



Federal Resources for Sustainable Farming and Ranching

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This publication offers an overview of the major federal conservation programs that provide resources for farmers and ranchers to enhance and maintain sustainable farming and ranching practices. The level of available conservation resources for this area has dramatically increased since 2002. This guide helps farmers and ranchers make their way through the often complex and difficult application processes. Access to these resources can open new opportunities to preserve agricultural lands, develop sustainable practices, and open new markets.

Introduction

Mike Natvig and Amy Miller are fourth generation farmers in northeast Iowa farming 420 certified organic acres. Because they have excellent records, have undertaken extensive planning, and have an excellent organic system of production, Natvig and Miller have captured an additional \$17,890 in benefits the first year of a 10-year contract under the Conservation Security Program (CSP). This publication assists the reader in understanding how to capture such benefits that help the bottom line and promote a more sustainable agriculture.



Mike Natvig and Amy Miller on their 420 acre organic farm. Photo by Mike McGrath, courtesy of Minnesota Project, Conservation and Crop Diversity.

The Natvig-Miller farm is diversified row crop and grazing operation, producing hogs, cattle, corn, soybeans, and hay. Finished hogs are raised on pasture and marketed directly to consumers and specialized buyers such as the nationally known Organic Valley label.

The livestock operation includes a herd of beef cattle. Some of the steers are marketed directly to consumers while others go to a niche market. The remaining calves are sold on the open market or kept as replacements. The cattle are on rotationally grazed pasture.

The crop program incorporates a long-term, resource-conserving crop rotation that includes corn, soybeans, hay, peas, small grains, and “green manure” cover crops. This rotation provides the Natvig-Miller operation with a diversity of feed for livestock, cash crops for market, and conservation practices that build soil tilth and prevent disease and erosion. The farm also includes oak savannah native prairie restoration and timber for wildlife habitat.

Federal Conservation Resources and Your Farm or Ranch

Beginning in 1985, the federal government has provided significant benefits to American farmers and ranchers by either retiring marginal and environmentally sensitive lands or by cost sharing the adoption of improved conservation practices on working lands. Since 2002, working lands conservation has known accelerated support. Programs that support agricultural land preservation (**Figure 1**) have also been initiated. Learning how to take advantages of these important but often complicated programs can help farmers and ranchers lower operational risk, provide tangible rewards for the

Earning a CSP Contract

The Natvig-Millers were awarded a CSP contract to reward them for addressing resources of concern on their entire farming operation. Meeting the eligibility requirements was not difficult. "We had most of the detailed records because we are certified organic," explained Mike.

Determining an accurate Soil Conditioning Index, or SCI, was a little more difficult because of the organic production practices. "The (RUSLE2) program¹ defaulted to 'harvesting' cover crops and to fall tillage resulting in low SCI scores," Amy explained. "But fortunately our NRCS conservationist devoted many hours to correcting all the computer's mistakes in our seven-year crop rotation."

When the assessments were completed, the NRCS determined that 365.4 of the 420 acres were eligible for stewardship payments at the Tier III level for \$4,230 per year. Added to that was \$1,508 for an existing practice payment and \$12,602 for enhancements payments, for a total of \$18,340 the first year.

The Natvig-Miller farm received enhancement payments for performance-based management activities in the categories of energy, nutrient management, soils management, grazing, and habitat. Existing practices eligible for energy enhancement payments included recycling of all used motor oil, use of perennial legumes in rotations and manure applications to reduce fertilizer needs, and the use of biodiesel fuels.

When asked what he thinks of the Conservation Security Program after having undergone the application process, Mike's response was quick. "It's the only program I've seen that makes sense," he said. "With CSP, taxpayers pay for clean water and wildlife habitat."

¹A computer model that provides an estimate for erosion potential.

Related ATTRA Publications

Entertainment Farming and Agri-Tourism

Green Markets for Farm Products

Sustainable Agriculture: An Introduction

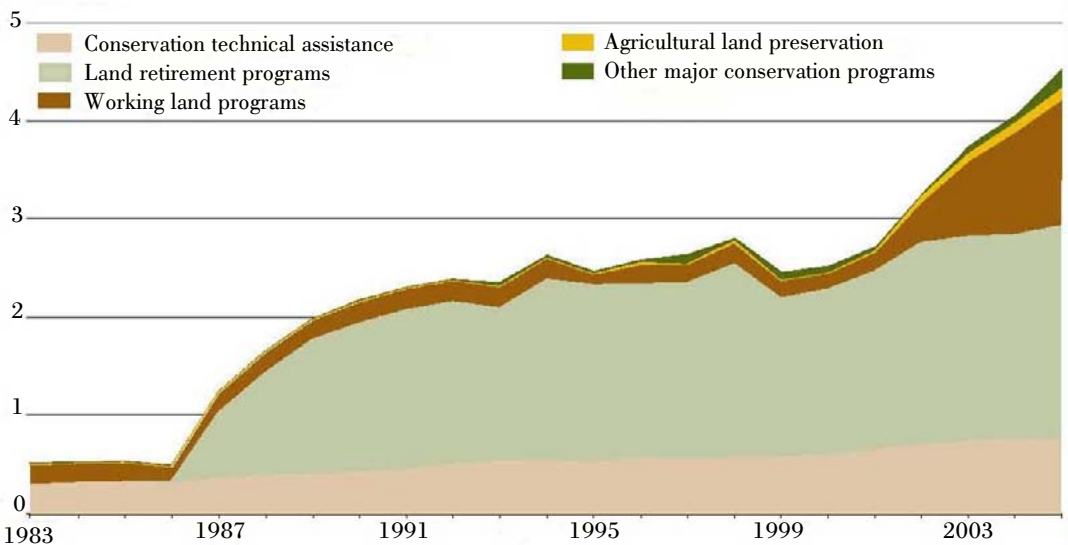
Pursuing Conservation Tillage Systems for Organic Crop Production

Overview of Cover Crops and Green Manures

Figure 1

Trends in USDA conservation expenditures, 1983-2005

Billion dollars



Source: Office of Budget and Policy Analysis, USDA, and the Congressional Budget Office

Conservation Program Design—contrasting working-land and land retirement programs. (ERS, 2006)

contribution that conservation practices provide in improving soil, air and water quality, increase profitability, and in general make farming and ranching more rewarding.

Another important reason to take advantage of expanding federal conservation resources is that the application process itself helps farmers and ranchers see their operations from new perspectives. This alone can alert farmers and ranchers to new market opportunities. For, example transitioning to an organic production system on your farm or ranch may lead to higher value for your crops and livestock.²

Engaging in federal conservation programs can also move your farm or ranch in more sustainable directions.³ “Whole” farm or ranch planning—which assesses the goals and potential resources of the farm or ranch—will likely be necessary for farmers or ranchers interested in maximizing the benefits of these federal conservation programs. Even those unable to take advantage

of a particular program come away with a valuable learning experience through the very process of applying. Learning how federal conservation programs work and going through the application process usually helps you better understand current innovative farming and ranching practices. Also, by engaging in federal conservation programs, you learn to be a more active citizen to make these programs work better for all farms and ranches in your community, state, and nation.

Finally, if you are of limited resources, socially disadvantaged, or a beginning farmer or rancher, most programs provide either a competitive advantage or high levels of support. The definitions of these special categories are very specific, however, so make sure you meet the definitions before assuming eligibility. When in doubt regarding eligibility requirements, check with the local office of the federal agency in charge of the specific program (see **Resources** at end of this publication).

The application process itself helps farmers and ranchers see their operations from new perspectives.

Some Definitions

- **Limited-Resource Farmers and Ranchers.** A limited resource farmer or rancher is defined as (a) a person with direct or indirect gross farm sales of not more than \$100,000 in each of the previous two years (increased each fiscal year since 2004 to adjust for inflation), and (b) has a total household income at or below the national poverty level for a family of four, OR less than 50 percent of county median household income in each of the previous two years (to be determined annually using Commerce Department data). USDA offers an online Limited Resource Farmer/Rancher Self-Determination Tool to determine whether you meet the definition. (www.lrftool.sc.egov.usda.gov/)
- **Beginning Farmer or Rancher.** A beginning farmer or rancher is defined as an individual or entity who: (a) has not operated a farm or ranch, or who has operated a farm or ranch for not more than 10 consecutive years (required of all members of an entity); and (b) will materially and substantially participate in the operation of the farm or ranch.
- **Socially Disadvantaged Farmer or Rancher.** A socially disadvantaged group is one whose members have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of the group, without regard to individual qualities. Socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher is a member of a socially disadvantaged group. Groups in particular localities subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice are determined by the United States Secretary of Agriculture. Check with your local or state NRCS offices for more details (see **Additional Resources**).

²See ATTRA publications: *Entertainment Farming and Tourism and Green Markets for Farm Products*.

³See ATTRA publication, *Sustainable Agriculture: An Introduction*.

What's Available? Overview of Federal Conservation Resources for Working Lands

The complexity of federal conservation programs—and in particular the application process itself—is perhaps one of the biggest reasons many farmers and ranchers do not access these resources. The programs are voluntary, and many opt out of using the programs simply because the process is often difficult and intimidating. The programs contain an “alphabet soup” of acronyms and bureaucratic jargon particularly difficult to understand for first-time applicants. The goal here is to present a simplified overview that outlines the essential step-by-step process to access these resources and benefits. The intent is also to help you understand the general purpose of the programs.

This publication specifically concentrates on resources available from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). This United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) agency is the one most engaged with agricultural conservation practices. The other major USDA agency involved in conservation efforts is the Farm Service Agency (FSA). The FSA shares administrative responsibility with the NRCS for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP).⁴ The FSA also has responsibility for the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) and the Emergency Conservation Program (ECP). Finally, in the most recent reauthorization of all USDA programs in 2002 (known as the Farm Bill), a special program was created that offers grants and loan guarantees for certain energy projects. Agricultural producers and rural

USDA Agency	Program	Description
Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)	Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)	Cost-shares for conservation improvements and to meet regulatory requirements
	Conservation Security Program (CSP)	Cost-shares for current and future conservation improvements
	Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA)	Similar to EQIP; limited to 15 states shared with Risk Management Agency (RMA) and Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS)
	Farm and Ranchland Protection Programs (FRPP)	Cost-share for farm and ranchland protection through easements
Farm Service Agency (FSA) And NRCS	Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)	Annual payments to keep sensitive land out of agricultural production
	Grassland Reserve Program (GRP)	Annual payments to keep land in native grasslands
Farm Service Agency (FSA)	Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)	Annual payments to keep riparian areas out of agricultural production (requires state matching funds)
	Emergency Conservation Program (ECP)	Rehabilitate farmland damaged by natural disasters and for carrying out emergency water conservation measures in periods of severe drought

⁴The GRP was created in the 2002 reauthorization of USDA programs (known as the Farm Bill) and was only funded in 2005. The program is very similar to CRP, but was designed to preserve native grasslands through long-term or permanent easements. Funding was suspended in 2006.

small businesses can receive assistance to purchase renewable energy systems and to make energy efficiency improvements demonstrated to have broadly defined conservation implications (see **chart** below).

Conservation Programs and USDA Agency Responsibilities

The first step in accessing these federal resources should be development of a Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) conservation plan. An NRCS conservation plan is helpful because it involves the agency early in the process. Even if you have done prior planning, it is still important to get NRCS assistance in translating your existing planning efforts into agency language. The local NRCS agent can evaluate the kinds of federal programs available to you.

While this may be the ideal process, finding available NRCS staff to assist with this kind of planning is often difficult. The actual process often begins with the farmer or rancher contacting the local NRCS field staff office (see **Resources** section) about a specific conservation program. The conservation planning begins with a discussion of the application process and eligibility requirements for that program, rather than with development of a comprehensive conservation plan. Indeed, NRCS recognizes the difficulty in assisting farmers and ranchers in preparing comprehensive conservation plans. In 2005 the agency began a special pilot project to bring additional resources to planning efforts. Unfortunately, the pilot project is only available in limited areas of nine states. It is unknown if additional resources to expand this work will be available on a broader basis. A link to this pilot project is:

Section 9006: Loans, Loan Guarantees, and Grants

The Section 9006 program is named after the section of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (known as the Farm Bill). Since 2002, this program has awarded 435 grants totaling \$66.7 million and two loan guarantees worth \$10 million in 2005. The goal of the program is to assist farmers, ranchers, and small businesses to reduce energy costs and consumption as well as to set up new renewable energy production systems. According to USDA, the key provisions of the program are the following:

- Applicants may qualify for a grant, a guaranteed loan, or a combination of both.
- Grant request must not exceed 25 percent of the eligible project costs. Renewable energy grants can range from \$2,500 to \$500,000. Energy efficiency grants can range from \$1,500 to \$250,000.
- A simplified application process is available for projects under \$200,000 total project costs.
- Loan guarantees can be for up to 50 percent of total eligible project costs. Guarantees can range from \$5,000 to \$10,000,000 per project.
- Projects can qualify for combined grant and loan guarantee, but the grant portion is still subject to the above limits and combined funding assistance cannot exceed 50 percent of total eligible project costs.

Further information on the program is available at: www.rurdev.usda.gov/rbs/farmbill/what_is.html

The following are three examples of projects funded under this program:

- *Camelina sativa*: A Multiuse Oil Crop for Biofuel, Omega-3 Cooking Oil, and Protein/Oil Source for Animal Feed, Great Northern Growers Cooperative, Sunburst, Montana, \$80,000. This Phase I project will evaluate a new crop for the Northern Plains states that is suitable for economic conversion into biodiesel, biolubricants, and an Omega-3 fatty acid-rich cooking oil for human consumption.
- Wind Energy for Grain and Livestock Production, Colwell, Iowa, \$45,540. On-farm wind generator for farm use with excess sales to local power company.
- Ventilation Fan Efficiency, Gold Top Farm, Knox, Maine, \$4,462. Project to install very large, high volume, low speed ventilation fans that use less energy.

www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/planning/consplngsignup/consplngsup.html

Barring the local NRCS staff, however, farmers and ranchers should still attempt to undertake some effort in farm or ranch planning. Doing so prepares applicants to interact effectively with NRCS staff. NCAT/ATTRA has several resources to help with the effort (see **Resources** Section).

Know the Programs: Working Land vs. Retiring Land

Federal conservation programs can perhaps be divided into two broad categories: working lands programs and land retirement or easement programs.

The working lands programs provide financial resources. These may be either incentive payments or “cost-share” for farmers or ranchers to implement the practices or structures on working agriculture lands. The NRCS has extensive information on quality criteria for resource management. A further list of hundreds of technical practice standards define NRCS minimal level of acceptable quality to conserve natural resources.

Understanding these technical standards can be complicated for many people not familiar with NRCS protocols and jargon. However, if you are serious about taking full advantage of the programs, some understanding of these standards and the systems of resource management is important. The major resource to understand technical standards and the general program evaluation processes is the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG). This document is available on-line and is called the eFOTG. (www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/efotg/) This document is “localized” down to the county level, so obtain the copy relevant your farm or ranch locale. The NRCS prides itself in soliciting local input for program development. Consequently, there is some variation among available programs, particularly for working lands.

Another program discussed in this publication is the Farm and Ranchland

Protection Program (FRPP), which provides protection to preserve working farms and ranches. Technically, this program might not be a working lands conservation program. It is in a sense “conserving” working farm or ranch land, however, as opposed to suburban or urban development use.

Land retirement or easement programs, on the other hand, are those that either permanently or temporarily pay farmers or ranchers to keep land out of agricultural production entirely. Some easement conservation programs do allow certain productive uses of easement land, but generally these programs were established to take land out of substantial productive use. These programs will not be discussed in this publication, but can be found in a companion ATTRA publication, *Protecting Grasslands, Wetlands, Wildlife and Habitat: A Guide to Federal Conservation Resources*.

National vs. Local Differences in Program Details

Another important point to know before applying for federal conservation programs is that program details can change substantially from state to state and even county to county. As noted above, the NRCS has been an agency that prides itself on being adaptable to state and local concerns. The logic of this approach makes some sense. Land use for agriculture varies dramatically between different parts of the country. For instance, the best conservation grazing management practices for southwest Montana are substantially different from those in central Florida.

On the other hand, local determination of program criteria is often a source for confusion about what programs can and do offer. In Montana, for instance, some NRCS programs provide resources for ranchers to improve fish passage around irrigation diversions. But the programs apply only to certain areas of the state, despite the fact that most areas have important fish passage issues. The best way to avoid confusion is to go to the respective NRCS Web site to pursue specific details of a program for that

Federal conservation programs can perhaps be divided into two broad categories: working lands programs and land retirement or easement programs.

state. Another way to clear up confusions is to talk with local and state-level NRCS staff.⁵

Working Lands Programs

Conservation Security Program (CSP)

The newest and perhaps the most confusing federal conservation program is the Conservation Security Program or CSP. This program is unique in that unlike other federal conservation programs it provides substantial resources for *current* conservation efforts in addition to payments to *change* to better or improved practices.

As of 2006, some 20,000 farmers and ranchers in 280 watersheds have enrolled 16 million acres in CSP, securing more than \$2 billion in long-term commitments to ensure sustainable conservation practices.

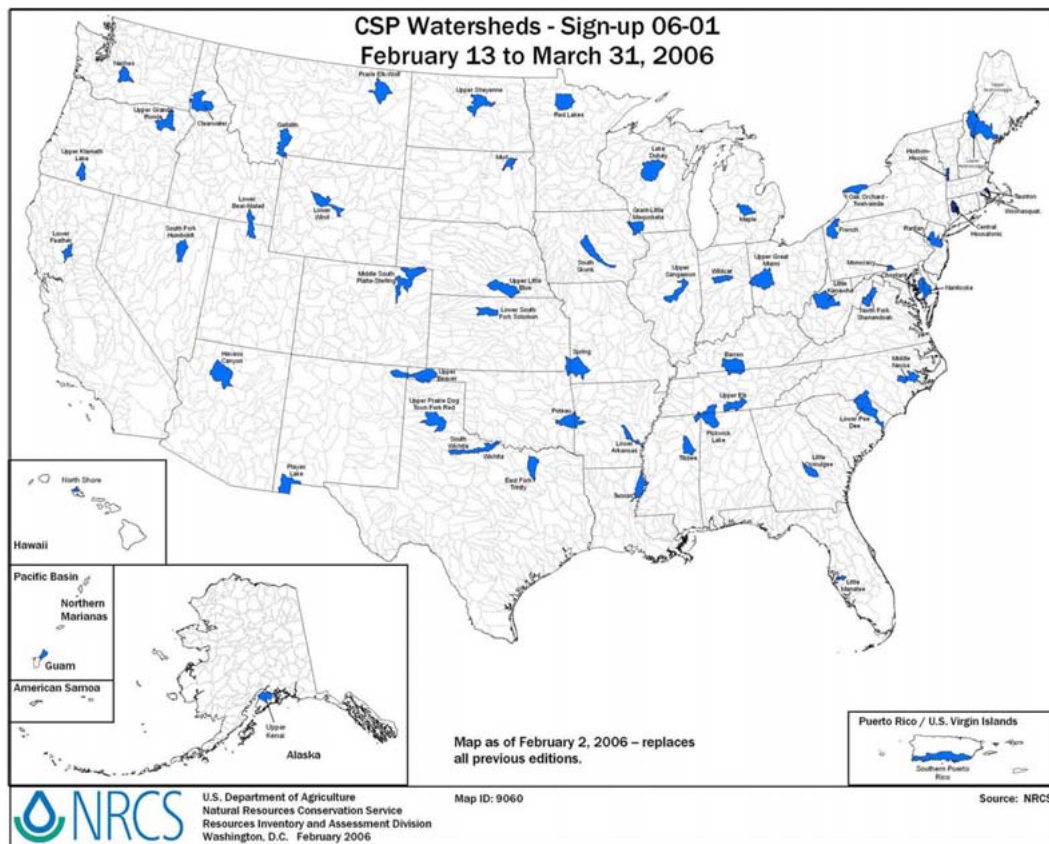
Moreover, the CSP currently has \$6 billion in authorized funding through 2011.

The CSP provides four types of payments: stewardship per-acre payments, existing practices, new practices, and enhancement payments. All farmers and ranchers can apply for this program (in watersheds selected for the sign-up period), but the standards for eligibility are fairly high. In other words, since this program rewards conservation practices, eligibility for the program requires documentation of past and current conservation practices. The program also allows producers to enter all or part of a farm or ranch into the program. Annual payment limits depend on whether you place the entire farm or ranch into the program and the level of conservation effort achieved. These levels are known as “tiers.”

The program was originally intended to be made available to all eligible farmers and ranchers in the United States. As of 2006,

The newest and perhaps the most confusing federal conservation program is the Conservation Security Program or CSP.

Figure 1- Eligible Watersheds for 2006.



⁵Check with both local and state-level NRCS staff. Sometimes local staffers do not know that funding differences exist between areas. State-level staffers often have that information.

however, the program has not been fully funded by Congress as authorized in 2002. To keep program costs within budget limitations, the NRCS decided to implement the program on a watershed rotation basis. This means that in a given fiscal year only eligible farmers or ranchers in designated watersheds can apply (**Figure 1**). In theory, the program will eventually be made available to all eligible farmers and ranchers. The intent is for all watersheds in the United States to be offered a sign-up year. The downside is that if you miss applying for the CSP in the year it is offered in your watershed, it may be many years before an opportunity again comes available.

To keep program costs within budget limitations, the NRCS decided to implement the program on a watershed rotation basis. This means that in a given fiscal year only eligible farmers or ranchers in designated watersheds can apply.

Finally, the CSP program was originally intended to provide resources for any eligible farmer or rancher (known as an entitlement program). However, budget limitations have also forced the NRCS to limit funding to applicants that meet higher levels of conservation practices than originally intended by the legislation. This has essentially made the CSP a “competitive” program—those with higher levels of current conservation practices are more likely to be awarded resources under the program.⁶

Eligibility

The first step in applying for the CSP program is to make sure your farm or ranch is in an eligible watershed. Each state NRCS office maintains a website and maps of eligible watersheds and their boundaries. Local NRCS offices can also provide maps of eligible watersheds (see **Resources** section).

The next step in determining eligibility is to work through the current edition of the CSP Self Assessment Workbook. This workbook is available via the Internet (www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/csp/) or by obtaining a copy through your local or state NRCS offices. The importance of maintaining accurate records and having developed written plans becomes evident as you work through this self-assessment. The workbook self-assessment is a series of questions with “yes,”

“no,” and “not-applicable” answers. Any “no” answers effectively render an applicant ineligible for the program.

However, the assessment is just a tool which, in part, is designed to “weed-out” ineligible applicants. If you have any doubts about the proper answer to a particular question, do not give up. Get assistance from your local or state NRCS office. For example, one of the questions in this document refers to cropland and asks: If you apply pesticides, do you use a schedule or a Pest Management Plan to conduct pest control activities on your cropland? An organic farmer might want to answer “no,” because certification disallows use of synthetic pesticides. However, all certified organic farmers are required to have an organic plan. Generally, this requires some “plan” to control pests, including the use of some approved non-synthetic pesticides, like BT (*Bacillus thuringiensis*). Hence the correct answer is likely to be “yes.” Again, contact NRCS should any doubts arise.

Finally, below are the essential questions and items to know before beginning the assessment process. Being prepared to document and respond to these items and questions makes the process easier:

- You must have some records to justify your answers to assessment questions.
- You must have some previous record of soil sampling and the use of the sampling in nutrient management.
- Have you safely protected ground water?
- Have you safely protected surface water?
- Do you make some effort to employ conservation tillage or crop rotations?
- Do you manage grazing distribution?
- Do you monitor salinity problems if applicable?

⁶The CSP offers five-year to ten-year “contracts,” which are legal agreements outlining mutual obligations over the life of the agreement.

When you have finished the national self-assessment, there is also a state-based supplemental self-assessment that provides further information in assessing eligibility.

Determining CSP Program Benefits

On the following page is a schematic that helps put together in a single picture both eligibility determination and the actual calculation of program benefits process. As noted earlier, this is a complicated program to apply to. However, a unique aspect of the CSP is that the determination of eligibility is immediately relevant to program benefits. Once self-assessment work is complete and necessary documentation collected, the local NRCS agent can largely determine your level of benefit. In addition, the CSP is particularly interested in practices that relate to soil and water quality and efforts to address these “resources of concern” are important to determine level of benefits.⁷ NRCS makes three major determinations when evaluating the level of benefits you will receive. These are: tier level, enrollment category, and types of payments.

Tier-Level

The NRCS categorizes all eligible applicants into one of three levels. A Tier I applicant must have already addressed soil and water quality to a minimum level of treatment on only a part of the farm or ranch land base. A Tier II applicant must meet this same level of treatment on the entire farm or ranch and must meet an additional level of treatment for an additional resource of concern, for instance water quantity. Finally, a Tier III must have addressed all applicable resources of concern on the entire farm or ranch to the standards set by NRCS in its Field Office Technical Guide, as well as have adequately protected all riparian zones on the farm or ranch. Thus, each tier level represents a higher level of conservation effort with a corresponding

greater level of potential resource gain in each tier. The program caps the total annual payment in each tier level to \$20,000 (Tier I), \$35,000 (Tier II), and \$45,000 (Tier III). Also, applicants in Tier I are limited to five-year contracts, while Tiers II and III can be between five-year and ten-year contracts. Theoretically, the “best” CSP applicant could receive up to \$450,000 in total payments over the life of a ten-year contract.

Enrollment Categories

After the tier level is determined, the NRCS will determine the enrollment category, which is based on a benchmark inventory—a part of the self-assessment process. Your category determines the priority your application gets if there are not enough funds to enroll everyone who applies.

The enrollment categories are labeled A-E. The labels are analogous to a grading system with A being the highest conservation effort within a given tier and E the least effort. While enrollment categories were not part of the original authorizing legislation, the NRCS opted to use enrollment categories to control program funding levels which had been capped by Congress. So after all applications are submitted, the NRCS decides who will receive funding based on categories. The 2006 signup put Tier 3 and Tier 2 applications in the highest categories. Indeed, few if any Tier 1 contracts were enrolled.

Payment Types

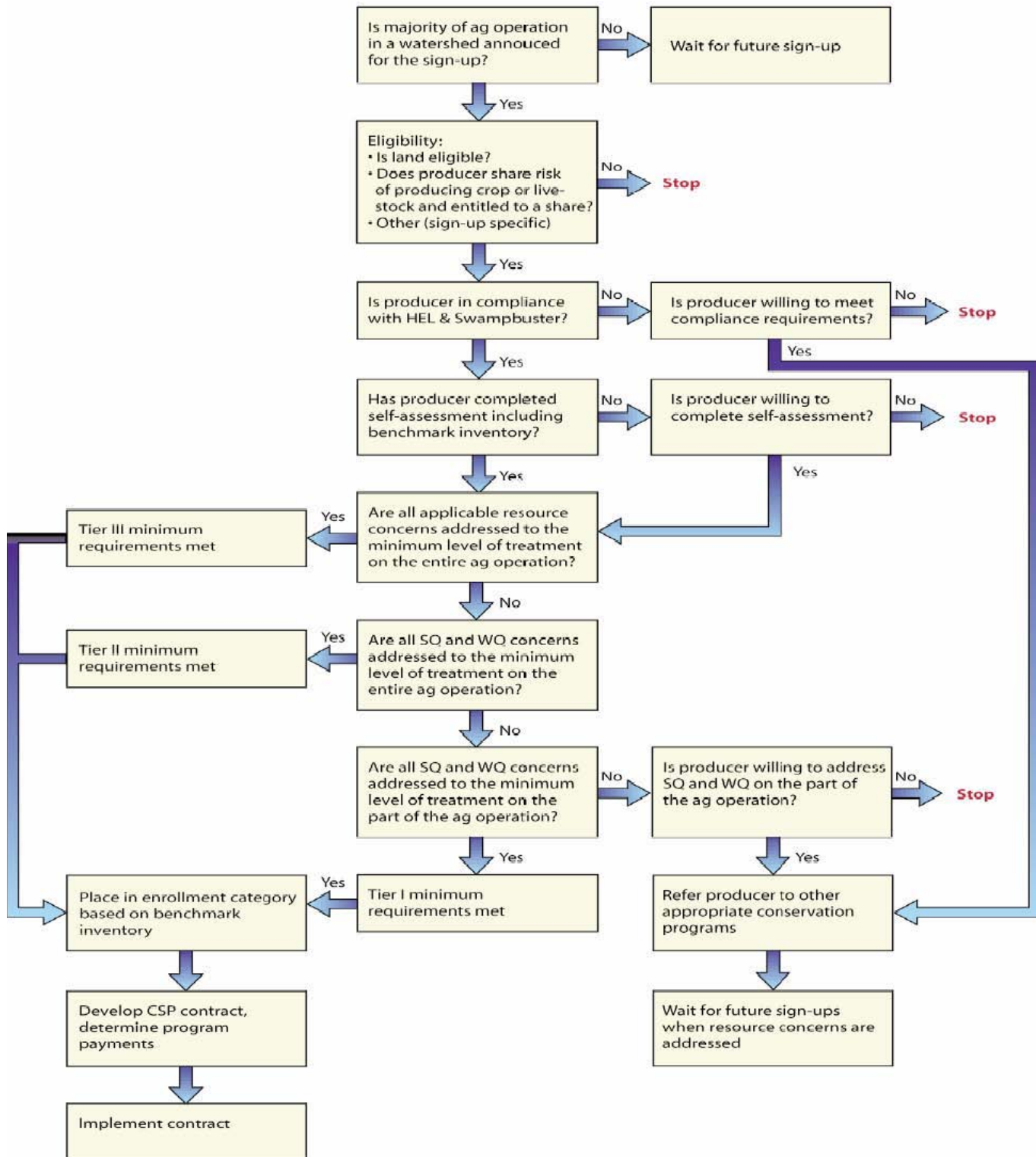
The final step for NRCS in putting together a CSP contract is to determine type and specific amount of program payments to be received. There are four types of payments. The chart on page 11 presents a simple overview.

To gain a fuller understanding of how these calculations work, see the full case study of a Massachusetts farm in the **Appendix**

NRCS makes three major determinations when evaluating the level of benefits you will receive. These are: tier level, enrollment category, and types of payments.

⁷Resource concern refers to the condition of natural resources that may be sensitive to change by natural forces or human activity. Resource concerns include soil erosion, soil quality, soil deposition, water quality, water quantity, air quality, plant management, and animal habitat and management.

CSP Application Process



Note: Compliance with HEL—Highly Erodable Lands and Swampbuster regulations—are a requirement for eligibility to all federal agricultural programs. Ask your NRCS agent whether you meet these regulations. Chart courtesy of USDA/NRCS

Type of Payment	Defined	Calculation
Stewardship	Annual acreage-based payment that rewards benchmark level of conservation effort.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local rental rate of land summed across land. Types (cropland, irrigated cropland, pastureland, rangeland). In the law these payments are referred to as base payments, fixed at a specific % of local rental rates. NRCS has lowered that % to contain costs.
Existing Practices	Annual payment that is no more than 75% of the cost of maintaining existing conservation practices.	A fixed 25% of the stewardship payment across land types.
New Practices	A one-time, cost-share payment to establish additional conservation practices.	Based on list of NRCS sanctioned new practices, cost-share percentage determined by NRCS in a specific sign-up year. Limited resource farmers are provided with higher NRCS contribution. Cost-share can be in-kind. In fact, few cost-share payments have been approved so far.
Enhancement	Annual payments made for conservation activities that exceed minimum requirements of a specific tier level.	Each state NRCS selects specific enhancement practices from a national list. By law they are to be flat annual payments throughout the contract period. In 2005 they were set up as variable declining payments.

Tier I	Stewardship	Existing Practice	New Practice	Enhancement	Total Payment
Year 1	\$85	\$22	\$0	\$5,970	\$6,077
Year 2	\$85	\$22	\$0	\$3,582	\$3,689
Year 3	\$85	\$22	\$0	\$2,786	\$2,893
Year 4	\$85	\$22	\$0	\$1,990	\$2,097
Year 5	\$85	\$22	\$0	\$1,194	\$1,301
Total	\$425	\$110	\$0	\$15,522	\$16,057

to this publication. Above is a summary chart from that case study. This Massachusetts farm is a mixed dairy, beef, and organic vegetable farm. The farm is a total of 650 acres with 25 acres of organic vegetables sold through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. The producer rotationally grazes 130 head of beef and dairy and has non-organic fields of hay and pasture. The farm was enrolled at the Tier I level.

Interestingly, the farmer chose not to sign up for any new practices and was not eligible to enter the program at a higher tier level because the organic vegetable acreage did not meet soil conditioning standards due to tillage practices.

Another important point is that enhancement payments make up the bulk of the

CSP payments. This has two implications. First, because the size of both the stewardship and existing practice are determined by acreage, the programs may not offer sizable benefits to smaller farms. Even the enhancement payments are often based on a per acre application of a practice, making the CSP more beneficial for larger farms. Nonetheless, it is not easy to determine what the total benefits to your farm or ranch may be without going through the determination in your perspective watershed.

CSP Changing Rules

It is important to note that the program is relatively new and has only been implemented for three years (2004-2006). The NRCS has changed many aspects of the program in each year of the operation. Many believe that over the next few

Many farmers and ranchers do not realize that since 2002, several of the NRCS conservation programs provide resources for energy efficiency and renewable energy production.

years the program will gain popularity and NRCS will improve how the program is implemented. The NRCS has been soliciting a great deal of input from many farmers, ranchers, and organizations to improve the program. At the same time, NRCS remains concerned that the program operate within the budget caps placed by Congress. Indeed, part of the complexity of the program is directly related to Congressional funding limits since it was created in 2002. The program is an entitlement program, which means that all eligible farmers and ranchers can potentially sign up for the program. Limiting participation and placing caps on the program's annual budgets has caused great consternation among the broader agriculture community. When a few farmers or ranchers receive benefits within a state and others have to wait for an extended period to reap similar benefits, an inevitable cry for fairness is raised by those who have to wait.

CSP and Organics

The CSP has in several states been particularly beneficial to organic production systems. Conservation is largely inherent to organic systems of production and this has been recognized by NRCS. For instance, in 2006, the Montana state office offered CSP applicants enhanced payments of \$10 per acre and \$5 per acre for certified organic production of crops and livestock

respectively. Interestingly, this was justified under the conservation practice of nutrient management, since—at least in Montana—most organic crop producers use green manure or legume crop rotations to provide some plant nutrients rather than synthetic fertilizer applications (prohibited by organic certification rules).⁸ Many would argue that there are additional aspects of organic production systems, such as energy efficiency, that could also warrant further CSP payment support.

CSP and Energy

Many farmers and ranchers do not realize that since 2002, several of the NRCS conservation programs provide resources for energy efficiency and renewable energy production. For example the chart below shows the practice standard energy management enhancements offered by the NRCS in California. Many of the energy enhancements are also related to cropping system practices. Indeed, though not mentioning organic production directly, the enhancement payment for the use of perennial legumes in crop rotation is a common practice in organic crop production. So as noted above, indirectly NRCS is recognizing the inherent energy efficiency of organic systems of production.

CSP Energy Management Enhancements		
Practice Standard	Type	Amount
EEM41 Recycling of all used motor oil for tractors and lubricating oil for other farm equipment such as irrigation pumps or grain drying motors	Year	\$200.00
EEM42 Use of perennial legumes in the crop rotation to reduce energy need for production of nitrogen	Acre	\$0.70
EEM43 Use of annual legumes in the crop rotation to reduce energy need for production of nitrogen	Acre	\$0.10
EEM47 Renewable energy generation (solar, wind, water, geothermal, methane)	100 KWh	\$2.50

⁸See ATTRA publications: *Pursuing Conservation Tillage for Organic Farms, Overview of Cover Crops and Green Manures and Soil Management: National Organic Program Rules.*

Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)

The **Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)** is the largest NRCS working lands program with annual budgets around \$1 billion dollars since 2002. EQIP provides incentives to farmers and ranchers for two major purposes. First, the program helps farmers and ranchers reach improved levels of conservation practices. Second, the program helps farmers and ranchers to be in compliance (or stay in compliance) with

federal environmental regulations such as the Clean Water Act.

The EQIP has provided substantial federal resource to assist farmers and ranchers to stay in compliance with regulations in regard to the operation of Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFO's) and Animal Feeding Operations (AFO's). This has included controversial issues involving large-scale dairies and commercial feedlots. Since 2002, the NRCS is required to try to achieve a target of 60 percent of EQIP expenditures for livestock conservation practices. While not all of that

EQIP Helps Cranberry Growers



A bountiful cranberry harvest. Photo courtesy of USDA/NRCS

In 2004 and 2005, 13 Wisconsin cranberry growers signed EQIP cost sharing contracts to help address the unique environmental concerns with surface and ground water quality associated with that crop. Irrigation water management and pest management are being implemented on all of the participating marshes, and 9 of the 13 contracts also include nutrient management. These three management practices form the basis of comprehensive Resource Management Systems on cranberry marshes. By necessity, cranberries are grown very close to water in order to flood the beds for frost protection and harvest. Cranberries are native to wet soils with typically high water tables. Even with very careful management, nutrients and pesticides may be easily transported to surface and groundwater. Nutrient management activities are focusing on reducing applications of phosphorous fertilizer to protect water quality. Pest management incentive payments are being used to offset the costs associated with implementing integrated pest management (IPM) and to reduce the environmental hazards associated with using high-risk pesticides.

And, irrigation water management is focused on increasing irrigation application efficiencies and uniformity of application, to conserve water, and to limit leaching and runoff of fertilizers and pesticides. Additional conservation efforts being funded through EQIP include erosion control projects, replacing inefficient irrigation systems, and installing irrigation tailwater recovery systems for the recycling and reuse of water.

More than \$500,000 in EQIP funding has been obligated to these contracts. These funds will result in conservation efforts in excess of \$1 million when labor, equipment, and material costs to participants are complete.

livestock-related EQIP funding has gone to resolve CAFO/AFO issues, a large percentage has. However, despite these environmental regulatory aspects to EQIP, there has been many farmers and ranchers who have improved conservation practices and their bottom lines by participating in this program (see insert).

Unlike the CSP, the EQIP has from time to time allocated resources to special sub-programs as determined by the NRCS. Currently there are three special regional and national EQIP sub-programs:

1. Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Program—The program reduces salinity by preventing salts from dissolving and mixing with the Colorado River’s flow.
2. Ground and Surface Water Conservation Program—Focuses attention on conservation practices to those that result in net saving of ground

and surface water as determined by state NRCS offices.

3. Klamath Basin Program—a locally-led conservation effort for farmers, ranchers, tribes, and other private landowners in the Klamath River Basin in northern California and southern Oregon.

These special EQIP sub-programs will not be discussed here, but further information can be obtained from your state NRCS office. Finally, even within states, the leading administrative agent for the NRCS, the State Conservationists, can also set aside part of the state EQIP allocations for special projects of importance to the state. For instance, in Montana, a special EQIP project was set-up to provide resources for the Big Hole River watershed. The drainage has faced severe drought and a population of Arctic grayling—the last remnant of this trout species in the lower forty eight—may be enhanced through the funding.

EQIP has allocated resources to special sub-programs as determined by the NRCS.

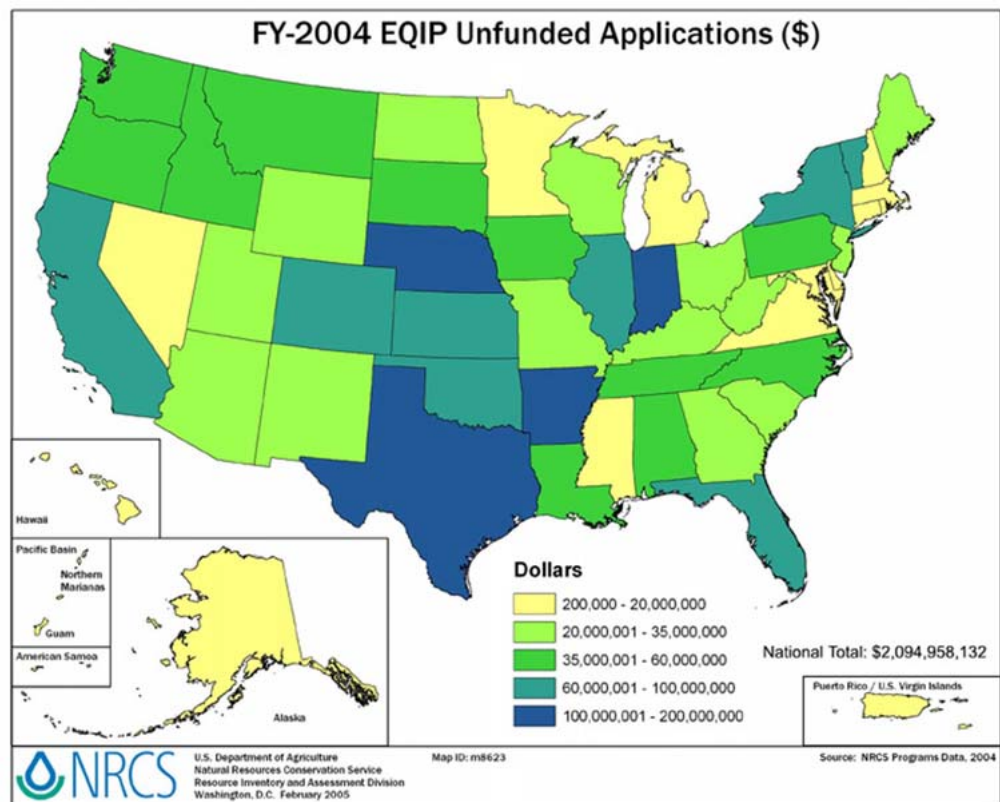


Figure 2. Map courtesy of USDA/NRCS

Finally, the EQIP is a very competitive program and is under-funded relative to demand by farmers and ranchers (see **Figure 2**). This means you must make sure to develop a comprehensive plan of the conservation practices integrated into your farm and ranch before you apply for the EQIP. Also, pay close attention to those elements of your plan that fit with the priorities that NRCS has identified as important for funding in the year you wish to apply.

EQIP Eligibility

There are only three exceptions to EQIP eligibility. First, the applicant must be in compliance with highly erodible land and wetland conservation practices. Known commonly as “sodbuster” and “swampbuster” provisions, EQIP is prevented from extending benefits to producers who have previously brought highly erodible land and converted wetlands into agriculture production.

Second, individuals or entities that have an average adjusted gross income exceeding \$2.5 million for the three tax years preceding application are not eligible. There is an exception to this rule if the individual or entity can document that 75 percent of the adjusted gross income (\$1.875 million) came from farming, ranching, or forestry operations. Essentially, this provision limits very wealthy individuals who don't receive income from agricultural and forestry operations from receiving federal conservation benefits.

Third, a person or entity cannot apply for EQIP if they have already reached a maximum benefit of \$450,000 through the program over the past five years.

All categories of land usage are eligible, including non-industrial forest lands. Interestingly, any land determined to pose a serious threat to soil, air, water or related resources is also eligible. Finally,

applications are accepted by state NRCS offices all year round, but there are specific dates by which you must be in-application to be eligible in any particular funding year.⁹ Each state sets its own deadlines, so check with your local NRCS agent or state office for the deadlines for you state.

Determining EQIP Benefits

Benefits are determined by an NRCS evaluation of the farmer's or rancher's application against a set of funding priorities known as the “ranking criteria.” These criteria are set at the national, state and county-levels. In some larger states such as California, or where demand for program benefits are high, a “pre-screening” set of selection criteria is often used. As noted, this is a competitive program and each state has the ability to prioritize which resources are of special concern, even down to the county level.¹⁰ Thus, each state's set of priorities is different and in any given year may not reflect the needs you have identified in your planning efforts for your farm or ranch. However, there is often a fairly wide-variety of conservation practices available to applicants and it is often hard to tell without going through the process how your planned changes will be “ranked.”

Below is a copy of just one part of the ranking criteria from Reeves County, Texas. This illustrates several aspects of EQIP in Texas. First, the state NRCS—at least in this county—has identified Animal Feeding Operations (AFO/CAFO) issues and salt cedar removal as high priority concerns. The local county group has added priorities related to conservation practices that promote plant health and water use efficiency. Both the state and county clearly recognize that when limited resource or beginning farmers or ranchers apply they are entitled to higher benefits (cost-shares). Finally, the county has placed limits on the extent of funding by identifying specific

Benefits are determined by an NRCS evaluation of the farmer's or rancher's application against a set of funding priorities known as the “ranking criteria.”

⁹Remember, the NRCS runs on the federal government fiscal cycle of October 1–September 30, and not the standard calendar year. Funding allocations are available to each state for that fiscal year only.

¹⁰The NRCS gets advice on setting these priorities from two governance committees: the state technical advisory committee (state-level) and the “local working groups” (see governance section).

priority practices and assigning points to those practices. Thus, in Reeves County, Texas a farmer or rancher is clearly at a funding advantage from EQIP if CAFO-AFO issues, salt cedar removal, plant health and water quantity issues are important to the applicant's farm or ranch conservation plan.

However, even if these conservation measures are relevant to the applying farmer or rancher, there is still no guarantee that the producer will ultimately be provided EQIP benefits. This is true because the applicant is also competing with every other applicant in all other counties. Ultimately, the state NRCS office places every applicant on a list in order of total ranking criteria points with associated total benefits requested. The process plays out until that year's state allocation of EQIP resources are expended.

What this example shows is that applying for EQIP benefits is a little like applying for a grant. The grantor (NRCS) gets to decide the criteria for grant awards and the applicant must match those criteria in order to increase the probability of acceptance. Also, an application for a single practice change is unlikely to be funded. It is useful to have a holistic plan of all the changes you wish to make on your farm or ranch and then apply for every relevant change that will garner the highest level of ranking criteria points possible. While NRCS does not want to encourage what it often refers to as "point shopping," farmers and ranchers must put together the best package possible to realize any benefit. For instance, in Montana there is an EQIP benefit of \$3,500 over three years to help farmers or ranchers transition to organic production. However, very few farmers or ranchers have received benefits under that option because they often apply only for that benefit and hence are out-competed by farmers and ranchers who present a more comprehensive application with higher total ranking points.

Applicants to EQIP are eligible for up to \$450,000 in program benefits. Though it is unusual for any single annual "contract" to be that high, the limit applies to the total

benefits in any previous contracts in the last five years. Thus, if you had received \$300,000 in EQIP benefits in the previous five years, you could only receive a \$150,000 in program benefits in the current year. As noted earlier, benefits are based on a percentage of the total cost of adopting the conservation practice up to a maximum of 75 percent. Again, limited resource and beginning farmers and ranchers may be up to 90 percent cost-share.

Figure 3 is an example from Maine NRCS of how actual dollar amounts are calculated to come up with the total contract benefits. Essentially, if the contract is selected based on ranking criteria, then each practice is applied for and a total contract benefit package is awarded.

For example, if one of the applicant's "practices" was installation of a composting facility, then the applicant, if successful, would receive \$75,000 (60 percent cost share) to build the facility—assessed by Maine NRCS to cost \$125,000. For a successful candidate, this would continue until all other practices were assessed and a total contract amount set. It is important to remember that "contracts" can be made for up to 10 years. Payments are made when the practice is completed (adopted) or installed. Thus, for example, the development of a compost facility might take several years to be complete and would likely require a multi-year EQIP contract.

The benefits of obtaining an EQIP contract can be substantial, but it does require a real commitment by the applicant farmer or rancher as well. Again, careful planning and optimization of program criteria is critical for success.

Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA)

The Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) program was created in 2000 and is very similar to the EQIP, except that it is a joint program involving two additional agencies of USDA, the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) and the Risk Management Agency (RMA). Also, the program is only

Applying for EQIP benefits is a little like applying for a grant.

EQIP Program in Reeves County, Texas, 2006

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) offers cost-share assistance to agricultural producers to implement on-farm conservation practices. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) determines eligible producers for the EQIP program and determines eligible land. Eligible producers may apply for cost-share assistance on conservation practices that will address the resource concern identified by the Local Work Group (LWG).

Reeves County Office Information

Interested agricultural producers may apply in person at the Reeves County USDA Service Center. Applicants may also request EQIP assistance by telephone, fax, e-mail, or letter.

State Resource Concerns Priority Areas that include part of Reeves County

Specific State Concern	State Resource Concern
AFO-CAFO -Poultry	Water Quality/Air Quality
AFO-CAFO -Swine	Water Quality/Air Quality
AFO-CAFO-Beef	Water Quality/Air Quality
AFO-CAFO -Dairy	Water Quality/Air Quality
Salt Cedar	Invasive Species
Limited Resource Farmer or Rancher	All
(AFO-Animal Feeding Operation) (CAFO-Confined Animal Feeding Operation)	

Objective:

The objective of the Reeves County Local Work Group (LWG) is to promote the use of conservation practices for improving natural resources throughout the county with major emphasis on improving plant health and water quantity.

County EQIP Resource Concern:

In Reeves County for 2006, the LWG has identified Plant Health and Water Quantity as the major resource concerns.

Priority for Funding:

Water Quantity—High Priority for funding

Land leveling, concrete ditch lining, irrigation water conveyance, sprinkler, sprinkler conversion, and drip irrigation.

Plant Health—High Priority for funding

Fencing, livestock water development, brush management, range ripping and seeding.

All practices receive 50 points.

Eligible Practices and Cost-Share Rates:

Limited Resource Farmers and Ranchers—90 percent.

Beginning Farmers and Ranchers—75 percent.

Other—50 percent.

Practices will be cost-shared based on the established average cost of the practice. The amount of cost-share earned will be the number of units certified after completion, multiplied by the average cost multiplied by the cost-share percentage.

Fig. 3 2006-Androscoggin/Sagadahoc Counties, Maine, EQIP Cost Lists

Practice Code	Practice Name	Component	Unit Type	Unit Cost \$	Share Rate %
560	Access Road	All components excluding crossings	foot	17	75
560	Access Road	Stream crossing	no.	55,000	75
702	Agrichemical Handling Facility	All components	no.	51,750	75
575	Animal Trails & Walkways	All components excluding crossings	foot	17	60
575	Animal Trails & Walkways	Stream crossing	no.	55,000	60
707	Barnyard Water Management	All components	s.f.	8	75
314	Brush Management	Brush management	acre	55	100
326	Clearing and Snagging	Clearing and snagging	foot	50	60
317	Composting Facility	All components	no.	125,000	75
100	Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan	Development of CNMP (one time payment)	a.u.	10	100
100	Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan	Implementation of CNMP (one time payment)	a.u.	40	100
327	Conservation Cover	Grass establishment	acre	330	60
328	Conservation Crop Rotation	Conservation crop rotation	acre	55	100
332	Contour Buffer Strips	Grass establishment	acre	330	60
330	Contour Farming	All components	acre	22	100
340	Cover Crop	Cover crop	acre	55	100
342	Critical Area Planting	All components with heavy site prep	acre	800	60
324	Deep Tillage	Deep tillage	acre	22	100
362	Diversion	All components	foot	5	60

available in 15 states.¹¹ The AMA program was created for only these 15 states because these states have historically low participation in Federal Crop Insurance programs. Under AMA, the AMS provides management of an organic agriculture certification cost-share program that assists new organic farmers and ranchers with support in certification costs. The RMA provides special mitigation of risks through a cost-share program. Finally, the NRCS implements all conservation provisions within the AMA. Conservation cost-shares are 75 percent of eligible practices and total payments from all three sources cannot exceed \$50,000 per participant per year.

Eligibility

Eligibility for the conservation aspects of AMA are the same as EQIP. Eligibility for the RMA and AMS parts of the program have requirements specific to each agency. AMS implements the organic certification cost-share program within the National Organic Program (NOP). It is open to all organic growers who apply in the respective 15 states. The Internet link for this part of the AMA is: www.ams.usda.gov/nop/StatePrograms/CostShare.html

The eligibility for the RMA portion of the AMA is simply a percentage cost reduction of a producer's crop insurance cost. If you live in one of the 15 states and are

¹¹Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

eligible for crop insurance, then you get this added discount.

Benefit Determination

As noted above, the AMA for insurance cost-share is a simple percentage discount on current crop insurance costs. The special organic cost-share offers 70 percent of the costs associated with organic certification up to a maximum of \$500. Conservation benefits for AMA are based on the set of specific practices in the respective state and are calculated like the EQIP. Again, total program maximum benefits per year are \$50,000.

Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRPP)

Though the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRPP) is essentially an easement program, it is included in this publication because it provides resources to keep farms and ranches as working lands by protecting them from being converted to other uses. The program is unique in that it is only indirectly supportive of conservation practices. As noted below, some of the eligibility requirements of the program require prior conservation efforts, but nonetheless, the benefits essentially support an easement. The program is also unique in that the NRCS only matches resources with

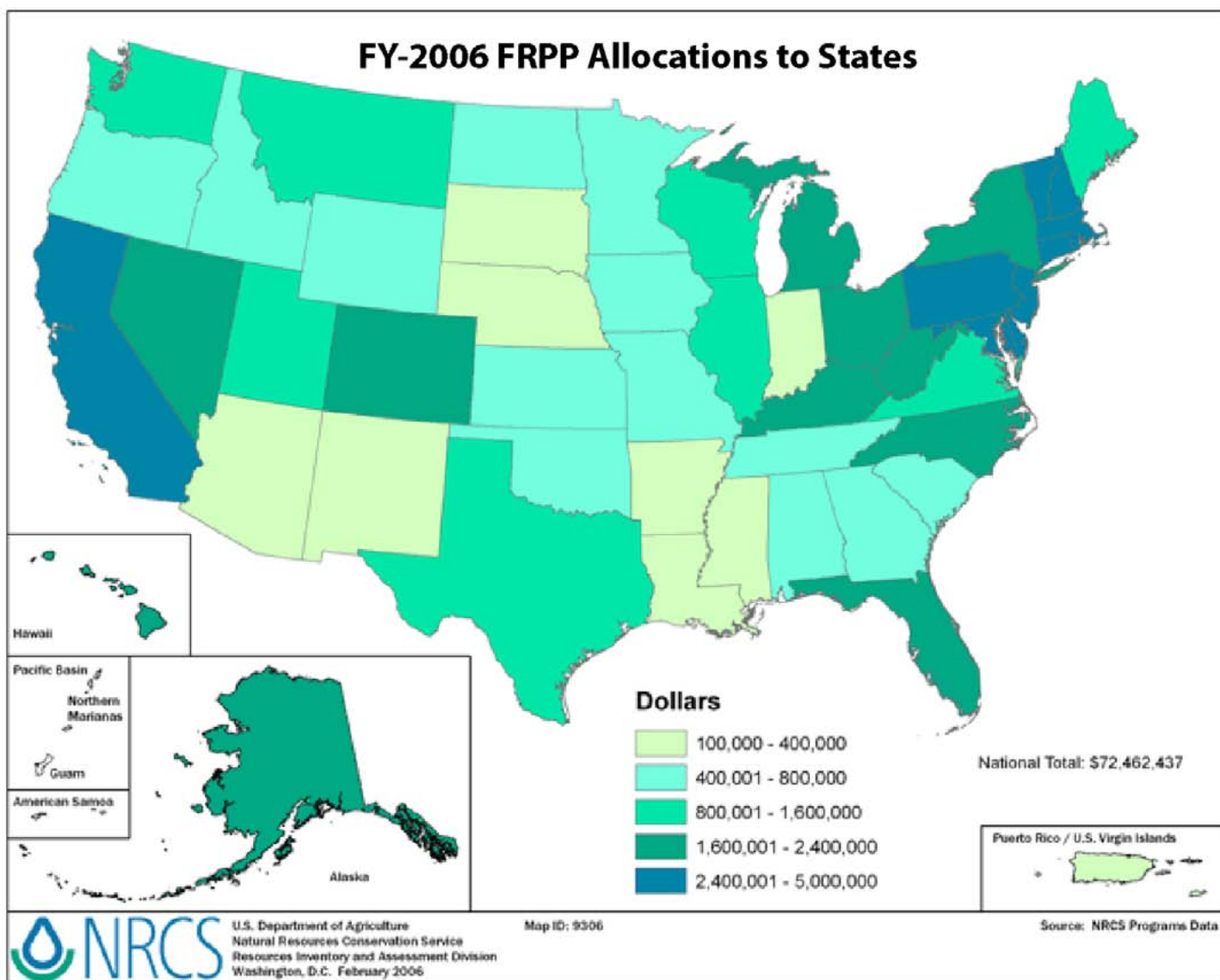


Figure 4. Map courtesy of NRCS/USDA.

another non-federal entity. These entities are state, tribal and local government and non-governmental easement programs. For instance, the American Farmland Trust (AFT) has an agricultural easement program and a farmer or rancher could enter into an agreement with AFT and then together with AFT could apply for FRPP to help support the total cost of the easement. The program is competitive and the demand for FRPP resources far exceeds supply. Funding for the program varies across the United States (see **Figure 4**). Finally, the program also assesses the historical and archeological significance of the easement property.

N *RCS working lands “contracts” are legally binding and commit you to fulfilling your end of the bargain.*

FRPP Eligibility

The FRPP is a competitive program and each state NRCS office has very particular eligibility requirements for the program. However, each has to meet the following minimum set of national criteria:

- Does the farm or ranch contain prime, unique, productive soil, historical or archeological resources?
- Is the farm or ranch included in a pending offer from a state, tribal, local government, or non-governmental organization easement program?
- Is the land privately owned?
- Is the farm or ranch covered by a conservation plan for highly erodible land?
- Is it large enough to sustain agricultural production?
- Does the farm or ranch have access to markets for its products?
- Do the farms or ranches that surround the applying farm or ranch support long-term agricultural production?
- Does the owner meet the Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) limitation?¹²

FRPP Benefit Determination

The NRCS share of the cost of the easement cannot be larger than 50 percent of the appraised market value. The applying farmer or rancher can contribute up to 25 percent of the cost with the cooperating entity contributing up to another 25 percent. The total benefit is calculated by all partners to the agreement and available funding. The selection is made by the state conservationist in each state. The size of the benefit is variable depending on the value of the easement. For instance in Montana in 2005, five easements were awarded under the FRPP at a value of \$2,221,000.

Implementation

Being awarded an NRCS working lands conservation program contract is really only the beginning of the process. NRCS working lands “contracts” are legally binding and commit you to fulfilling your end of the bargain. With contracts lasting in some cases 10 years, it is important to be absolutely clear on your commitments. By the same token the NRCS has also made significant commitments as well. During the implementation phase, there will be a need to regularly work with your local NRCS agent to make sure you are making timely progress on your contract.

While ideally avoided, there may be disputes about either the fairness of the application process or about your obligations during the implementation of the contract. Federal law does provide for formal processes of appeal. While NRCS works hard to make sure you understand the details of a program contract prior to implementation, knowing your rights for appealing decisions is important.

Appeals

The appeals process—like the programs themselves—is complex. The first question to be clear about is the basis for

¹²This is the same income limitation for all other NRCS programs.

your appeal. For instance, if you appeal the rejection of your application for program benefits, remember first that the programs are competitive and losing in that competition is not itself a reason to appeal. The general basis for an appeal includes the following:

- Denial of participation in a program.
- Compliance with program requirements.
- The payment or amount of payments or other program benefits to a program participant.
- Technical determinations or technical decisions that affect the status of land even though eligibility for USDA benefits may not be affected.

There are specific reasons that an appeal can be rejected by NRCS:

- General program requirements applicable to all participants; that is, you cannot make your farm or ranch a “special” case.
- Science-based formulas and criteria; for example, eligibility for CSP is based on a certain minimum Soil Conditioning Index (SCI) score. You cannot appeal your eligibility on the basis that the SCI index is the wrong criteria to use.¹³
- The fairness or constitutionality of federal laws; for example, arguing that it is unfair that you can’t apply for the CSP because you don’t happen to live in the watershed where the program is being implemented in that year.
- Technical standards or criteria that apply to all persons.
- State Technical Committee membership decisions made by the State Conservationist.

- Procedural technical decisions relating to program administration.
- Denials of assistance due to the lack of funds or authority.

Once you have established a basis for an appeal, determine whether you are appealing a “technical determination” or a “program decision.” An appeal of a technical determination challenges the correctness of “the status and condition of the natural resources and cultural practices based on science and best professional judgment of natural resources professionals concerning soils, water, air, plants and animals.”¹⁴ For example, the stocking rate of cattle on a particular range or pasture could be a contested technical decision.

An appeal of a program decision, on the other hand, challenges the correctness of the determination of eligibility, or how the program is administered and implemented. For example, if the local NRCS is wrong in its determination that your farm or ranch is in an eligible watershed for application to the CSP, then you could appeal that program eligibility decision.

After you have decided the basis for an appeal and the type of appeal, the next step is to make sure the program you applied for is a “Chapter XII” program.¹⁵ All the programs outlined in this publication are Chapter XII programs. Check with your local or state NRCS office for a list of non-Chapter XII programs (See **Resources** Section below).

To begin the preliminary phase of the appeal process, ask in writing for one of three actions to take place within 30 days after notification of the decision you wish to contest.

- Make a request for a field visit and reconsideration of an NRCS decision.
- Ask for mediation of the contested decision.

Determine whether you are appealing a “technical determination” or a “program decision.”

¹³However, if you think the wrong information was used to calculate the score, then an appeal may be warranted.

¹⁴NRCS.

¹⁵Chapter XII refers to the title of the Food Security Act of 1985, when the current appeals process was established.

- Appeal directly to the local Farm Service Agency (FSA)—usually county-based—for a reconsideration of a decision.

Which of these three routes to take in the appeals process is up to you. It may be hard to evaluate which is of greater benefit. Even though the first choice explicitly provides for a “field visit,” all others will require a field visit anyway. The reconsideration and mediation routes should be completed within 30 days of the request.

Finally, even after these appeal routes are exhausted, you can still appeal a decision to the National Appeals Division (NAD) of the USDA. This agency is independent of the other USDA agencies and provides participants with the opportunity to have a neutral review of an appeal. The NAD can make independent findings but also must apply laws and regulations of the respective agency to the case.

Conclusion

The conservation programs outlined in this publication are complex; accessing these resources requires significant effort and an investment in time and energy. The complexities of the programs are in part due to sincere efforts by a large federal agency to make the programs locally relevant. If you do not like the way programs are designed and implemented, the NRCS is unique in that it also provides at least two ways for you to be engaged in changing them.

Local Working Groups

Local work groups are essentially a form of local governance of federal conservation programs. The meetings are open to the general public, but formal membership is limited to federal, state, tribal, or local government representatives. The meetings are convened by the local conservation district in each state and the purpose of the group is to provide advice to the NRCS on conservation programs. Contact your local NRCS

office about the meeting schedule in your area. As a farmer or rancher you can attend these meetings and offer public comment on the decisions being made. Incumbents of any of several local government offices usually serve as leaders of these groups. The local working groups provide representatives to serve on a multi-state committee. Additionally, the working groups provide advice in the following general areas:¹⁶

- Conditions of the natural resources and the environment;
- The local application process, including ranking criteria and application periods;
- Identifying the educational and training needs of producers;
- Cost-share rates and payment levels and methods of payment;
- Eligible conservation practices;
- The need for new, innovative conservation practices;
- Public outreach and information efforts;
- Program performance indicators.

State Technical Committee

Each state NRCS office has a State Technical Committee (STC). The committee is comprised of groups or individuals who represent a wide variety of natural resource issues. If you wish to serve on your state STC, either as an individual or as a representative of a group, you must write a letter to your State Conservationist explaining your interest and credentials. Several federal agencies must be represented on the committee by law and many non-governmental and state agencies are encouraged to participate as well. Unlike local working groups, STC members do not have to be “elected” officials. Public notification of meetings must be accomplished no later than 14 days prior to the meeting and the state conservationist is required to prepare

The complexities of the programs are in part due to sincere efforts by a large federal agency to make the programs locally relevant.

¹⁶Montana NRCS (2006).

meeting agendas and necessary background information for the meetings. There is no requirement for any number of meetings in any given year, but any USDA agency can request that a meeting be held.

There is an extensive list of conservation programs that the STC has responsibilities to address. The list is available on the internet: http://policy.nrcs.usda.gov/scripts/lpsiis.dll/M/M_440_501_B_11.htm or by contacting your local or state NRCS office (see **Resource** list). However, it is important to remember that the STC is only an advisory body and has no legal enforcement or implementation authority. Nonetheless, even without this statutory authority, members of the STCs are generally the leaders of agriculture in a particular state. It would be difficult for any State Conservationist to not give strong consideration to the recommendations of this important group.

Final Word: Is Conservation a Public Good?

There are some farmers, ranchers, agricultural, and conservation organizations that have had philosophical issues with the very intent of working lands conservation programs. For the CSP, the concept of rewarding farmers and ranchers for their current conservation efforts is fundamentally different from all other federal conservation programs. Some have argued that if some farmers and ranchers are already providing these benefits without public support, then why should scarce public resources be provided to continue these efforts? (Batie, 2006) Others have argued that good stewardship by farmers and ranchers provides a public good or investment. It is argued that we all benefit from these stewardship efforts and public incentives are required to continue good stewardship of the land and—more importantly—to encourage those who do not provide these public benefits. (Kemp, 2005)

The EQIP program supports farmers and ranchers to move toward improved conservation practices that protect natural resources and the environment. The additions to social benefits seem clearer than with the CSP. However, EQIP also has a role to regulate environmental damages resulting from agriculture by ending poor farming and ranching practices before governmental enforcement actions are imposed. In this regard, EQIP is often criticized for rewarding the worst environmental actors in the agriculture system.

These issues—like many others in our democratic system—strike at the broader issue of the proper role of government engagement in protecting both the

environment and the future productive capacity of natural resources. Even with the substantial federal resource increases in conservation since 2002, federal conservation programs still only represent about 8 percent of all USDA expenditures. So even at this higher level of activity, the federal government is far more engaged in agriculture and food systems in ways not related to the protection of our agricultural resource base and natural environment. Perhaps conservation efforts need to be of even higher priority in the United States.

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Further Resources

Internet, Intranet, and Phone

The NRCS has an excellent intranet-based information system. The national NRCS Web site links to all state NRCS Web sites. In turn state Web sites link to local NRCS office Web sites if the local office maintains a site. Starting at the national NRCS site is the best way to begin a search of all the programs and services the NRCS provides. That link is: www.nrcs.usda.gov/

If you do not have Internet access, your phone book should list your local county NRCS office in the “blue” federal government sections. If not call the following state offices to get the phone number of your local office.

State Office Contacts

The Natural Resources Conservation Service has offices at state, area, and district levels. For information on conservation for a specific state or county, phone the state conservationist listed below.

State	State Conservationist	Phone	Fax	E-mail
Alabama	W. Gary Kobylski	334-887-4500	334-887-4552	gary.kobylski@al.usda.gov
Alaska	Robert N. Jones	907-761-7760	907-761-7790	robert.jones@ak.usda.gov
Arizona	David L. McKay	602-280-8801	602-280-8809	david.mckay@az.usda.gov
Arkansas	Kalven L. Trice	501-301-3100	501-301-3194	kalven.trice@ar.usda.gov
California	Lincoln E. "Ed" Burton	530-792-5600	530-792-5790	ed.burton@ca.usda.gov
Caribbean Area	Juan A. Martinez	787-766-5206 x237	787-766-6563	juan.martinez@pr.usda.gov
Colorado	James Allen Green	720-544-2810	720-544-2965	allen.green@co.usda.gov
Connecticut	Margo L. Wallace	860-871-4011	860-871-4054	margo.wallace@ct.usda.gov
Delaware	Jon F. Hall	302-678-4160	302-678-0843	jon.hall@de.usda.gov
Florida	T. Niles Glasgow	352-338-9500	352-338-9574	niles.glasgow@fl.usda.gov
Georgia	James E. Tillman Sr.	706-546-2272	706-546-2120	james.tillman@ga.usda.gov
Hawaii	Lawrence T. Yamamoto	808-541-2600 x100	808-541-1335	larry.yamamoto@hi.usda.gov
Idaho	Richard W. Sims	208-378-5700	208-378-5735	richard.sims@id.usda.gov
Illinois	William J. Gradle	217-353-6600	217-353-6676	bill.gradle@il.usda.gov
Indiana	Jane E. Hardesty	317-290-3200	317-290-3225	jane.hardesty@in.usda.gov
Iowa	Richard W. Van Klaveren	515-284-6655	515-284-4394	rick.vanklaveren@ia.usda.gov
Kansas	Harold L. Klaege	785-823-4565	785-823-4540	harold.klaege@ks.usda.gov
Kentucky	David G. Sawyer	859-224-7350	859-224-7399	david.sawyer@ky.usda.gov
Louisiana	Donald W. Gohmert	318-473-7751	318-473-7626	don.gohmert@la.usda.gov
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Notes

Notes

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