶² For FSCSC, *specialty crop operation* means a farming operation (individual or legal entity) that produces specialty crops that are raw agricultural commodities. *Raw agricultural commodity* "means any food in its raw or natural state, including fruits that are washed, colored, or treated in their unpeeled natural form prior to marketing." Raw agricultural commodities are not processed in ways such as cooking, cutting, canning, freezing, or dehydrating. Examples of specialty crops that are also raw agricultural commodities include bagged apples, mixed leafy greens, heads of cabbage, and bunches of bananas. Raw agricultural commodities that are not specialty crops include eggs and raw milk. Specialty crops that are not raw agricultural commodities include processed fruits and vegetables, such as baby carrots; frozen fruit mixes; dehydrated mangos or cranberries; or any canned, cooked, or cut fruits and vegetables. CCC and FSA, "NOFA for FSCSC Program," 87 *Federal Register* 36816.

⁶³ The 2024 NOFA defines *small businesses* as "an applicant that had an average annual monetary value of specialty crops the applicant sold during the 3-year period preceding the program year of more than \$250,000 but not more than \$500,000." This definition did not change from 2022. In 2024, FSA added eligibility for *medium-sized businesses*, defined as a business with "the average annual monetary value of specialty crops sold during the applicable 3-year period from \$500,001 to \$1,000,000." USDA, FSA, "USDA Expands Funding Opportunities for Specialty Crop Growers to Help Offset On-Farm Food Safety Expenses for 2024 and 2025," press release, June 26, 2024, <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/news-events/news/06-26-2024/usda-expands-funding-opportunities-specialty-crop-growers-help-offset>. CCC and FSA, "NOFA for FSCSC Program," 89 *Federal Register* 53382, June 26, 2024.

and very small businesses were considered eligible.⁶⁴ Eligible expenses for the program include food safety plan development for first-time food safety certification, existing food safety plan maintenance or updating, food safety certification and associated application fees (including for group audits), certification upload fees, microbiological testing, and food safety training costs. Ineligible expenses include infrastructure improvements, equipment, supplies, salaries and benefits of employees (except for consultants), and late payment fees.

The costs associated with food safety certification activities can vary widely. The FSCSC program requires specialty crop growers to submit forms detailing costs incurred for eligible expenses.⁶⁵ Audit costs may include travel expenses and an hourly rate for the auditor and a cost for the certification itself. For example, USDA's AMS provides audits for specialty crop operations at a cost of \$163 per hour.⁶⁶ Food safety trainings can vary in length, cost, and modality depending on the provider. For example, costs for grower trainings listed on the Produce Safety Alliance website as of November 18, 2025, range from \$0 to \$450; the Food Safety Preventive Controls Alliance website as of November 18, 2025, lists participant courses ranging from \$340 to \$1,914.⁶⁷

Eligible expense categories have different payment rates and maximum payment amounts that are calculated separately for each expense category.⁶⁸ In 2022 and 2023, the FSCSC program set a higher payment rate for socially disadvantaged, limited-resource, and beginning and veteran farmers or ranchers compared with all other applicants. Historically underserved farmer or ranchers were eligible for a 75% subsidy for eligible expenses except training, which received a 100% subsidy. All other applicants received a 50% subsidy on all eligible expenses, except for training expenses, for which all other applicants received a 100% subsidy up to a maximum of \$200. Certain categories of eligible expenses had a maximum payment amount.⁶⁹ Based on feedback following the publication of the 2022 FSCSC notice of funds availability (NOFA), the 2024 NOFA set the rate for all applicants to the higher rate that applied only to historically underserved farmers or ranchers in the 2022 NOFA.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ USDA, FSA, "USDA Expands Funding Opportunities for Specialty Crop Growers to Help Offset On-Farm Food Safety Expenses for 2024 and 2025."

⁶⁵ Farmers.gov, "Food Safety Certification for Specialty Crops Program: Apply for the Food Safety Certification for Specialty Crop Program," April 15, 2025, <https://www.farmers.gov/coronavirus/pandemic-assistance/food-safety#apply> (hereinafter USDA, "Applying for FSCSC"). Eligible specialty crop producers can apply for FSCSC by working directly with their FSA office or through an online application portal.

⁶⁶ USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), "Service Fees for Fresh and Processed Fruits and Vegetables," October 1, 2024, <https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grading/fees#fresh>.

⁶⁷ See Cornell University, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, "Produce Safety Alliance: Upcoming Grower Trainings," <https://cals.cornell.edu/produce-safety-alliance/training/grower-training-course/upcoming-grower-trainings>; and Food Safety Preventive Controls Alliance, "Training Catalog for Human Food Courses," https://fspca.my.site.com/FSPCA/s/trainingcatalog?language=en_US.

⁶⁸ USDA, "Applying for FSCSC." Categories of eligible expenses are those used to develop a food safety plan, maintain or update a food safety plan, obtain food safety certification, pay for certification upload fees, conduct microbiological testing, and cover training expenses. FSA reports that expected FSCSC payments for each eligible year will equal the applicant's eligible expenses multiplied by the corresponding percentage, not to exceed the category's maximum payment amount. This amount, plus any additional cost-share assistance received, cannot exceed the total amount of the eligible expense.

⁶⁹ CCC and FSA, "NOFA for FSCSC Program," 89 *Federal Register* 53382. For example, in program year 2024, FSCSC covered 100% of training expenses up to a maximum of \$500.

⁷⁰ USDA, FSA, "USDA Expands Funding Opportunities for Specialty Crop Growers to Help Offset On-Farm Food Safety Expenses for 2024 and 2025," news release, June 27, 2024, <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/news-events/news/06-27-2024/usda-expands-funding-opportunities-specialty-crop-growers-help-offset>. See CCC and FSA, "NOFA for FSCSC Program," 89 *Federal Register* 53382.

Funding

Funding for FSCSC is authorized by the Secretary of Agriculture using CCC funds.⁷¹ CCC funding authorized for FSCSC is at the discretion of the Secretary of Agriculture and may change or be suspended by the Secretary at any time. When FSCSC was established in 2022, USDA announced that the program would use CCC funds to aid in the expansion and development of new markets by paying a portion of the eligible expenses for specialty crop operations to obtain food safety certifications.⁷² These certifications may facilitate specialty crop operations' access to markets, such as grocery stores and schools, and to other institutional buyers and retailers.

The 2022 funding announcement included \$200 million available for subsidizing eligible specialty crop producers' food safety certifications issued between 2022 and the end of 2023.⁷³ In June 2024, USDA announced the availability of \$19 million for this program for certification expenses incurred in calendar years 2024 and 2025.⁷⁴ According to USASpending.gov, USDA obligated \$683,480 from 2022 through July 31, 2025.⁷⁵ To date, USDA has not announced a funding opportunity that would apply to eligible expenses incurred after December 31, 2025.

Issues for Congress

Foodborne illnesses linked to the consumption of specialty crops continue to occur. Programs created to assist specialty crop operators with addressing these risks may reduce such events. FSOP and the FSCSC program provide specialty crop producers with opportunities for food safety technical assistance through different pathways. Congress authorized FSOP and has provided discretionary funding for the program; USDA established the FSCSC program using mandatory funding from the CCC. Some stakeholders have commented that these programs are beneficial to specialty crop producers.⁷⁶ Further, the *Roadmap to Produce Safety*, published in July 2025, advised that sustainable funding frameworks for technical assistance should include

⁷¹ The CCC is a wholly government-owned corporation that is authorized to borrow funds from the U.S. Department of the Treasury to finance programs supporting U.S. agriculture. Most CCC-funded programs are authorized by Congress and direct USDA on how to administer CCC activities and in what amounts to fund them. The CCC Charter Act (P.L. 80-806; 62 Stat. 1070; 15 U.S.C. §§714 et seq.) also grants the Secretary of Agriculture a level of discretion to use CCC funding for activities that broadly support agriculture through activities such as food purchases, increased market access, and payments for adverse economic conditions. For more information on the CCC and its uses, see CRS Report R44606, *The Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC)*.

⁷² 15 U.S.C. §714c(e). CCC and FSA, "NOFA for FSCSC Program," 87 *Federal Register* 36816.

⁷³ For program year 2022, the application period was between June 1, 2022, and January 31, 2023. For program year 2023, the application period spanned from January 1, 2023, to January 31, 2024. Applications were accepted for expenses incurred during the calendar year corresponding with each program year (e.g., expenses eligible to be subsidized by program year 2022 were incurred from June 2022 to December 31, 2022).

⁷⁴ See CCC and FSA, "NOFA for FSCSC Program," 89 *Federal Register* 53382.

⁷⁵ See USASpending.gov, "Awards for Listing 10.142: Food Safety Certification for Specialty Crops Program," accessed September 5, 2025, <https://www.usaspending.gov/search/?hash=68e37dd77f1837416e020c6255a9a07c>.

⁷⁶ For example, project directors for FSOP awardees convene annually "to foster sharing among the projects of approaches, findings, outputs, and lessons learned." The breakout group summary report from the 2022 and 2023 annual project directors' meeting identified themes across annual meetings, highlighted the impact of the FSOP awards, and identified outstanding needs based on recently completed work. Chris Callahan and Elizabeth Newbold, "Summary Report: Breakout Group Discussions Project Directors Meeting USDA NIFA Food Safety Outreach Program (FSOP) Covering the 2022 and 2023 Meetings," summary report presented at the National Project Directors' Meeting, Tampa, FL, June 24, 2023, <https://conference.ifas.ufl.edu/fsop/prior/2023/presentations/FSOP-2023-Breakout-Group-Summary-Report.pdf>.

consistent federal funding, as well as state, industry, and public private contributions.⁷⁷ Congress may consider the effectiveness of FSOP and the FSCSC program and whether to further shape the programs through authorizing legislation. In addition, Congress may consider the sufficiency of appropriations for the programs.

Since FY2021, Congress has appropriated \$10.0 million annually for FSOP. Various stakeholders have supported this funding level for FSOP. For example, one stakeholder, the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture, noted that the program has “been critical to meeting FSMA’s mandate and ensuring a safe food supply.”⁷⁸ In the FY2026 President’s budget request, the Trump Administration requested \$7 million for the program and stated that the \$3 million decrease in funding compared with FY2025 is to “direct funding to higher priority activities, that allow for greater focus on national priorities and is consistent with the Administration’s policy.” The authorization of appropriations for FSOP is set to expire at the end of FY2026.⁷⁹ Congress may consider the President’s budget request and stakeholder petitions, among other considerations, in determining the level of appropriations for FSOP in FY2027 and future fiscal years.

During the Biden Administration, USDA announced funding for FSCSC to assist specialty crop growers with expanding their markets or developing new and additional markets by subsidizing food safety certification costs. Since 2022, USDA has made available \$219 million in CCC funds for FSCSC. USASpending.gov reported that USDA had obligated less than \$1 million of these program funds as of July 2025. USDA has not announced funding available past program year 2025.⁸⁰ The *Roadmap to Produce Safety* advocated for securing long-term investments for food safety technical assistance. Congress may consider oversight efforts to evaluate program implementation and effectiveness. Among other efforts, Congress may question USDA officials at congressional hearings and/or direct audits of the program by the Government Accountability Office or the Inspector General. In addition, Congress may consider whether to direct USDA to continue providing CCC funding for FSCSC.

Congress may also consider authorizing provisions regarding the programs. USDA established FSCSC administratively; the program does not have specific authority. Congress may consider authorizing the program should it want to provide express direction to USDA regarding the

⁷⁷ *Roadmap to Produce Safety*, published in July 2025, summarized the results of surveys and discussions with stakeholders regarding priorities and challenges in improving produce safety. The Reagan-Udall Foundation for the FDA (Reagan-Udall) initiated this effort. Reagan-Udall is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization created by Congress “to advance the mission of the FDA to modernize medical, veterinary, food, food ingredient, and cosmetic product development, accelerate innovation, and enhance product safety” (21 U.S.C. §379dd). Reagan-Udall, *Roadmap to Produce Safety: Summary Report of the Produce Safety Dialogue*, July 2025, https://reaganudall.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/072825_Roadmap%20to%20Produce%20Safety_Final3.pdf (hereinafter Reagan-Udall, *Roadmap to Produce Safety*).

⁷⁸ For example, in FY2022, the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA) sent a letter to the House and Senate Appropriations Committees and Agriculture subcommittees requesting to prioritize specific programs that “enhance farmers, ranchers, and rural communities and ensure a safe, affordable, and abundant food supply.” Other food safety-related programs mentioned were the state cooperative agreement programs for the PSR and the animal foods preventive controls rule and the Produce Safety Alliance. In the letter, NASDA requested \$10 million for FSOP in FY2023. NASDA represents the commissioners, secretaries, and directors of agriculture in all 50 states and 4 territories. NASDA, “Letter to Appropriations Committee, Agriculture Subcommittees on FY 2023 priorities,” June 2, 2022, <https://www.nasda.org/letter-to-appropriations-committee-on-fy-2023-priorities/>.

⁷⁹ P.L. 119-37 extends FSOP funding through the end of FY2026. Sen. Collins, “Sec. 4 of the Continuing Appropriations, Agriculture, Legislative Branch, Military Construction and Veterans Affairs, and Extensions Act, 2026,” p. S8045.

⁸⁰ Applications will be accepted for expenses incurred during program year 2025 from January 1, 2025, to January 31, 2026. CCC and FSA, “NOFA for FSCSC Program,” 89 *Federal Register* 53382.

program. Authorizing language could include directions for the program's administration, such as the amount available for covered activities and eligibility criteria. Congress may also consider FSOP's authorization. In the 2018 farm bill, Congress amended certain FSOP provisions, including by adding veteran farmers or ranchers as target groups for projects. During the 118th Congress, the Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2024 (H.R. 8467) would have reauthorized appropriations for FSOP until FY2029. It also would have removed the requirement for the Secretary of Agriculture to coordinate implementation of the grant program with the FDA National Integrated Food Safety Initiative (IFSS), the national food safety strategy. The Secretary would not have been required to consider applied research, education, and extension results when carrying out the grant program and would not have been required to consider the needs articulated by FSOP participants in determining the applied research agenda for the IFSS. Congress may consider these and other provisions if it chooses to modify the authority for FSOP.

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