

FACT SHEET:

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT THE CSP PLAN

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) provides assistance across the whole farm through payments for new and existing conservation practices, all while the land continues to be farmed. CSP pays farmers and ranchers annually to invest in conservation, building agricultural and financial resilience in the process.

CSP is designed to accomplish two main goals:

- Reward farmers and ranchers for existing conservation practices, especially those who address top local resource concerns.
- Provide incentives for farmers and ranchers to implement new practices enhancing conservation on their land.

Farmers and ranchers who want to enroll first need to demonstrate their current conservation practices address at least two priority resource concerns for their state or region.



For example, soil quality degradation may be a priority resource concern set by the state. Conservation practices that can help address soil quality are: cover crops, extended crop rotations, reduced till, and conservation cover.

Then, local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff work with farmers and ranchers to determine what additional conservation practices or enhancements would work best to address natural resource concerns on their land. To maximize the environmental impact, some enhancements are combined into bundles.

WHAT ARE THE MOST POPULAR PRACTICES?

In 2018, the most popular conservation practices implemented within CSP were cover crops, prescribed grazing, nutrient management, integrated pest management, and residue and tillage management (reduced tillage).

A list of available enhancements can be found at nrcs.usda.gov. More than 200 enhancements are approved for use, ranging across enhancements for the practices of cover crops, herbaceous weed control, and prescribed grazing.

KEY VOCABULARY YOU MAY ENCOUNTER AT NRCS

Priority resource concern: These are specific categories of natural resource concerns related to soil, water, wildlife, and more. The NRCS sets priority resource concerns for each state, often with stakeholder input. Examples include soil erosion, inadequate fish and wildlife habitat, and insufficient water.



Conservation practice: An activity to manage or improve natural resources. A practice is something the farmer or rancher is already doing before enrolling in CSP. Prescribed grazing, cover crops, and buffer strips are examples of conservation practices farmers and ranchers may use to protect soil and water on their land.

Enhancement: Additional conservation activities a farmer or rancher installs or adopts on their land under CSP contract terms. Enhancements typically expand on existing conservation practices the farmer is doing; for example, cover crop enhancement options within CSP include more diverse, multi-species mixes rather than a single cover crop, such as cereal rye. These enhancements are designed to help the farmer or rancher achieve a higher level of conservation and create a greater benefit for natural resources.



Enhancement bundle: Three or more enhancements that are combined to address priority resource concerns in a comprehensive and cost-effective way. Farmers and ranchers work one-on-one with NRCS personnel to select enhancement bundles that fit the unique needs of their operations. Farmers and ranchers who choose to implement a bundle of enhancements receive an increase in ranking points and payments relative to selecting single enhancements.



Stewardship thresholds: An established sustainable use level for a particular natural resource. Meeting or exceeding the threshold means a farmer is satisfactorily addressing the resource concern. The goal of CSP is to assist farmers and ranchers, over time, to meet or exceed the stewardship thresholds for all the priority resource concerns in their area.



HOW ARE APPLICATIONS RANKED?

NRCS establishes ranking pools based on watersheds, geographic areas, or other high-priority areas within the state, so that like applications compete in pools. NRCS also establishes separate ranking pools for beginning farmers and ranchers, farmers of color (the U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA] uses the term “socially-disadvantaged”), and organic farmers or farmers transitioning to organic. Local NRCS staff are the best resource for the most up-to-date information regarding current ranking pools; farmers with questions should contact their local offices.

As farmers and ranchers learn through the CSP application process which stewardship thresholds their operation meets, they then choose enhancements to address resource concerns where additional conservation would have the greatest benefit. This is critical to have a competitive application, as farmers and ranchers must meet or exceed at least one additional resource concern by the end of the contract.

How an application addresses the priority resource concerns and stewardship thresholds will heavily affect its ranking. Farmers and ranchers should contact NRCS to learn what the priority resource concerns are in their areas.

WHEN WILL I GET PAID? HOW MUCH?



CSP annual payments are between \$1,500 and \$40,000, based on the contract and the practices implemented.

Payments are typically made in October. Payment rates for all practices, enhancements, and bundles may vary from state to state and from year to year, so be sure to check the NRCS website for the payment rates for your state.¹

Currently, the more than 60% of CSP payments nationally reward new practices and enhancements, so a farmer’s advantage is to select all activities they can comfortably implement. The points will be multiplied by the number of acres on which the enhancement is implemented, or in some cases an increment of the enhancement, such as the 25-foot width of additional conservation buffer.

HOW MUCH MONEY DO I NEED BEFOREHAND?

CSP is a cost-share program, which means participants are reimbursed for some of the money they spend to implement a practice. CSP does not pay for the full cost of either maintaining or taking on conservation efforts. Participants should take care to understand the financial commitments before undertaking a CSP contract.

CSP does not offer an advance payment option at this time, but it does offer a higher percentage of cost-share for farmers and ranchers of color (the USDA uses the term “socially-disadvantaged”). Farmers and ranchers must self-identify to access these cost-share rates.

WHAT ARE THE REPORTING REQUIREMENTS?

Some enhancements and bundles require very specific reporting before, during, and after implementation. NRCS staff will provide farmers and ranchers with a printout of reporting requirements for the planned activities. Without accurate reporting, farmers will not be paid for the conservation work they are doing on their land. NRCS will let farmers know what assistance will be provided in the implementation process, but the work of reporting falls on farmers or ranchers.

HOW LONG DO I NEED TO MAINTAIN ENHANCEMENTS?



Management enhancements, such as prescribed grazing or no-till, must be maintained at least for the duration of the contract. Structural or vegetative practices, such as fencing or the establishment of riparian forest buffers, may require maintenance for up to 15 years.

WHAT IF CHANGES OCCUR WHILE I'M IN CONTRACT?

The best practice is to keep in touch with local NRCS staff if you are considering or need to make changes to a CSP contract. Get in contact if there are changes to a lease or other difficulties in fulfilling the contract. Modification requests may be made to adjust the schedule of operations, and acres can be removed from a contract if a farmer loses a lease. Contract violations, when a practice in the contract isn’t implemented, may be corrected by the farmer or rancher within a given period of time with NRCS approval. Instances of natural disasters and other hardships may be exempt from contract violation, but the farmer needs to get in contact with local NRCS staff to discuss these circumstances.

¹ “2021 State Payment Schedules.” U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/financial/?cid=nrcseprd1328426. Accessed March 2021.

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