

Program Description

October 2005

Conservation Security Program

Overview

The Conservation Security Program (CSP) is a voluntary conservation program that supports ongoing stewardship of private agricultural lands by providing payments for maintaining and enhancing natural resources. CSP identifies and rewards those farmers and ranchers who are meeting the highest standards of conservation and environmental management on their operations.

Authority

The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (2002 Farm Bill) (Pub. L. 107-171) amended the Food Security Act of 1985 to authorize the program. CSP is administered by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Scope

CSP is available in all 50 States, the Caribbean Area (Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands), and the Pacific Basin Area (Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands).

Eligibility

Applicants: Agricultural producers – individuals or entities engaged in livestock or agricultural production on working lands – may participate in CSP. There are, however, circumstances that limit an individual's or entity's participation; these include:

- The applicant must have control of the land for the life of the contract.
- The applicant must share in the risk of producing any crop or livestock and be entitled to a share in the crop or livestock marketed from the operation.

- The applicant must be in compliance with highly erodible land and wetland conservation provisions.
- The adjusted gross income provision of the 2002 Farm Bill impacts eligibility for CSP and several other 2002 Farm Bill programs. Individuals or entities that have an average adjusted gross income exceeding \$2.5 million for the three tax years immediately preceding the year the contract is approved are not eligible to receive program benefits or payments. However, an exemption is provided in cases where 75 percent of the adjusted gross income is derived from farming, ranching, or forestry operations.
- Applicants may submit only one application. Participants can only have one active contract at any one time.
- Applications with multiple beneficiaries must provide Social Security numbers at the time of application for purposes of monitoring payment limitations.

Land: Private agricultural land eligible for CSP includes cropland, grassland, prairie land, improved pasture land, and rangeland. Also, private non-industrial forested land that is an incidental part of the agriculture operation (limited to up to ten percent of the contract acres) is eligible. The majority of the agricultural operation must be within one of the selected watersheds.

Land that is not eligible for CSP includes:

- Land owned by Federal and State governments and their political subdivisions;

- Land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program, the Wetlands Reserve Program, or the Grassland Reserve Program; in addition, land accepted in a recent CRP sign-up for contract development is not eligible;
 - Land used for crop production after May 13, 2002, that had not been planted, considered to be planted, or devoted to crop production, as determined by NRCS, for at least 4 of the 6 years preceding May 13, 2002 is not eligible for any CSP payment.
- In order to apply, applicants must submit:
 1. A completed self-assessment workbook, including the benchmark inventory;
 2. Two years of written records to document past stewardship levels, including fertilizer, nutrient, and pesticide application schedules, tillage, and grazing schedules if applicable.
 3. Completed Conservation Program Application, CCC-1200, available through the self-assessment online guide and at any USDA Service Center.

Application Process

CSP sign-ups are offered in selected watersheds across the Nation. Selected watersheds are listed on the CSP Web page and in NRCS offices nationwide.

Applicants are encouraged to attend preliminary workshops, which are announced locally. At the workshop, basic qualifications are explained, and assistance is provided to help attendees understand the self-assessment workbook and benchmark inventory.

- Producers begin the application process by filling out a self-assessment to determine if they meet the basic qualifications for CSP. Self-assessment workbooks are available in hard copy at USDA Service Centers within the watersheds, and electronically for download or from an interactive Web site linked from the CSP Web page. The self-assessment workbook includes a benchmark inventory where applicants document the conservation practices and activities that are ongoing on their operation. This benchmark inventory serves as the basis for the stewardship plan.
 - Once producers determine that they meet the minimum requirements for CSP, as outlined in the workbook, they should make an appointment for an interview to discuss their application with the NRCS local staff.
- Based on the application, description of current conservation activities, and the interview, NRCS determines CSP eligibility and in which program tier and enrollment category the applicant may participate.
 - For Tier I, the producer must have addressed soil quality and water quality to the described minimum level of treatment for eligible land uses on part of the agricultural operation prior to acceptance.
 - For Tier II, the producer must have addressed soil quality and water quality to the described minimum level of treatment on all eligible land uses on the entire agricultural operation prior to acceptance and agree to address an additional resource concern applicable to their watershed by the end of the contract period.
 - For Tier III, the producer must have addressed all applicable resource concerns to a resource management system level that meets the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide standards on all eligible land uses on the entire agricultural operation before acceptance into the program and have riparian zones adequately treated.

Approval Process

Applications which meet the minimum requirements will be placed in enrollment categories and subcategories for funding consideration. Categories will be funded in order from A through E until funds are exhausted. If funds are not available to fund an entire category, then subcategories will be used to determine funding order within a category.

CSP Contract Payments and Limits

CSP contract payments include one or more of the following components subject to the described limits:

- An annual per acre stewardship component for the benchmark conservation treatment. This component is calculated separately for each land use based on eligible acres, the stewardship payment rate, and additional factors.
- An annual existing practice component for maintaining existing conservation practices. Existing practice payments will be calculated as a flat rate of 25 percent of the stewardship payment.
- A new practice component for additional practices on the watershed specific list. New practice payments for limited resource farmers and beginning farmers will be made at not more than a 65 percent cost-share rate. New practice payments for all other contracts will be made at not more than a 50 percent cost-share rate. All new practice payments are limited to a \$10,000 cumulative total for the contract.
- An annual enhancement component for exceptional conservation effort and additional conservation practices or activities that provide increased resource benefits beyond minimum requirements.

For More Information

If you need more information about CSP, please contact your local USDA Service Center, listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture, or your local conservation district. Information also is available on the CSP Web page: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/csp>



Visit USDA on the Web at:
<http://www.usda.gov/farmbill>

Note: This is not intended to be a definitive interpretation of farm legislation. Rather, it is preliminary and may change as USDA develops implementing policies and procedures. Please check back for updates.