



CONSERVATION SECURITY PROGRAM

Background

The Conservation Security Program (CSP) was first authorized by the 2002 farm bill. The CSP is a voluntary working lands conservation program administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). It provides financial and technical assistance to producers who advance the conservation and improvement of nationally significant resources such as soil, water, air, energy, and plant and animal life on tribal and private working lands.

The purposes of CSP are to (1) identify and reward those farmers and ranchers meeting the very highest standards of conservation and environmental management on their operations; (2) create powerful incentives for other producers to meet those same standards of conservation performance on their operations; and (3) provide public benefits from an improved environment.

CSP is available to all eligible producers on privately owned or tribal lands in each of the 50 States, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Guam, the Virgin Islands of the United States, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

Natural Resource Emphasis and Three Tier Approach

The CSP rewards three levels of conservation treatment based on a watershed approach. Tier I rewards contract participants who address established levels of water quality and soil quality on a portion of their agricultural operation. Tier II rewards contract participants who address water quality and soil quality on the entire agricultural operation. Tier II contract participants must also treat an additional significant resource concern by the end of their contract period. For Tier III, the contract participants must address all existing resource concerns on their entire agricultural operation.

Priority Watershed Delivery

NRCS has prioritized watersheds based upon a nationally consistent process that uses existing natural resource, environmental quality, and agricultural activity data. Signups for CSP participation are rotated among watersheds on an annual basis.

Program Signup

NRCS publishes a CSP signup notice for the selected priority watersheds with sufficient lead time for producers to consider the benefits of participation prior to the opening of the signup period. NRCS accepts and approves producer applications as outlined in the signup announcement based on available funding. For approved applications, the NRCS or an approved Technical Service Provider develops a conservation plan with the applicant. This plan forms the

basis for the contract for conservation stewardship payments. Once the parties approve the contract, the applicant becomes a CSP participant.

Financial Assistance to Participants

CSP financial assistance payments include: (1) an annual stewardship component for the base level of conservation treatment; (2) an annual existing practice component for the maintenance of existing conservation practices; (3) an enhancement component for exceptional conservation effort and additional activities that provide increased resource benefits beyond the prescribed level; and (4) a one-time new practice component for additional needed practices.

Participation in CSP

In 2005, CSP was implemented in 220 watersheds nationwide, including Puerto Rico, and resulted in nearly 12,800 eligible applications covering more than 10 million acres. In fiscal year (FY) 2005, \$202 million was obligated.

FY 2005 CSP Eligible Applications				Acres					
Number of Contracts									
Tier I	Tier II	Tier III	Total	Cropland	Irrigated Cropland	Pasture	Range	Other	Total
6,574	3,696	2,517	12,787	5,209,230	1,735,568	180,776	2,768,423	342,478	10,236,476

In FY 2004, USDA offered the CSP in 18 watersheds within 22 States. In the 2-year period, USDA has rewarded nearly 15,000 stewards on 12.1 million acres of working agricultural lands.

General Opinions Expressed

- Commenters generally supported CSP as a program that recognizes farmers for the work they have done over the years to protect natural resources and the environment.
- Some commenters stated that CSP should be fully funded as stipulated in the 2002 farm bill to adequately reward all individuals—nationwide—who are currently good stewards of the land.
- CSP could develop into the only conservation program needed. Having one conservation program would simplify things for farmers and staff. NRCS could get back in the business of whole-farm conservation planning and away from the habit of program implementation.
- Some commenters wanted green payments to be the centerpiece of the next farm bill. They noted that CSP is consistent with WTO rules in its focus on paying for conservation of resources rather than production of commodities. Others stated that USDA should not make CSP the centerpiece of the next farm bill.
- Some noted that organic farming should be a priority in CSP.
- CSP funding should be for working lands only—wildlife should not be considered.
- Forest lands need to be a part of CSP as a land use, not treated as incidental land as currently provided under the 2002 farm bill.
- Make State trust lands and Federal lands eligible for CSP.
- Do not start the program during planting season.
- Expand CSP nationwide; get rid of the watershed approach.
- Increase CSP coverage (more watersheds).

- Increase CSP assistance to small farmers; reduce payments to large operations.
- Payment should be based on the amount of (new) conservation work completed, not existing practices.
- In CSP, conservation goals should be synonymous with production goals.
- Some commenters do not agree with the requirement that CSP watersheds have digitized soil surveys as a prerequisite to program participation.
- Some commenters were concerned that applicants are unable to enroll and participate in two different counties (only one contract is allowed in CSP).
- Some commenters indicated that past inaccurate information regarding CSP caused confusion with farmers.
- Some commenters indicated that current CSP payment limitations per farm are insufficient to get all acres enrolled.
- Some comments suggested that the Conservation Security Program should be restructured so that organic practices are rewarded. Cover cropping and crop rotations should be emphasized, while organic farm plans should be accepted as proof of compliance with the highest tier (III) of conservation.

Detailed Suggestions Expressed

- The Conservation Security Program needs to be our flagship of conservation programs.
- Farmers should know if their watersheds are eligible for application, at least 1 year, preferably 2 years, prior to time of application.
- Large farms should not get the same proportion as small farms. Farms should not be allowed to be split among family members where each can receive a subsidy. The CSP should replace all other assistance programs for farmers.
- For the 2007 farm bill, we would suggest that conservation programs be fully oriented to help farmers achieve reductions of nitrogen and phosphorus runoff, particularly through programs such as CSP and EQIP, and to do so in a manner that sustains our agricultural economy.
- Government policy, rules, and regulations need to stay out of the organic and sustainable farming movement. These movements just need a level playing field. Set up minimum conservation and environmental goals such as the CSP and let the best conservation farmers run their business.
- Producers can only participate in one contract. Individual producers should be allowed to have more than one contract to allow more leased land to be enrolled in CSP contracts.
- Conservation funding in the next farm bill should reward existing good stewards for achieved environmental benefits rather than providing funding for traditional programs that only fix natural resource problems.
- Commenter opposed the CSP as a waste of taxpayer dollars. Recommended elimination of program.