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CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS



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Conservation Security Program Fact Sheet – Program Implementation

What Is the New Conservation Security Program (CSP)?

The Conservation Security Program's second sign-up will be underway shortly. The final rule has not been published yet, but we expect it in the near future. Therefore, this fact sheet is based on the interim final rule, which guided the program during the first sign-up held last summer. This year, the CSP will be available in 202 watersheds. The CSP is administered by the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS).



The Conservation Security Program (CSP) is a 2002 Farm Bill initiative written by Congress to provide financial assistance to farmers and ranchers who are solving key natural resource and environmental problems by adopting sustainable practices and systems. The CSP was designed by Congress to support farmers and ranchers who are already engaged in strong conservation systems to protect soil, water, air, and wildlife or who will adopt more sustainable systems as part of the program.

The CSP was intended to be a nationwide program, available to all qualifying farmers and ranchers in all 50 states. Unfortunately, the program was capped at \$41 million the first year. The program is still capped, however at \$202 million for this sign-up period.

We need to continue working to protect the CSP from additional funding cuts and to restore its uncapped status. For information on how you can help save the CSP so it can be implemented nationwide, contact Traci Bruckner, tracib@cfra.org or 402-687-2100 at the Center for Rural Affairs.

2. What is the tier level eligibility?

Cropland – Tiers I and II for cropland have the minimum level of soil quality and must have a positive Soil Conditioning Index (SCI)* value. To meet the water quality criteria, the benchmark inventory must indicate that the current level of treatment meets or exceeds NRCS quality criteria for nutrients, pesticides, salinity, and sediment for both surface and groundwater. Tier I participants need to do this on the portion they wish to enroll in the CSP, and Tier II must do this on all land. **Tier III** for cropland must address all resource concerns on all land to the minimum quality criteria.

Pasture and Rangeland – Tiers I and II for pasture and rangeland must follow a grazing management plan that provides a forage-animal balance, proper livestock distribution, and managing livestock access to water courses. **Tier III** again must address all resource concerns on all land to the minimum quality criteria.

*SCI is a tool that can predict the consequences of cropping systems and tillage practices on the trend of soil organic matter. The SCI has three main components: 1) the amount of organic material returned to or removed from the soil; 2) the effects of tillage and field operations on organic matter decomposition; 3) the effect of predicted soil erosion associated with the management system. The SCI gives an overall rating based on these three components. If the rating is negative, the system is predicted to have declining soil organic matter. If the rating is positive, the system is predicted to have increasing soil organic matter.

1. What are the basic eligibility criteria?

If you are an owner/operator or a crop-share landlord with at least 51 percent of your farm/ranch in one of the eligible watersheds, you may be able to participate in the CSP. For farmers and ranchers renting land, you need to be able to show written proof, which can be as simple as a letter indicating such and demonstrating you control decisions made on that farm/ranch.

Beyond the basic eligibility, there are minimum conservation requirements for each tier level of participation for cropland, pasture and rangeland.

3. What will the payment look like?

The CSP payments are based on four criteria:

Stewardship Payments – are the payments you get just for qualifying and enrolling in the program. These payments are a percentage of regional rental rates for a particular land use, starting at five percent for Tier I, ten percent for Tier II, and fifteen percent for Tier III. These rates are then further reduced to 25 percent of that figure for Tier I, 50 percent for Tier II and 75 percent for Tier III. For example, if the regional rental rate for irrigated cropland is \$116 per acre, the Stewardship payment could range from \$1.45 per acre for Tier I to \$13.05 per acre for Tier III.

Maintenance Payments – are for maintenance of conservation practices already in place which have been providing environmental benefits. Maintenance payments are set at a flat rate of 25 percent of the stewardship payment. For example, using the \$116 figure again, the maintenance payments will range from \$0.36 per acre for Tier I to \$3.26 per acre for Tier III.

New Practice Payments – are a one-time payment and are capped at 50 percent cost-share, not to exceed \$10,000 over the life of the contract. The number of practices that will qualify for this payment is limited and will be based on local conservation need.

Enhanced Payments – make up the majority of the overall payment and are designed to reward those implementing exceptional conservation efforts by going above and beyond the basic level of participation. Eligible practices for the enhanced payment are watershed specific to address locally identified conservation needs. Enhanced payments cannot exceed \$10,000 for Tier I, \$17,500 for Tier II and \$22,500 for Tier III.

“This program is the most promising conservation program in the Farm Bill. It was designed by Congress to reward the best conservation farmers and ranchers.”

**- Traci Bruckner,
CSP Hotline Director,
Center for Rural Affairs**

4. What are the payment limitations?

The payment limitations as legislated are \$20,000 for Tier I, \$35,000 for Tier II and \$45,000 for Tier III.

The interim rule includes a brand new type of limit that did not exist in the law as written. This new limit is called a **“contract limit,”** which caps the base, existing and enhancement payments to not more than 15 percent of local land rental rates multiplied by the number of acres enrolled for Tier I, 25 percent for Tier II and 40 percent for Tier III. This new contract limitation severely disadvantages smaller acreage farms and farms and ranches of any size with very low rental rates.

5. How do I get signed up?

The first step is to determine if you are within one of the eligible watersheds for this year. The next step is to complete the *Conservation Security Program: Self-Assessment Workbook*, which will help you determine if you are eligible for the CSP. This workbook is available at your local NRCS office.

Included in the workbook is a “benchmark inventory” where farmers and ranchers describe their operation and all the conservation practices being implemented. After completion of the self-assessment including the benchmark inventory, farmers and ranchers will have an interview with NRCS staff to go over the workbook and determine eligibility. A farm visit may also be scheduled to help determine eligibility. This site visit can help clear up any unanswered questions farmers, ranchers or NRCS staff may have.

Qualifying farmers and ranchers will then be placed in an enrollment category. These categories are being used to prioritize contracts and to distribute funding accordingly. The farmers and ranchers with the strongest conservation already in place and committed to do more will be placed in the top category.

The final step will be to sign a contract, which will include the conservation plan that is developed by integrating information from the completed self-assessment and benchmark inventory and adding the dates for any new conservation practices to be implemented.

The Center for Rural Affairs is also operating a hotline to assist farmers and ranchers with program sign-up. For assistance, please call the Center at (402) 687-2100 and ask for the Conservation Hotline.

To find information about the CSP from NRCS, go to the following website: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/csp/>

