



Conservation Stewardship Program Fact Sheet 2010 Sign-up – Applications Due by June 25

Please Note: Farmers and ranchers wanting to enroll in the Conservation Stewardship Program have until June 25th to file a simple application form with their [local NRCS office](#).

Program Overview

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) is a working lands conservation program administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and available on a nationwide basis. CSP offers technical and financial assistance to farmers for maintaining high standards of environmental stewardship. Assistance is available for both the active management of existing conservation systems and for implementing new conservation activities on land in agricultural production.

Eligible lands include cropland, grassland, prairie land, improved pastureland, rangeland, non-industrial private forest lands and agricultural land under tribal jurisdiction. Cropped woodlands, marshes, land being used for livestock production and other private lands on which resource concerns can be addressed are also eligible. Applicants must demonstrate they have effective control over these lands to be eligible.

Timing and Enrollment Process

Enrollment in the CSP is continuous so farmers can apply anytime. However, at certain dates during the year, applicants will be ranked and offers selected for enrollment. To be included in the 2010 ranking period, farmers and ranchers must file a [simple program application form](#) with their local NRCS office by June 25.

NRCS has developed a [self screening checklist](#) to help farmers decide if the program is right for them. The check list covers basic applicant and land eligibility issues as well as the stewardship threshold that CSP farmers must meet. It's a useful first step in deciding whether to apply.

CSP eligibility, ranking and payment levels are pegged to how well a farmer is addressing priority resource concerns on their farm. Priority resource concerns are determined at the state level and can include, for example, soil quality, water quality, wildlife habitat, plant diversity, energy conservation, and soil erosion.

You can find out the priority resource concerns in your state by visiting [your state's NRCS website](#) and searching for "priority resource concerns." CSP applicants must be addressing at least one priority resource concern to the "stewardship threshold" level or above at the time of application to be eligible, agree to adopt or install additional conservation activities during the contract period, and address at least one more priority resource concern to the stewardship threshold level during the first 5-year contract period.

Farmers who do not meet the eligibility threshold can seek assistance to make improvements through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and apply for CSP once they can qualify.

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Once farmers have filed their application they will then work with their local NRCS office to complete the CSP Conservation Management Tool (CMT). The CMT is a series of questions related to a farm's existing conservation practices plus a menu of choices for conservation improvements and additional practices for new adoption.

After all applicants have completed the CMT, NRCS will then rank the proposals to determine the best offers for enrollment. If an application is accepted for enrollment, the farmer or rancher will be notified and a field visit will be scheduled. If the field visit confirms the information from the CMT, it will be followed by a contract offer for the producer to sign. The payment rate will be indicated in the contract offer.

For the 2010 ranking, the field visits and contract signing will occur over the summer months. The first annual CSP payment for both the 2009 ranking period (which occurred late) and the 2010 ranking periods will occur in October 2010 and then every October thereafter throughout the 5-year contract term.

Each year 12.8 million acres of crop, pasture, range, and forest lands will be enrolled. Combined with the 12.8 million acres enrolled in the 2009 sign-up, CSP enrollment will stand at 25.6 million acres by this fall. By the end of the current farm bill cycle in 2012, enrollment will be over 51 million acres.

The Conservation Measurement Tool

The CMT is a set of questions organized by land use category of cropland, pasture, forest and rangeland. It will evaluate both the farmer's baseline level of conservation on these lands and the additional activities called enhancements the farmer intends to undertake over the five year contract.

Points will be assigned for conservation performance and those points will determine applicant ranking and payment rates. Conservation performance is tied to how effectively the activities and enhancements address the priority resource concerns for that state.

NRCS has posted this [list of conservation activities](#) (enhancements and practices) for the 2010 enrollment and this set of [job sheets for enhancements](#). The baseline inventory questions ("CMT Inventory Questions") are available toward the bottom of [this page](#).

The type of land use also affects points and ranking with cropland typically receiving a higher point score. Grassland that is managed for hay or haylage, however, is considered cropland. NRCS has also established a "pastured cropland" designation to provide a greater payment rate for grass based livestock production on land suitable for cropland.

Ranking

The CMT will calculate ranking points. Offers for enrollment will be made to those with the highest scores until all 12.8 million acres are accounted for. The ranking is based on four, equally weighted factors:

- The baseline level of conservation on the ground at the time of application.
- The level of proposed additional conservation to be added during the contract term.

- The number of priority resource concerns addressed before enrolling in the program or during the contract term.
- The number of other resource concerns, in addition to the priority resource concerns, addressed before enrolling in the program or during the contract term.

Payment Rates

CSP awards payments annually for establishing and adopting conservation activities and for managing and improving existing activities. Annual payments are based on: costs incurred by implementing the activities; income forfeited by the producer; and expected environmental benefits.

Annual payments, however, are calculated using the CMT. The CMT calculates performance points for managing and maintaining existing conservation activities (baseline inventory) and additional performance points for adopting new conservation “enhancements” or conservation practices. Total performance points are then multiplied by the acreage on which each conservation activity is performed and then further multiplied by an NRCS-calculated land-use payment rate.

For the 2010 sign up NRCS has adopted a split rate payment system with one rate for existing practices and a higher rate for new enhancements. The differential between the rates has not yet been announced. The split rate system would appear to be contrary to law as established by Congress in the 2008 Farm Bill, but until legally challenged will remain the Administration’s position and the way NRCS implements the program.

The national average payment to participants is \$18 per acre; however, the actual payment received varies according to the type of land enrolled, the existing level of conservation, and the number and type of new enhancements and practices to be adopted. Cropland receives the highest payment rate, with range and forest land at the lower end, and pasture in the middle.

For the 2009 sign-up, the land use payment rates were a bit over 6 cents a point for cropland, a bit over 3 cents a point for pasture, and a bit over 1 cent a point for range and forest land. That put cropland in the \$20-\$40 dollar an acre range, typically, with the other land use types at lower rates.

Minimum Payments and Payment Limits

For small farms, where the annual contract payment would otherwise be less than \$1,000 a year, USDA will make a minimum contract payment if the operator is a beginning farmer or rancher, a socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher, or a limited resource farmer or rancher. The actual rate of the minimum payment, however, has not yet been announced however.

A person or entity may not receive more than \$40,000 per year in CSP payments and \$200,000 over any five year period. Joint operations are limited to \$80,000 and \$400,000 respectively.

Bundles

“Bundles” are a new addition to the CSP in 2010. A bundle is a group of proposed enhancements that might make sense to practice together for some farmers and ranchers. For this sign up NRCS is offering

three cropland bundles, 2 forest bundles (one for hardwoods and one for pines), 1 pasture bundle, and 1 rangeland bundle.

The cropland [enhancement bundle #2](#), for example, includes locally grown and marketed farm products, using legumes as a source of nitrogen, continuous cover cropping, a high level integrated pest management, and pollinator or beneficial insect habitat.

Applicants who choose to implement a bundle of enhancements will receive an increase in ranking points and payments relative to choosing from the regular *a la carte* menu of enhancements. Like the blue plate special, however, no substitutions are allowed.

Supplemental Payments for Resource Conserving Crop Rotations

CSP offers an additional supplemental payment to producers who adopt a [resource-conserving crop rotation](#). This ranking period will impose a stricter definition for a resource conserving crop rotation than was the case in 2009. A resource-conserving crop rotation must include at least one resource-conserving crop and reduce erosion, improve soil fertility and tilth, interrupt pest cycles and in some areas of the country must conserve soil moisture and reduce the need for irrigation. A resource-conserving crop is either:

- A perennial grass;
- A legume grown for use as forage, seed or as a green manure;
- A legume grass mixture; or
- A small grain grown in combination with a grass or legume green manure crop whether inter-seeded or planted in rotation.

The perennial grass, legume or legume grass mixture must be grown for at least one year after the seeding year with at least one other crop in the rotation. A small grain grown in combination with a grass or legume green manure crop must include at least two other crops in the rotation and neither the small grain residue or cover crop may be harvested or grazed.

Some states, such as [Wisconsin](#), impose additional requirements for resource-conserving crop rotations so check with your [state office](#).

The payment rate for adopting a resource-conserving crop in 2009 was \$16 an acre, and is likely to be something similar in 2010.

CSP for Organic Producers

The 2008 farm bill directed NRCS to provide an easy cross walk between CSP eligibility and compliance with the National Organic Program (NOP) for farmers who are either certified organic or transitioning to organic production. NRCS has identified a number of CSP practice enhancements that are likely to be used by farmers who are certified or by those transitioning. Many of the enhancements will be useful in developing an Organic Systems Plan as required by the NOP. CSP organic cross walk enhancements include buffer practices, advanced integrated pest management, cover cropping, organic grazing systems, conservation crop rotations and other practices used by organic farmers. A complete list is [available here](#).

CSP Set-Aside for Beginning and Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers

Each state or region within a state maintains a 5 percent set-aside of CSP acres specifically for beginning farmers and ranchers, plus an additional 5 percent set-aside of CSP acres specifically for socially disadvantaged or minority farmers and ranchers. These separate pools allow these applicants to compete separately from the bigger pool, providing a better chance of receiving a contract offer.

Additional Assistance

Many NSAC members are offering assistance to farmers and ranchers working their way through the CSP application process.

ATTRA recently posted an updated step-by-step guide to the CSP application process which includes links to the self-screening checklist and other relevant forms and background information. Producers are also invited to call the ATTRA toll free hot-line number at 1-800-346-9140 (English) and 1-800-411-3222 (Spanish) for additional help or further information. [Click here to visit the ATTRA guide to Accessing CSP.](#)

The Center for Rural Affairs' Farm Bill Helpline can offer direct assistance to farmers and ranchers. Call 402-687-2100 and ask for the Farm Bill Helpline.

The Land Stewardship Project (LSP) offers a series of farmer fact sheets on CSP, available [on their CSP page](#). LSP is also interested to hear about producers' experience with the CSP application process at their local NRCS office. Contact Policy Program organizer Adam Warthesen at 612-722-6377 or adam@landstewardshipproject.org

The Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF), has developed this [set of frequently asked questions](#) about CSP specific to organic producers and this [resource page](#).

The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition shortly will be revising and web-publishing its 20-page *Farmers Guide to the CSP* to reflect the 2010 changes to CSP. It will be available at www.sustainableagriculture.net/CSPguide.