

FACT SHEET:

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT ELIGIBILITY AND ENROLLMENT FOR CSP

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) is one of the nation's flagship working lands conservation programs. Administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), CSP helps farmers and ranchers reach the next level of conservation across their whole farm or ranch through financial and technical assistance.

WHAT DOES THE APPLICATION PROCESS LOOK LIKE?

In applying for CSP, farmers and ranchers will work with NRCS technical staff to complete the application form, which includes information about themselves and their operations, such as crop rotations, tillage, and spray regimes, as well as a map that identifies the land they intend to enroll.

Next, NRCS staff will evaluate the entire operation and determine where resource concerns still exist and what improvements can be made. Staff and farmer work together to select conservation activities comprised of practices and enhancements the farmer will complete if awarded a contract. Enhancements typically improve upon existing practices and are designed to take conservation activities to the next level. At least one new activity is required to enroll in CSP, and each land use requires an additional activity in order to be paid on that land use. CSP recognizes the following agricultural land uses: cropland, pastureland, rangeland, farmsteads and associated agricultural lands, and participants can choose from more than 170 enhancements.

After a farmer completes initial eligibility paperwork, the next step is to develop a conservation plan (if a farmer doesn't already have one on file). Then the application is ranked against other applications in the state, based on what conservation the farmer is currently doing and how much additional activities they are willing to do to address priority natural resource concerns identified for their state or region. This process will help determine how competitive the application will be, with higher-scoring applications addressing resource concerns more likely to be funded.

Farmers selected for the program will work with NRCS to determine the specifics of the contract.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE?

There is no minimum requirement for how long a person has farmed. A farmer or rancher simply must be a decisionmaker in daily operations and must assume the risk of production. All sizes and types of agricultural operations are eligible for enrollment.



As with all other farm bill programs, participants must be in compliance with any applicable highly erodible land or wetland conservation requirements.

To qualify, farmers and ranchers must have sufficient ongoing conservation activity to satisfy at least two state-specific priority resource concerns related to soil, water, wildlife, and more. To find out what priority resource concerns have been set in a given area, get in touch with your local NRCS office.

In their application, the farmer or rancher must agree to add sufficient conservation activities to exceed the threshold of at least one more priority resource concern during the contract period. Refer to our fact sheet, "What to Know About the CSP Plan,"¹ for more information about priority resource concerns and creating a conservation plan.

For information on rented land and how to find your local U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Service Center, check out our fact sheet "What to Know About Working with Your Local USDA Service Center."¹



WHEN ARE APPLICATION DEADLINES?

Applications are accepted on a rolling basis throughout the year, but state officials select and announce a cut-off date each year. Applications received after the cut-off date will be moved to the application pool for the following year. Because the date varies year-to-year, farmers and ranchers should contact their local NRCS office for the applicable deadline.

HOW LONG DOES THE APPLICATION PROCESS TAKE?

Applying for CSP may take anywhere from a few weeks to several months, depending on the types of practices and enhancements included in the application. The time just before a cut-off deadline is typically busy for NRCS technicians. Potential applicants should be proactive and reach out to their local NRCS sooner rather than later.

USDA definitions:

- **Beginning farmers and ranchers** are those who have been operating a farm or ranch for fewer than 10 consecutive years.
- **Socially-disadvantaged farmers and ranchers** are members of a group that has been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudices and injustices. Farmers of color should be aware of this term and may need to use it to identify themselves to USDA.

BEGINNING AND SOCIALLY-DISADVANTAGED FARMERS AND RANCHERS

When filling out the initial forms on an application, a farmer or rancher will be asked to give details about his or her operation, what is produced, and self-identify if they are organic, beginning, or socially-disadvantaged. This is relevant, because 10% of total CSP funding is targeted toward enrolling beginning farmers and farmers of color. Military veterans receive an additional preference within those targeted groups.

NRCS also allocates dollars specifically for organic and transitioning-to-organic farmers, who may then compete in a separate pool for those dollars. Organic or transitioning-to-organic farmers should ask their local NRCS staff how CSP might work for them.

1 Find these fact sheets and more information at cfra.org/publications.

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