

Beginning farmer-rancher incentive helps

Craig Capron growing up never imagined himself a farmer, although his wife, Leann, grew up in a ranching family.

They had always planted a few fruit trees on their property near Gillette, just for their family. They began to plant a few more things and started selling their goods at local markets.

They soon connected with the local agriculture community in Gillette. A fellow farmer's new high tunnel led Capron to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for assistance to fund his own.

High tunnels are a protected growing area that extends the growing season and helps farmers grow produce, improve plant and soil quality, reduce nutrient use, pollen and pesticide drift, and energy use, and improve air quality.

NRCS office provides funding opportunity

Capron contacted NRCS district conservationist Tim Kellogg in Gillette about applying for funds to build his own high tunnel.

"He made it so easy. It really made a difference," said Capron. Kellogg walked Capron through the process and informed him he would also qualify as a Beginning Farmer Rancher (BFR), which qualified Capron for extra funds to complete the project.

The BFR designation distinguishes Capron as a farmer or rancher who has operated a farm or ranch for less than 10 years

In 2018, the Caprons began constructing their first high tunnel with NRCS funding from the Agricultural Management Assistance Program, including additional funds from his

BFR status. The tunnels allowed the Capron family to increase their production at Apple Bee Chicken Farm, a name referencing their products, doubling their crops in one season.

Building their high tunnel allowed the family to grow tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, cabbage, and romaine lettuce. Crops that are usually difficult to grow in Wyoming due to harsh winters. Long winters make for a short growing season, with snow often falling in June and August.

High tunnel allows produce options

For Capron, finally growing peppers is a personal success. Peppers thrive in warm climates and need protection from the wind, something not found in Wyoming. High tunnels provide climate control also allowing Capron to plant earlier in the season, starting with cabbage in the winter, maximizing crops and profits. High tunnels also help the Caprons better prevent pests getting to their crops.

The high tunnel system supports the Capron family plan for slow and steady growth over the next few years.

Capron absolutely credits the NRCS funding and BFR incentive with allowing his family to grow as farmers.

"We would never have done a high tunnel without the grant program. That really got us going," he said.

They are adding a second high tunnel, again with NRCS and BFR, as they still fit in the BFR qualifications.

Craig Capron doubled the amount of produce in one season by using a high tunnel.



Gillette farmer increase production

Shares funding option, extra produce

Capron says he is always happy to involve his neighbors and fellow farmers in projects, as well as informing them about NRCS funds and technical help.

“Gillette is a very supportive community. People are willing to help. That’s a big thing,” he said.

Capron believes there is room for everyone and thinks everyone should be farming—just one of the many reasons he’s happy to share not only information on funding, but any over production with local organizations giving back to the community.

Apple Bee Chicken Farm can be found at local farmers markets in Gillette. They also sell to neighbors and think there’s a possibility they may someday sell around the state in other farmers markets.

NRCS funding and BFR has helped the Capron family grow their production and can help other beginning farmers and ranchers across the state. Working with NRCS offers farmers and ranchers not only potential funding for projects like high tunnels, but they offer a source for advice and guidance for addressing natural resource concerns.

To apply for funding and for more details on required criteria for different programs, producers can reach out to their local service center, farming coordinator, or utilize the self-service options on [farmers.gov](https://www.farmers.gov). Call in advance to make sure your local service center is open.

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Clockwise from upper left, Capron family at farmers market, Leann Capron sorting tomatoes and inspecting the high tunnel.