University of Vermont | Extension
College of Agriculture and Life Sciences

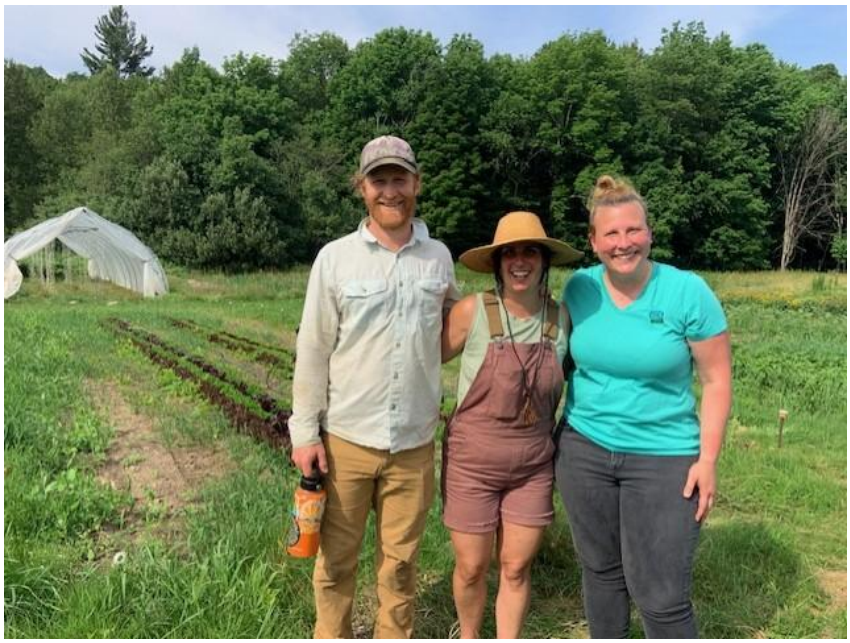
Funding Case Study

A Diversified New Farm Working with NRCS - Stone's Throw Farmstead
Shrewsbury, Vermont

Background

Jess Purks and Connor Self purchased 11 acres in Shrewsbury, Vermont in 2022 with the goal of establishing a diversified commercial farm. Stone's Throw Farmstead began production in 2023, growing vegetables and cut flowers while raising sheep and alpacas. Today, the farm includes 1 acre of vegetables and flowers, 5 acres of pasture supporting 16 sheep and 3 alpacas, and 5 acres of managed forest.

The farm sells its products through a farmstand, the Rutland and Ludlow farmers markets, wholesale accounts with local stores, and a flower CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program. Jess and Connor emphasize ecological land stewardship by minimizing tillage, reducing reliance on power equipment, and adopting conservation practices that improve soil health and biodiversity.



Initial USDA Engagement

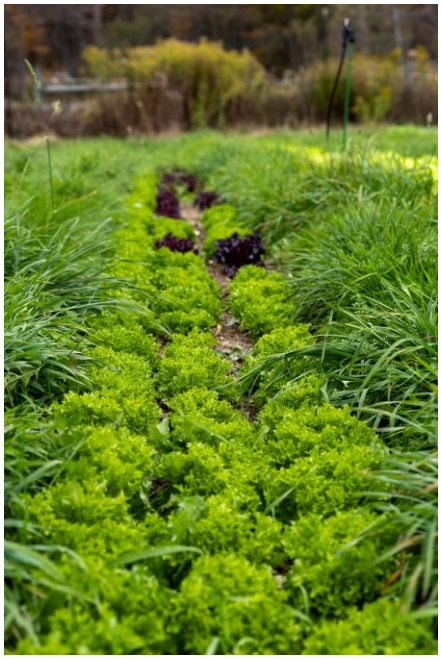
As beginning farmers, Jess and Connor sought financial assistance to build infrastructure and improve the long-term sustainability of their farm. Their initial interest in USDA programs centered on constructing a high tunnel through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Working with NRCS Conservation Planner Olivia Carlson, they discovered that many additional conservation practices aligned with their production goals. Since 2023, they have enrolled in two NRCS contracts.

From left to right: Connor, Jess, and Olivia Carlson, their NRCS Planner, at Stone's Throw Farmstead

Conservation Planning

Jess and Connor view conservation planning as an integral part of managing their farm rather than a collection of individual projects. Their conservation goals include improving soil health, increasing biodiversity, building resilience, and developing long-term ecological systems that support profitable crop production.

Working closely with their NRCS Conservation Planner has helped them identify practices that complement one another and fit the farm's small acreage and diversified production system. Rather than adopting standard approaches, they have adopted practices to meet their specific operational needs (such as movable caterpillar tunnels, intensive cover cropping, and reduced tillage). Their experience demonstrates how NRCS technical assistance can help beginning farmers develop a comprehensive conservation strategy while building infrastructure that supports both environmental stewardship and farm profitability.



One of their lettuce plantings, flanked by cover cropped pathways

EQIP Conservation Practices

Between their two NRCS contracts, Stone's Throw Farmstead has received technical and financial assistance for a broad range of conservation practices that improve soil health, increase biodiversity, enhance wildlife habitat, and strengthen farm resilience. Many of these practices are implemented over multiple years, with annual certification documenting successful adoption and management.

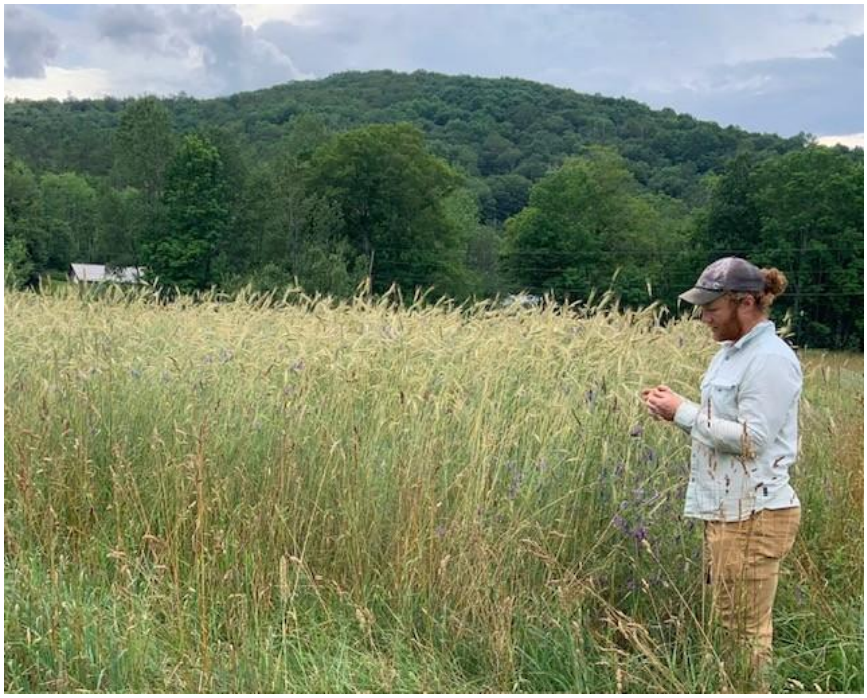
Practices (with their NRCS code) implemented include:

- **High Tunnels (325):** Two movable 16’ x 50’ caterpillar tunnels in 2023 and two additional tunnels in 2025 to extend the growing season while allowing tunnel rotation across the farm.
- **Cover Crop (340) and Conservation Crop Rotation (328):** Cover cropping and crop rotation to improve soil health, reduce erosion, suppress weeds, and increase biodiversity.
- **Residue and Tillage Management (345):** Reduced tillage practices that minimize soil disturbance while maintaining productive vegetable beds.
- **Soil Carbon Amendment (336) and Mulching (484):** Compost and mulch applications to build soil organic matter and fertility.
- **Low tunnels (821) and Pest Management Conservation System (595):** Low tunnels and integrated pest management practices that reduce crop losses while avoiding pesticide use.
- **Restoration of Rare or Declining Natural Communities (643), Structures for Wildlife (649), Tree and Shrub Establishment (612):** Wildlife habitat enhancements, including beetle banks, Eastern Bluebird nesting boxes, and tree and shrub plantings that support pollinators, beneficial insects, and natural pest control.
- **Alley Cropping (311):** Alley cropping with fruit trees integrated into vegetable production to diversify farm production while improving ecological function.

Key Points

- NRCS programs can support beginning farmers beyond tunnels.
- Conservation practices can be integrated into diversified vegetable production.
- Technical assistance can be as valuable as financial assistance.
- Many conservation practices provide long-term benefits.
- Conservation planning encourages continuous improvement.

Thanks to Jess Purks and Connor Self for opening up their farm and sharing their experiences; and thanks to Olivia Carlson and other NRCS staff for sharing information for this case study. Created by Rachel Stievater, edited by Vern Grubinger and Julie Callahan. Photo credits: Andy Chamberlin and Rachel Stievater. July 2026.



Connor inspects their rye cover crop to determine if it’s ready for crimping