National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

2014 Conservation Stewardship Program Sign Up

January 2014

INFORMATION ALERT

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has extended the cut-off date for farmer applications to the ***Conservation Stewardship Program*** (CSP) for enrollment in the program during Fiscal Year (FY) 2014. The sign-up period was initially announced on Monday, December 2, 2013 and on January 7, 2014 was extended for three extra weeks.

Farmers and ranchers interested in enrolling in CSP for FY 2014 will now have until February 7, 2014 to submit the initial application form.

Important: You Can Sign Up Anytime, But if You Miss the Cut-Off You Wait a Full Year

While CSP is a continuous sign-up program and you can apply to enroll at any time of the year, NRCS applies a cut-off date for applications to be considered during a particular fiscal year. You may continue to apply for the program after the February 7, 2014 cut-off date, but your application will not be considered for entry into the program until early 2015.

Process and Timeline for Enrolling in CSP

Step 1: Applying to Participate is Simple

There are three simple steps to apply to enroll in CSP:

First, you must complete a short and simple ***application form***, NRCS-CPA-1200. This is the same, generic three-page form that is used for all NRCS conservation programs that offer financial assistance to farmers and ranchers, and is available at your local NRCS office.

Second, you must have a ***farm record number*** established with USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA). If you do not currently have one, go to your local FSA office first to establish your farm record before submitting the CSP application.

Third, you must also have a ***Data Universal Numbering System (DUNS) number***, which is a unique number used to identify your farm business. If you do not currently have one, you can obtain your DUNS number for free online, through this website.

Those are the only three things you need to apply to participate in the program: the three-page NRCS-CSP-1200 form, the FSA farm record number, and the DUNS number.

110 Maryland Avenue NE, Suite 209 • Washington, DC 20002-5622
p (202) 547-5754 f (202) 547-1837 • www.sustainableagriculture.net

Please note, however, that NRCS has developed a self-screening checklist to help farmers decide if the program is right for them. The checklist covers basic applicant and land eligibility issues as well as the stewardship threshold that CSP farmers must meet. While use of the self-screening checklist is not required, it can be a useful first step in deciding whether to begin the application process.

For more information and to start the application process, visit your local NRCS service center.

Step 2: Completing the Conservation Measurement Tool

Once you have completed and submitted the short application form (see above, NRCS-CPA-1200) by the February 7, 2014 cut-off date, and have your farm record number and DUNS number in hand, you will then have an approximately **45 day period** after that to sit down with your local NRCS staff person and fill out the CSP ***Conservation Measurement Tool*** (CMT) which will be used to determine your program eligibility, your environmental benefits ranking score, and CSP contract payment amounts. The CMT session generally lasts an hour or more.

The CMT collects information about the conservation activities that you are actively managing and maintaining on your farm, as well as the new conservation practices or enhancements to conservation activities you want to add with assistance from the program. (More information about those choices follows below under the ***Conservation Enhancements and Practices*** heading.)

The CMT displays performance points in real time, which allows you to perform a "what-if" analysis and see how your score changes based on your responses to questions and choices in the CMT. That feature helps you test different conservation enhancement choices and combinations. The tool also breaks down your total ranking score so you can see how past performance has impacted your ranking and areas where improvement is necessary.

Step 3: Farm Site Visit and Contract Preparation

Within roughly 90 days of the application cut-off date (or roughly 45 days from CMT completion), NRCS will complete an ***on-farm verification*** visit to each farm that ranks high enough to be enrolled in the program this year. After the farm site visit, you will work with NRCS staff to develop a ***CSP plan and contract***, which includes a schedule for new enhancement implementation and a payment schedule. The ***first annual payment*** for a five-year contract awarded in this round will be made on or after October 1, 2014, and then every October 1 thereafter for the five years of the CSP contract.

Step 4: CSP Contract Renewal

CSP contracts last for five years. However, you may re-enroll in CSP for an additional five-year contract term. To be eligible for a contract renewal, you must demonstrate that you are currently in compliance with your initial five-year contract, and agree to adopt additional conservation activities.

CSP Background in Brief

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

In CSP's first five enrollment years (2009-2013), the program enrolled over 46,000 farmers and ranchers operating nearly 60 million acres of farm and ranch land in five-year, renewable CSP conservation contracts. For those five enrollment years, annual CSP payments currently total $804 million a year.

NSAC regularly analyzes and reports on CSP participation data. Visit our website for recently published information on trends in CSP enrollment, how CSP influences land management decisions, and participation in CSP by beginning, socially disadvantaged, organic, and transitioning to organic farmers and ranchers.

Eligible lands include cropland, grassland, prairie land, improved pastureland, rangeland, non-industrial private forestlands, 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, either through ownership or reasonably secure leases.

CSP eligibility, ranking, and payment levels are tied to how well a farmer is addressing ***priority resource concerns*** on their farm. Priority resource concerns vary by state (and within some states by watershed as well) and can include, for example, soil quality, soil erosion, water quality, water quantity, wildlife habitat, plant or biodiversity, air quality, and energy conservation. Each state selects and assigns at least three (and not more than five) priority resource concerns at either the state or watershed level.

You can find out the priority resource concerns in your state by visiting your state's NRCS website, going to the "Programs" tab, and then to the CSP page to look for "priority resource concerns" for your state or area of the state. Be forewarned that not all state offices make this information easy to find. If you cannot find your state's priority resource concerns on the state CSP webpage, or if you are instead redirected to the national CSP page, try searching for "priority resource concerns" on your state's NRCS website. If you still cannot find it on the website, call your local NRCS office for the information.

For each priority resource concern, NRCS has determined a ***"stewardship threshold" level*** for superior conservation. To enroll in CSP, an applicant must already be addressing at least one priority resource concern to at least the stewardship threshold level and be willing to reach or exceed the stewardship threshold for at least one additional resource concern during the contract period.

Farmers and ranchers who do not meet the eligibility threshold may alternatively seek assistance for conservation improvements through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), using EQIP funding to help them reach the higher eligibility standard for CSP, and then re-apply for CSP in a future year.

The ***national average payment*** to participants is $18 per acre; however, the actual payment received varies widely 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 generally receives the highest payment rate, with range and forestland at the lower end, and pasture in the middle. Pastured cropland receives payment rates in between cropland and pasture rates.

A person or business entity ***may not receive more than $40,000 per year*** in CSP payments. Joint or multi-family operations are limited to not more than $80,000 per year. The cap does not apply to shared tribal land applications.

Beginning and Minority Farmer Provisions

For small acreage farms, USDA will make $1,000 the ***minimum contract payment*** if the operator is a beginning, socially disadvantaged, or limited resource farmer or rancher.

Five percent of all CSP acres each year are reserved for ***separate competitions*** among beginning farmers only and among socially disadvantaged (minority) farmers only. If you are not sure whether you qualify as a beginning, socially disadvantaged, or limited resource farmer, you can learn more here. If you qualify, it is generally advantageous to compete within the smaller pool rather than against all other producers applying to enroll in the program.

CSP Conservation Enhancements and Practices

Financial assistance for the adoption of new conservation activities through CSP is divided into two categories – regular conservation practices, and conservation enhancements, which are conservation activities that go above and beyond the requirements of regular conservation practices. The crux of CSP rests upon these advanced conservation enhancements; however, farmers can also use regular conservation practices to help them meet stewardship thresholds for additional priority resource concerns during the life of the contract.

The list of conservation activities for 2014 includes a total of 78 individual conservation ***enhancements***. Beyond individual enhancements, the 2014 list of activities includes six ***enhancement bundles***. Bundles are groupings of conservation enhancements that the agency feels may work well together on particular types of farms. You can think of the two options – choosing from among the practices and enhancements, or choosing a bundle – as similar to ordering from the a la carte menu or choosing the "blue plate" special at the local restaurant. To view the bundles in the list provided by NRCS, go to this section of NRCS's CSP website.

In addition to the available conservation enhancements, producers can choose from a limited list of 37 regular conservation practices to help them reach or exceed the stewardship threshold for the additional priority resources concerns during the life of the contract.

Supplemental Payments and Special Project Activities

A substantial supplemental payment is available for adopting or improving a resource-conserving crop rotation, in recognition of the very important multiple resource benefits that longer, more diverse rotations provide. For more information on the supplemental payment for resource conserving crop rotations, click here.

There are two special project activities -- on-farm research and demonstrations of innovative conservation activities, and on-farm pilot testing of proven conservation activities that do not yet have wide adoption rates. You can also find more information on these National Focus Areas on the NRCS website by clicking here.

You can download a document containing all of the CSP conservation activities, which includes both the supplemental and special project activities on the NRCS website, or by clicking here (PDF).

CSP Enhancement and Practice Environmental Benefit Ranking Points

Each year, NSAC makes available a list of all the available options for enhancements, practices, and bundles in the order of their environmental benefit scores. The points scored by choosing different options help to determine whether an application will rank high enough to be selected for enrollment. They also figure into the calculation of how much a producer will be paid – the higher the score, the higher the payment.

NSAC's chart lists the activities from highest scoring to lowest scoring. NRCS does not provide this ranked-order information on its website, but NSAC makes it available each year as soon as NRCS publishes the underlying data.

The NSAC chart that ranks the environmental benefits score of each activity offered in FY 2014 is included at the end of this Information Alert as Appendix A. The Appendix begins on page 8 below with a description of key terms and the chart begins on page 9. Not every conservation activity applies to each land use – crop, pasture, range, forestland – so if you need more information about which might apply to your farm, cross reference this NRCS chart.

Some High Ranking Conservation Activities of Note

Of particular interest ***to sustainable livestock producers***, CSP in 2014 will continue to offer a variety of activities with high environmental benefit scores, including:

- Prescriptive grazing management system for grazing lands (includes expired Conservation Reserve Program acres converted to a grazing lands)
- Conversion of cropped land to grass-based agriculture
- Intensive rotational grazing
- Rotation of supplement and feeding areas
- Prairie restoration for grazing and wildlife habitat

There are also a variety of high-scoring enhancements geared toward ***establishing and improving wildlife habitat***, including:

- Enhance wildlife habitat on expired tree covered CRP acres or acres with similar woody cover managed as forestland
- Enhance wildlife habitat on expired grass/legume covered CRP acres or acres with similar perennial vegetated cover managed as hayland
- Conversion of cropped land to grass-based agriculture
- Multi-species native perennials for wildlife habitat and biomass
- Extend riparian forest buffers for water quality protection and wildlife habitat
- Extend existing filter strips or riparian herbaceous cover for water quality protection and wildlife habitat

Of particular interest ***to organic farmers and others utilizing sustainable agriculture systems***, CSP in 2014 will offer:

- Resource-conserving crop rotations
- Providing nitrogen through legumes, manure, and compost
- Intensive rotational grazing
- Intensive no-till for organic and non-organic systems
- Intercropping
- High residue and intensive cover cropping
- Pollinator and beneficial insect habitat
- Biological suppression of weeds and invasives
- High level IPM
- IPM for organic systems
- Non-chemical pest management for livestock
- Transition to organic grazing systems
- Transition to organic cropping systems
- On-farm composting

Organic Crosswalk

For producers interested in learning more about how CSP enhancements can be used to assist in transitioning to organic production and meeting National Organic Program (NOP) requirements, you can download the NRCS "Organic Crosswalk."

Farmers' Guide to the CSP

As producers consider signing up for the program, they may want to review NSAC's *Farmers' Guide to the Conservation Stewardship Program*. The guide is intended to help family farmers, ranchers, and foresters better understand the CSP enrollment process. In addition, it provides clear information on conservation activities eligible for CSP payments to improve conservation performance and environmental benefits.

The *Guide* includes step-by-step enrollment guidance, key definitions, and helpful hints. It also includes a five-page section with data analysis of the program's first two sign-up periods in 2009 and 2010. This data section includes analysis of program participation by geographic region, land use type, commodity type, and the top conservation practices and enhancements chosen by farmers and ranchers who have enrolled in the program. For a preview of this data updated for 2011 and 2012, you can visit Part I, Part II, and Part III of our recent blog post series.

Please note that since publication of the most recent version of the *Guide*, modest changes have been made to the program, so if you have any questions, please consult your local NRCS office. Moreover, once Congress passes a new Farm Bill, some aspects of the program will be modified. NSAC will continue to provide updated information as it becomes available.

Appendix A

Conservation Enhancement and Practice Choices for 2014 and their Environmental Benefit Ranking Score

Terms

Conservation enhancements are conservation activities that go above and beyond the more basic requirements of regular conservation practices. Conservation enhancements are available to all CSP participants who are willing to adopt the enhancement on their operation, or who are willing to improve an existing conservation activity so that it fully meets the requirements for the enhancement.

Some enhancements apply to all four CSP land use categories -- cropland, pasture, rangeland, or forested land -- though most apply to one or two land use types specifically. For more information, see the NRCS Conservation Activity List (PDF) or visit the CSP website.

Regular conservation practices are available to CSP participants who, when they sign-up for the program, are not already meeting or exceeding the stewardship threshold for the three to five priority resource concerns for their state or region and who could use the practice to help meet additional stewardship thresholds.

Conservation baseline activities are the conservation practices and measures that are already part of your operation. Baseline activities are also scored with similar environmental benefit point values for ranking and payment purposes. Those existing conservation activities are not listed below. More information on those activities can be found on the NRCS website listed above under the heading "Operations Baseline Data Questions" and more information on the point values can be found on the same website under "Conservation Measurement Tool Inventory Questions" and then "CMT Scoring Process".

Point values are based on the overall level of expected environmental benefits from improvement or adoption of the enhancement or practice for soil conservation, soil quality, water conservation, water quality, air quality, energy conservation, wildlife habitat, and biodiversity, as determined by NRCS using their "conservation practice physical effects" (CPPE) system.

Please note: Conservation enhancements and practices eligible for selection in CSP may change from year to year, as may point values. We keep this list updated as changes are made, though there may be a small delay time depending on how quickly we receive the changes from USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

2014 CSP Enhancements and Practices
Listed From Highest Scoring to Lowest Scoring

CSP Conservation Enhancements in Regular Typeface – *Regular Conservation Practices in Italics*

Enhancements and Practices	Activity Code	Environmental Benefit Score
Crop Management System where Crop Land Acres were Recently Converted from CRP Grass/Legume Cover or Similar Perennial Vegetation	SQL10	153.3
Enhance Wildlife Habitat on Expired Tree Covered CRP Acres or Acres with Similar Woody Cover Managed as Forestland	ANM36	94.93
Prescriptive Grazing Management System for Grazing Lands (includes expired CRP grass/legume or tree covered acres converted to a grazing lands)	ANM37	88.2
Enhance Wildlife Habitat on Expired Grass/Legume Covered CRP Acres or Acres with Similar Perennial Vegetated Cover Managed as Hayland	ANM35	87.4
High Residue Cover Crop or Mixtures of High Residue Cover Crops for Weed Suppression and Soil Health	PLT20	84
Intensive No Till (Organic or Non-organic)	SOE05	62
Conversion of Cropped Land to Grass-Based Agriculture	SQL09	59
Cover Cropping in Orchards, Vineyards and Other Woody Perennial Horticultural Crops	SQL11	55
Intensive Cover Cropping in Annual Crops	SQL12	55
Extending Riparian Forest Buffers for Water Quality Protection and Wildlife Habitat	ANM05	48
Forest Stand Improvement Pre-Treating Vegetation and Fuels Preceding a Prescribed Fire	PLT21	47.25
Intensive Rotational Grazing	PLT16	45
Decrease Irrigation Water Quantity or Conversion to Non-Irrigated Crop Production	WQT08	44
Resource-Conserving Crop Rotation	CCR99	44
Cover Crop	340	42
Plant a Cover Crop that will Scavenge Residual Nitrogen	WQL10	42
Riparian Forest Buffer	391	42
Use of Cover Crop Mixes	SQL04	42
Use of Deep Rooted Crops to Breakup Soil Compaction	SQL05	42
Use of Legume Cover Crops as a Nitrogen Source	ENR12	42
Extend Existing Filter Strips or Riparian Herbaceous Cover for Water Quality Protection and Wildlife Habitat	ANM32	41
Using Nitrogen Provided by Legumes, Animal Manure and	ENR10	41

Compost to Supply 90-100% of the Nitrogen Needs		
Rotation of Supplement and Feeding Areas	WQL03	40
Tree/Shrub Establishment	612	40
Prairie Restoration for Grazing and Wildlife Habitat	ANM21	37
Riparian Herbaceous Cover	390	37
Windbreak/Shelterbelt Establishment	380	37
Irrigation System Automation	WQT01	36
Prescribed Grazing	528	36
Critical Area Planting	342	35
Drainage Water Management	ANM31	35
Residue and Tillage Management, No-Till/Strip Till/Direct Seed	329	35
Forage and Biomass Planting	512	33
Increasing On-Farm Food Production with Edible Woody Buffer Landscapes	PLT18	33
Irrigation Water Management	449	33
Multi-Species Native Perennials for Biomass/Wildlife Habitat	ANM23	33
Regional Weather Networks for Irrigation Scheduling	WQT07	33
Remote Monitoring and Notification of Irrigation Pumping Plant Operation	WQT05	33
Alley Cropping	311	32
Conservation Crop Rotation	328	31
High Level Integrated Pest Management to Reduce Pesticide Environmental Risk	WQL13	31
Integrated Pest Management for Organic Farming	WQL21	31
Monitor Key Grazing Areas to Improve Grazing Management	PLT02	31
On-Farm Composting of Farm Organic Waste	WQL22	31
Renovation of a Windbreak, Shelter Belt or Hedgerow for Wildlife Habitat	PLT06	31
Restoration and Management of Rare and Declining Habitats	643	31
Windbreak/Shelterbelt Renovation	650	31
Range Planting	550	30
Filter Strip	393	29
Extending Existing Field Borders for Water Quality Protection and Wildlife Habitat	ANM07	28
Residue and Tillage Management, Mulch Till	345	28
Riparian Buffer, Terrestrial and Aquatic Wildlife Habitat	ANM33	28
Use Drift Reducing Nozzles, Low Pressures, Lower Boom Height,	AIR04	28

and Adjuvants to Reduce Pesticide Drift		
Improving Energy Feedstock Production Using Alley Cropping Systems with Short Rotation Woody Crops	ENR11	27
Residue and Tillage Management, Ridge Till	346	27
Drainage Water Management for Nutrient, Pathogen, or Pesticide Reduction	WQL27	26
Reduce the Concentration of Nutrients Imported on Farm	WQL26	26
GPS, Targeted Spray Application (SmartSprayer), or Other Chemical Application Electronic Control Technology	AIR07	25
Herbicide Resistant Weed Management	PLT19	25
Mulching	484	25
Split Applications of Nitrogen based on a PSNT	WQL25	25
Transition to Organic Cropping Systems	WQL20	25
Wetland Wildlife Habitat Management	644	25
Controlled Traffic System	SQL01	24
Establish Pollinator and/or Beneficial Insect Habitat	PLT15	24
Intercropping to Improve Soil Quality and Increase Biodiversity	SQL08	24
Use of Non-Chemical Methods to Kill Cover Crops	WQL17	24
Leave Standing Grain Crops Un-Harvested to Benefit Wildlife	ANM34	23
Precision Application Technology to Apply Nutrients	WQL11	23
Upland Wildlife Habitat Management	645	23
Watering Facility	614	23
Field Border	386	22
Land Application of Treated Manure	WQL14	22
Road/Trail/Landing Closure and Treatment	654	22
Stream Habitat Improvement and Management	395	22
Forest Stand Improvement	666	21
Stockpiling Forages to Extend the Grazing Season	ANM25	21
On-Farm Pilot Projects	FPP02	20.7
On-Farm Research and Demonstrations	FRD01	20.7
Apply Enhanced Efficiency Fertilizer	WQL24	20
Biological Suppression and Other Non-Chemical Techniques to Manage Brush, Weeds and Invasive Species	WQL01	20
Patch-Burning to Enhance Wildlife Habitat	ANM11	20
Transition to Organic Grazing Systems	WQL19	20
Early Successional Habitat Development/Management	647	19

Fuel Use Reduction for Field Operations	ENR01	19
Plant Tissue Tests and Analysis to Improve Nitrogen Management	WQL04	19
Shallow Water Habitat	ANM12	19
Split Nitrogen Applications 50% After the Crops/Pasture Emerge/Green Up	WQL07	19
Grazing Management to Improve Wildlife Habitat	ANM09	18
Forest Trails & Landings	655	17
Incorporate Native Grasses and/or Legumes into 15% or more of Herbage Dry Matter Productivity	ANM03	17
Non- Chemical Pest Management for Livestock	WQL18	17
Prescribed Burning	338	17
Irrigation Pumping Plant Evaluation	WQT03	16
On-Farm Forage Based Grazing System	ANM29	16
Brush Management	314	14
Forage Harvest Management	511	13
Harvest Hay in a Manner that Allows Wildlife to Flush and Escape	ANM10	13
Monitoring Nutritional Status of Livestock Using the NUTBAL PRO System	ANM17	13
Retrofit Watering Facility for Wildlife Escape and Enhanced Access for Bats and Bird Species	ANM38	12
Apply Nutrients no more than 30 Days prior to Planned Planting Date	WQL05	11
Multi-Story Cropping, Sustainable Management of Non-Timber Forest Plants	PLT05	10
Nitrification Inhibitors or Urease Inhibitors	AIR08	10
Residue Management, Seasonal	344	10
Apply Phosphorus Fertilizer below Soil Surface	WQL09	9
Managing Calving to Coincide with Forage Availability	ANM26	9
Wildlife Friendly Fencing	ANM27	9
Replace Burning of Prunings, Removals and Other Crop Residues with Non-burning Alternatives	AIR03	8
Woody Residue Treatment	384	8
Variable Frequency Drive Electric Motors	ENR09	7
Firebreak	394	6
Fuelbreak	383	6
Tree/Shrub Pruning	660	6
Create Forest Openings to Improve Hardwood Stands	PLT17	5
Fence	382	4

Appendix B

Links to Key Resources

NRCS CSP Self-Screening Checklist

Locating a USDA Service Center in Your County

CSP Application Form: NRCS-CPA-1200

Getting a DUNS Number

NRCS CSP Website

NSAC Farmers' Guide to the Conservation Stewardship Program

NSAC Blog Series Analyzing CSP Participation Data: Part I, Part II, and Part III.