

# Concerns with Conservation Security Program (CSP) Proposed Rule Changes

(The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002)

These are a few major concerns that we as landowners, conservationist, and stewards of the land have with the proposed rule changes to the Conservation Security Program.

- **Priority Watershed Restriction:** By law CSP is designed for all farmers, no matter their location across the nation, to be eligible for rewards for their stewardship of the land. The proposed rule would limit the program to those few who were located in “priority watersheds.” What is a “priority watershed,” and who is going to determine which landowners are located in them? These questions have yet to be answered.
- **The High Soil and Quality Standards:** By law CSP should include both existing and new farm conservation plans which are at or above sustainable use levels for our resources. It is only fair to reward those farmers who have been at sustainable levels for an extended period of time prior to the implementation of this program, and to reward new farm plans to encourage further growth.
- **Low Payments:** By law CSP is a 3 tier payment system.
  - Tier 1 – Base payments
  - Tier 2 – Cost-share payments
  - Tier 3 – Bonus payments for outstanding environmental action

Cost-share and base payments need to rise sufficiently if this program is going to take hold and enhance our environment in the years to come. Proposed CSP payments are just too low to encourage any sort of participation. Who and what will determine the farmers who are exceptional stewards of the land?

These practices have been implemented on our farm since 1951 –

- 15 acres of conifers
- 3 acre pond
- 30 acres of field windbreaks
- grassed waterways
- 2 acre living snowfence
- no-till farming practices
- 3 crop rotation
- cover crops (rye, vetch)
- rebuilding of biological soils and balancing of nutrients

Practices to be implemented in the next few years –

- food plots
- prairie
- forest restoration

## **Yours for Sustainability?**

CSP and other conservation programs alike need full funding for those who are exceptional stewards of the land, and to encourage new ones!

The soil must be kept in good health if the animal is to remain in good health. The same is true of man. Soil science is the foundation of protective medicine, the medicine of tomorrow.

- Andre Voisin

Roger & Suzanne Coventry - Farm Owners



7045 N. 3350 E. Rd.  
Chatsworth, IL 60921

Sidney Branch  
659 Highway 407  
Winona, MS 38967

February 26, 2004

Natural Resources Conservation Service  
Conservation Operations Division  
P. O. Box 2890  
Washington, DC 20013

SUBJECT: The Conservation Security Program

Background information: I have actively farmed in Montgomery County, Mississippi since 1954 operating two farms, one of 500 acres which was originally owned by my paternal great-grandparents (circa 1870) and the other of 600 acres originally owned by my maternal grandparents (circa 1890).

I have served as a Soil Conservation District Commissioner for 35 years, as a member of the Mississippi Soil Conservation Commission for 8 years and president of the Mississippi Association of Conservation Districts for 2 years.

Comments, Specific: I have read the proposed rule for implementing CSP in its entirety as published in the Federal Register and attended the CSP Forum in Greenwood, Mississippi on February 11.

Watershed approach as proposed:

While I can agree that the approach as proposed would be the easiest for the NRCS to administer, it has certain fallacies that could best be overcome by a different but similar approach. To implement your proposed approach would reward how many of the truly top farming operations? 10%? 5%? Probably less, as you do not consider those top producers in the vast majority of watersheds not selected. In addition, your plan will reward many producers who are at a lower level of conservation implementation.

I propose an approach that would retain the watershed concept but instead of choosing a few watersheds for consideration and implementation, take every watershed in the country and choose one<sup>farm</sup> (or more if funds permit) for implementation. This would be much more equitable to all farming operations than the proposed approach and would insure that the purpose of the CSP as stated numerous times in your proposed rule, "Reward the Best and Motivate the rest", would be best carried out as intended by congress.

To implement the CSP in only a few selected watersheds as outlined in your proposed rule would certainly abrogate your policy stated in the proposed rule that you would "prioritize funding to ensure that those producers with the highest commitment to conservation are funded first."

Your proposed rule states that you will offer contracts to participants at all tier levels. This appears to be diametrically opposed to your stated purpose of "rewarding the best and motivating the rest." If this is done in a few selected watersheds the funds allocated to CSP will be exhausted before many tier 1 prospective applicants in non selected watersheds would be considered. This seems to be neither fair nor equitable.

Your proposed rule states that you will give priority to beginning and limited resource farmers. This does not seem to be compatible with the intended purpose of CSP as probably few of them could meet the higher tier level which should be a prerequisite for participation. I believe that they would be better served by receiving a high priority in other programs such as EQIP.

I strongly agree with your definition of an agricultural operation. The present system used by FSA is cumbersome and often frustrating.

Division of payments between landlord and tenant should be carried out as per agreement between the two parties. Basically, the payments should accrue to the party who furnished the input for a particular practice.

I am at a loss to understand your consideration, or rather your lack of consideration of forestland in CSP. In our part of the United States, forestland is an integral part of the majority of farms and plays a vital role in our conservation programs. Some of the benefits are: Slows runoff during periods of heavy precipitation thus mitigating flooding and soil erosion thus enhancing water and soil quality. Provides habitat for many species of wildlife and an environment for many recreational activities. There are a number of practices being carried out on many operations which are worthy of being cost shared under CSP; such as controlled burning, establishment of trails for hiking, biking, horse-backing, bird watching, etc.

Comments, general: I grew up in the days of the great depression (1930's) and war years of 1940s. On the farms which I now operate there was no timber of any practical value, cropping was done on small fields much of which was on hillsides and slopes. The majority of the land was non-productive and there were numerous gullies some large enough to contain a two or three bedroom house. Soil erosion was rampant and bottomland flooding a regular occurrence.

Since receiving management and operational control of these farms, I have continually sought to maximize soil, water, environmental and energy conservation measures on them as well as countywide and statewide. We were successful in getting small watershed programs established in the northern and western portions of our county, which have resulted in substantial financial assistance to those areas. Three efforts were made to establish one in the southern half of the county, in which my farms are located, but were unsuccessful because of constraints caused by the location of the city of Winona, two rail lines and three major highways. Also in recent years the southern half of our county has suffered from an almost zero allocation of conservation funding under EQIP.

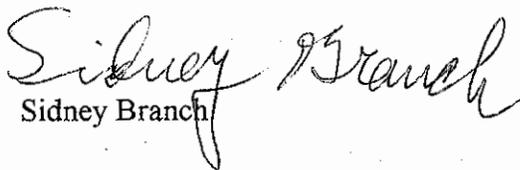
While I have received cost share assistance on a number of small conservation measures several major ones have been built entirely with my funds and only technical assistance from NRCS. Much of our property is open to hunting, fishing and other recreational activities to a large number of people outside our family. Numerous Conservation and Forestry Field Days have been held here. Fishing Rodeos and Day Camps with a Conservation Theme are held annually for elementary age children.

I believe that if my farming operation were evaluated it would register somewhere between tier 2 and tier 3 and that it would be worthy of becoming a participant in CSP.

My purpose in providing you with the above information is my concern that under the rule that you have proposed the watershed, county and farm, which I operate will stand little chance of being selected to participate in CSP.

Respectfully submitted for your consideration.

Sincerely,

  
Sidney Branch

Cc: Homer Wilkes  
State Conservationist Mississippi

Feb 23 2003

Dear Mr. McWay

A few comments to the Conservation  
Security Program.

I farm 255 acres in McLeod County Minn.  
I am a Certified Organic farmer. The reason I'm  
writing you is I have 60 acres of trees  
of which 9 acres have never been farmed.  
It has lots of wild flowers. The reason I'm  
willing that is real estate people want to  
develop it to put houses in it all that  
wooded area. Also I have 65 acres of wet land  
with some high area that could be developed also.  
It lays along side the wooded area. I would  
like to preserve for future generation. The taxes  
are getting higher every year so if I could get  
some income from this land. I would like to  
handle that way. I have a lot of deer in my  
woods and other wild animals and birds. Some nights  
I can see up to 80 deer at one time in my field.  
This land is worth a lot of money but I would rather  
keep it this way.

Thank you

Ronald W. Boyd  
203 81 1/2 Wells Lake Rd  
Hutchinson Minn 55350

Julie Dawson  
256 Renwick Dr.  
Ithaca NY, 14850

David McKay,  
Conservation Operations,  
NRCS, PO Box 2890,  
Washington, DC 20013-2890  
Fax 202-720-4265

ATTN: CSP

Dear David McKay,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed Conservation Security Program rule. I recently graduated from Cornell University and will be attending graduate school in Crop Science this fall. I hope to eventually have my own farm or be involved in farm research and extension. There are several issues that I would like to address in my comments:

1) Limiting the CSP to certain watersheds or categories of producers arbitrarily excludes farmers and ranchers who would qualify under the environmental standards of the program. This is not in keeping with the statute, which establishes a nationwide conservation program. When funding is tight, the administration can raise the bar on environmental management practices or give priority to limited-resource farmers and ranchers, rather than only funding producers that live in certain watersheds or address certain resource concerns.

2) The payment rates are set at extremely low rates and enrollment criteria are set incredibly high. While I support the requirement that farmers and ranchers meet the non-degradation standards for their resources of concern, they should be required to do so during the life of their contract, not before enrollment. There need to be meaningful cost-share and maintenance payments to help producers move forward with conservation practices that will achieve these standards. If the goal of the CSP is to "reward the best and motivate the rest," payments need to reflect the value of conservation efforts, including time, cash expenses and societal benefits. Having such low base, cost-share and maintenance payments will discourage enrollment for this important program.

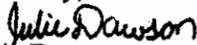
3) The enrollment process for CSP needs to be far less burdensome. A continuous sign-up would allow producers to budget their time and do the paperwork for CSP when the time spent on farm work is less (ie not during planting and harvest). It would also enable NRCS to deal with the matter of technical assistance in a less crunched fashion. Furthermore, there needs to be a streamlined process for organic producers so they do not have two sets of completely different paperwork. This is not to say that organic producers would automatically qualify for CSP, but there needs to be coordination with the National Organic Program so that whole-farm plans and records can also be used for CSP paperwork requirements.

4) Enhancement payments have the potential to be the really motivating factor in the CSP rule. For that reason, it is important to include a range of options for practices and activities that are eligible for enhanced payments. They should reward producers who are willing to go above and beyond the call of duty in resource conservation, monitoring and evaluation, research and demonstration or organizing within a watershed. Specifically, practices such as rotational grazing, buffers, and conserving crop rotations should be included as practices that merit enhanced payments because of their potential to improve the overall quality of the farm and

surrounding environment. Research, demonstrations, monitoring and evaluation are incredibly important for future conservation efforts and farmers should be rewarded for these labor-intensive efforts. Also, farmers that adopt innovative practices with higher risk levels but with large potential benefits should be encouraged, through incentive payments, to refine and share these conservation methods.

5) America is a very diverse nation agriculturally. While soil and water resources are of national concern, the methods for addressing these issues will vary by location, so it is not appropriate for NRCS to develop a list of eligible practices. Just as importantly, local and state offices must be able to identify the most pressing resources issues for their locality. One of the strengths of the CSP as set down in the statute is its flexibility in responding to environmental concerns. States should be able to select their top resource concerns, possibly including the national priorities of soil and water conservation, and all practices that address these or other locally important issues should qualify for payments. It is inconsistent to set a restricted list of resource priorities and practices and also say that CSP will reward farmers for innovative solutions to conservation problems. The rule should provide encouragement and assistance for producers who achieve improvements in environmental quality using any combination of conservation practices. I strongly encourage you to issue a revised rule as soon as possible that takes into account the entitlement status of the CSP and leads to its implementation without further delay. Thank you for your effort on behalf of stewardship farmers and ranchers.

Sincerely,

  
Julie Dawson

P. O. Box 3  
 Orongoville, UT 84537  
 February 24, 2004

Conservation Security Program Committee  
 Attn: David McKay

I am writing to underscore the need to make better rules for the CSP. This is an important program to be able to have productive land for farming.

I urge you to revise the rules and have those rules open to public comment for 30 days. These rules should incorporate at least the following.

The USDA should open it up to the whole country, to all farmers to be effective.

There needs to be adequate payment for the practices farmers are doing. These should be based on local rental rates.

Farmers who <sup>have</sup> been using crop rotation and managed rotational grazing should receive the enhanced payments the law requires. This means also that farmers who have moved from crops to pasture as part of a managed grazing system should receive equal payment rates to other cropland.

The rules should allow farmers with USDA organic certification plans under the National Organic program to also certify under CSP if they meet both standards.

I trust this and other needed changes will be made.

Sincerely,  
 Paulo Hallney

February 24, 2004

Mr. David McKay  
Attention: Conservation Security Program  
Conservation Planning Team Leader  
Conservation Operations Division  
USDA NRCS  
P.O. Box 2890  
Washington, DC 20013-2890

Dear Mr. McKay:

I am pleased to submit comments on the proposed rule to implement the 2002 Farm Bill Conservation Security Program. First, I applaud NRCS for developing a proposed rule in the face of the number of legislative changes that were made to the program following its enactment.

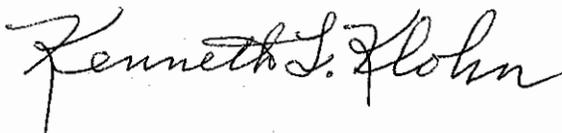
I have several concerns relative to the proposed rule. I understand that during the development of the proposed rule, changes were made to the statute that altered it from an uncapped entitlement program to a "capped entitlement" to be funded at approximately \$3.8 billion over 10 years. Given that change, NRCS proposed a much more limited program that would be available only to a relatively small number of producers in highly targeted watersheds. The proposed rule also placed significantly lower limits on cost-share rates and base payments than were allowed in the statute; restricted the number and types of practices that would be eligible for payment; and required producers to address resource concerns prior to enrolling in the program.

The enactment of the 2004 Consolidated Appropriations Bill, however, restored the CSP to an uncapped entitlement as it was originally written. Given that fact, I strongly urge NRCS to prepare a rule to implement the program as originally intended and without the severe restrictions in the currently proposed rule. The principal issues that need to be addressed in the supplement to properly implement the CSP as an uncapped entitlement include:

- allowing open enrollment to all eligible producers nationwide with no preference for producers in targeted watersheds;
- providing the full cost-share, maintenance and base payments as provided for in the statute;
- removing the limitation on the types of practices eligible for payment; and
- making the CSP a true rewards program by allowing producers to use CSP to address resource concerns after enrollment.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide my comments on the CSP proposed rule.

Sincerely yours,



February 24, 2004

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Sincerely yours,

*Leland K. Klobin*