Extension Programs

Field Data Readiness Checklist

Designed for extension directors, department heads, and program managers, this checklist helps you assess whether your current data collection infrastructure meets the requirements of NRCS, grant funders, and peer-reviewed publication standards. Use it as a **pre-season planning audit** before enrollment opens, or mid-season to identify where reporting gaps are forming.

How to Use This Checklist	Work through each section with your program team. Check every item that is currently in place. Leave unchecked items blank. They become your action list. At the end, tally your score and use the **Scoring Guide** to determine your next step. ***Aim to complete this audit at least 6 weeks before your enrollment window opens.***

Each checked item = 1 point. Total possible score: 25 points.

Section 1 | Enrollment & Farmer Onboarding

- ☐ We have a digital enrollment process (not paper-only).
  e.g., online form, platform portal, or digital intake tool
- ☐ Each enrolled farmer has a unique, trackable record in our system.
  Prevents duplicate entries and enables multi-year tracking
- ☐ We can segment farmers by program, cohort, or field trial group.
  Critical for multi-program management and reporting
- ☐ Enrollment data is stored in a centralized location accessible to all staff.
  Not siloed in individual inboxes or spreadsheets
- ☐ We collect baseline farm data at enrollment (acres, crops, practices).
  Required for most NRCS and grant applications

Section 1 Score: _____ / 5

Section 2 | Field Data Collection

- [ ] Farmers can submit field data via mobile device (not paper only).
  Mobile capture reduces transcription errors and time-to-data
- [ ] Geo-verification is in place to confirm practice location on-field.
  Required for NRCS conservation practice confirmation
- [ ] Field boundaries are digitally recorded and linked to farmer records.
  Enables spatial reporting and acreage verification
- [ ] Data is collected at practice-implementation — not reconstructed later.
  Retroactive data collection is a common audit failure point
- [ ] We have a defined data collection schedule / field visit cadence.
  Ad-hoc collection leads to gaps; scheduled cadence improves compliance

Section 2 Score: _____ / 5

Section 3 | Photo & Documentation Standards

- [ ] We have standardized photo protocols communicated to all field staff.
  e.g., what to capture, framing standards, minimum required photos per visit
- [ ] All photos are timestamped and geotagged automatically at capture.
  Geotagging is required for NRCS practice confirmation; check device settings
- [ ] Photos are stored in a structured, searchable archive linked to field records.
  Not buried in phone camera rolls or unnamed shared drives
- [ ] We collect signed practice verification documents from farmers.
  Required for conservation program payments and grant reimbursements
- [ ] We have version control for field documentation (edits are tracked).
  Prevents documentation disputes during audits

Section 3 Score: _____ / 5

Section 4 | Reporting & Compliance

- [ ] We can generate NRCS- or state funder-ready reports without manual aggregation.
  Manual spreadsheet aggregation is the #1 cause of reporting delays
- [ ] Our reporting output matches the format required by our primary funders.
  Confirm against current NRCS 1026, CPS, or state-specific report templates
- [ ] We can produce audit-ready documentation within 48 hours of a request.
  Auditors rarely give advance notice — readiness is a compliance baseline
- [ ] We track practice verification status per farmer in real time.
  Not reconstructed from email threads at reporting deadlines
- [ ] We have a documented data retention and backup policy.
  NRCS and most federal grants require 3–7 year data retention

Section 4 Score: _____ / 5

Section 5 | Staff Capacity

- [ ] Less than 20% of staff time is spent on data wrangling / reconciliation.
  Benchmark: more than 20% signals a process or tooling problem
- [ ] Staff have received training on current data collection protocols.
  Untrained staff = inconsistent data = audit risk
- [ ] We have a designated data manager or point of contact for reporting.
  Diffuse responsibility leads to gaps; assign clear ownership
- [ ] We have documented SOPs for data collection and program administration.
  Critical for staff turnover continuity and audit documentation
- [ ] Staff can access program data remotely (not desktop-only).
  Field teams need mobile access; admin staff need remote access

Section 5 Score: _____ / 5

Section 6 | Technology Stack

- [ ] We have identified all tools currently used in our data workflow.
  e.g., spreadsheets, survey tools, GIS software, email — list them all
- [ ] Data handoffs between tools are documented and consistent.
  Undocumented handoffs are where data loss and errors occur
- [ ] Our current tools integrate or export data in compatible formats.
  CSV/API compatibility with NRCS and grant portals is essential
- [ ] We have evaluated platforms built specifically for agricultural program management.
  General-purpose tools often fail conservation program-specific requirements
- [ ] We have a plan to address technology gaps before next enrollment.
  Reactive tooling changes mid-season create data integrity risk

Section 6 Score: _____ / 5

Scoring Guide

Score	What It Means	Next Step
20–25 √	Strong foundation — focus on optimization	Schedule a FarmRaise platform walkthrough
12–19 ■	Gaps exist — targeted upgrades needed	Download our Data Gaps Action Guide
0–11 ✗	Significant rebuild required	Talk to a FarmRaise program specialist

Notes & Action Items

Ready to close the gaps?

FarmRaise is built for extension programs — digital enrollment, geo-verified field data, and audit-ready reporting. See how programs like yours are cutting data wrangling time by more than 60%.

fhttps://www.farmraise.com/crop-innovation-and-field-trial-operations? | Request a free platform walkthrough

This checklist is provided for educational purposes. FarmRaise is a USDA Farm Service Agency partner. NRCS program requirements may vary by state. Consult your local FSA or NRCS office for current standards.