

Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI)
Guidance in using the Conservation Stewardship Program

The Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) is a voluntary conservation initiative that enables the use of certain conservation programs along with resources of eligible partners to provide additional financial and/or technical assistance to owners and operators of agricultural and nonindustrial private forest lands. One of these programs, the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), is unique amongst Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) conservation programs in the manner it uses environmental benefits of existing and new conservation activities to evaluate applications and make payments to participants.

Potential partners should understand CSP policy and the constraints imposed when applying for CSP funds. This guidance identifies those policy related issues and explain the programs requirements.

The purpose of the Conservation Stewardship Program is to encourage producers to address resource concerns in a comprehensive manner by:

1. Undertaking additional conservation activities
2. Improving, maintaining and managing existing conservation activities

Partners will find this comprehensive approach fits well with CCPI's stated purposes of:

1. Addressing conservation priorities involving agricultural and nonindustrial private forest land
2. Encouraging producers to cooperate in meeting applicable Federal, State and Local regulatory requirements
3. Encouraging producers to cooperate in the installation and maintenance of conservation practices that affect multiple farm operations
4. Promoting the development and demonstration of innovative conservation practices and delivery methods, including those for specialty crops and organic production

Key Points

Program Administration

- CCPI is not a grants program; there are no funds available to cover partner administrative cost.
- Contracting directly with eligible producers for financial assistance is
- Any financial assistance provided by partners will be paid through a separate contract between the partner and producer
- Producers in the project area will be given the choice to participate in the general CSP or the CCPI CSP sign up dependent on their resource goals
- CCPI encourages partners to work with "Historically underserved" farmers
- Unused allocated acreage can be redistributed to other CCPI projects within a state or to the general CSP at the State Conservationist's discretion.
- Acres allocated to a project will be used for contracts that meet the partner's resource concern as identified in the partnership agreement.

Project Resource Concerns

CSP policy requires participants to meet the stewardship threshold on one resource concern at the time of application and one priority resource concern by the end of the contract period. Stewardship threshold are determined by the Conservation Measurement Tool (CMT).

- Partners are expected to identify targeted resource concerns in their CCPI proposals applicants must address for the project area. . Partners should recognize the CMT will be used to evaluate all resource concerns on the producer applicants' offered acreage.
- Partners must identify the primary land use producer- submitted CSP applications in the approved project area. CMT requires the evaluation of all uses of eligible land uses under the applicant's control.
- Partners are encouraged to develop or recommend that NRCS use a pre-screening tool to identify applicants with targeted resource concerns on the primary land use in the proposed project area.

Conservation Activities

CSP emphasizes the adoption of enhancements, a conservation activity used to treat natural resources and improve conservation performance. Enhancements are installed at a level of management intensity that exceeds the sustainable level for a given resource concern. Enhancements directly related to an existing NRCS conservation practice standard are applied in a manner that exceeds the minimum requirement of the standard.

- Projects identify the CSP activities that are to be encouraged and/or develop new enhancement guidance following CSP enhancement protocol.
- CCPI encourages the development and demonstration of innovative conservation activities
- A partners' offer of financial and/or technical assistance can be used to increase CSP enhancement criteria to achieve higher environmental benefits, e.g. paying for additional width of riparian field borders
- New enhancements must be developed using the CSP activity job sheet format that can be found on the NRCS home page
http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/new_csp/csp.html
- The job sheet must include:

| | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Enhancement Description | 4. Criteria for Adoption |
| 2. Land Use Applicability | 5. Documentation Requirements |
| 3. Benefits | 6. References |
- The CSP team will evaluate and approve new enhancements regarding their environmental impact on the seven resource concerns plus energy. These then will be incorporated in the National list.

Ranking and Selection

CSP selects applications based on the performance of an individual applicant's existing conservation activities, and the additional benefits from selected enhancements. These "conservation performance points" are estimated using the NRCS Conservation Measurement Tool (CMT) by land use type as designated by the participant. The CMT resource is a series of questions about applicant's farming operation. The questions are land use specific and evaluate the farming operations impact on seven natural resource concerns - soil erosion, soil quality, water quality, water quantity, air quality, plants, and animal concerns (domestic and wildlife) and energy.

- The CMT will be used determine conservation performance points
- No changes will be allowed in the Conservation Measure Tool.

- Established Stewardship Thresholds will be used to determine if existing conservation activities address resource concerns.
- An additional screening tool can be used by NRCS to target potential applicants that meet project goals for program enrollment.

Technical and Financial Assistance

The 2008 Farm Bill requires that 6% of the annual CSP acreage allocation, or 766,140 acres, be made available for CCPI projects Nationwide. State CCPI projects are to account for 90% of the allocated acreage with 10% held back for National projects. Total technical and financial assistance is not to exceed a National average of \$18 per acre for all land uses. Payments to program participants are based on a National payment rate per conservation performance point as estimated by the CMT. These values vary by land use and are based on cost incurred, income foregone, and environmental benefit. The National Rates will not vary for CCPI.

- Established CSP performance point values by land use will be used.
- If available, additional financial incentives will be contracted and paid through a separate agreement between the participant and CCPI partner.

Program Eligibility

- Projects must adhere to all program and applicant eligibility requirements such as:...(list some examples – AGI, HEL/WC, pay limitations, etc.....)
- An applicant with an agricultural operation that has agricultural land located both within and/or outside of the project area will make application and be ranked in the area where the largest acreage portion of their operation occurs.
- Land enrolled in the Conservation Security Program or Conservation Stewardship Program is ineligible for program enrollment until the contract expires.