

DATE:

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

Dear Mr. McKay,

I support the CSP as a nationwide conservation program focused on working farmlands and ranchlands that will "reward the best, and motivate the rest."

CSP can be a very useful tool for helping farmers to conserve and improve natural resources, but only if the proposed rule is changed to reflect the original spirit of program. USDA should issue a supplement to the rule, which would be open for public comment for 30 days. This should be done immediately to make the rule consistent with the law authorizing the CSP, and with the funding allocated by Congress restoring it to its uncapped, national entitlement program status.

Specifically, I recommend the following changes:

- **Restore Green Payments** - Farmers should be financially rewarded for outstanding environmental performance. The proposed rule calls for pennies per acre for base payments, as low as five percent cost-share payments for practices, and enhanced payments well below the farmer's costs. It is doubtful farmers would bother to apply with these low payments. Restore payments to the levels called for in the law.
- **Make All Farms Eligible** - Restore eligibility for all by eliminating the selection of priority watersheds and limited categories for enrollment.
- **Motivate Farmers** - Allow farmers to achieve high conservation standards while in the program, not as a precondition for applying.
- **Restore Comprehensive Conservation Approach** - Allow farmers to address significant natural resource concerns on their farm. Allow use of all effective conservation practices, instead of severely restricting what can be done. Allow states to add up to three other resources of concern to the national resource concerns of soil quality and water quality.

Sincerely,



Sarah Borrón  
Community Food Security Coalition  
110 Maryland Ave NE Ste 307  
Washington, DC 20010

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

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Sincerely,

*Claire O'Leary*

Name *Claire O'Leary, volunteer member*  
Organization *Sierra Club*  
Address *2701 Douglas Drive*  
*Bloomfield Hills, MI 48304*

Conservation Security Program Contracts  
ATTN: David McKay  
NRCS Conservation Operations Division  
P.O. Box 2890  
Washington, DC 20013-2890

Dear Mr. McKay,

We are three Conservation Biology graduate students studying at the University of Minnesota in St. Paul and are writing to suggest important changes to the USDA's proposed rules for the operation of the Conservation Security Program. We also wish to introduce you to a computer based 'expert system' we designed that could help farmers determine whether, and at what tier, they are eligible for CSP.

First, we commend NRCS and the USDA for following the spirit of the 2002 Farm Bill by maintaining strict standards for soil and water quality in each tier of CSP. However, these strong standards may have little impact on real environmental problems unless other aspects of the rules are rewritten.

The proposed rule replaces measures for full funding with a limited funding proposal based on watersheds. We feel strongly that the USDA should fully fund this program and NOT use the watershed method to dole out miniscule amounts of money. It should be an entitlement program. Farmers who grow commodities (corn, soybeans, cotton etc.) automatically get funded through an entitlement program and there is NO CAP ON FUNDS. At the end of the year our US government figures out what it has spent, but it never knows ahead of time. Farmers who work to preserve habitat should have such a program, and then we (the government) should wean farmers off of commodity payments. As of now, our country dumps commodity food reserves on foreign markets which undercuts good agricultural systems in other countries, putting small farmers out of business all over the developing world and receiving soil erosion, and a dead zone in the gulf of Mexico here, in return. The CRP legislation represents a new way. We want it to succeed.

The proposed rule uses a fixed base rate for the life of the program. We feel this base rate should not be fixed and should be more closely tied to local market conditions. The proposed 90% reduction leaves little incentive to motivate farmers to change. However, if the watershed plan is put in place the base payment should be based on the average rental rate in each watershed. Base rates should not be thought of as a cost-share program, but as real bonuses to reward the best conservation-minded farmers.

As conservation biologists we see great value in the rules' emphasis on soil and water resources. However, we feel that other aspects of ecosystem health should be addressed, specifically fish and wildlife habitat and native species establishment.

Farmers and NRCS officers must monitor farms in the program to determine if they are in compliance. This could be accomplished in cooperation with local and state groups. These groups might include local Audubon, Izaak Walton League, or state ornithology chapters to gain assistance monitoring grassland birds, local herpetology groups to monitor amphibians, and local angler groups to monitor fish. Many farmers monitor informally, in the course of a day working the land, and enjoy sharing information about farmland animal populations with local groups. Of course farmers should also be encouraged to monitor soil and water conditions. There are many inexpensive kits available for this purpose, and farmers should be encouraged to share costs to reduce the price farther.

The USDA should not penalize farmers for shifting former cropland to pasture as part of a managed grazing system. Former or potential cropland that is pastured and put into a managed rotational grazing system must receive equal payment rates to other cropland, and not the lower rate of pastureland. The rules should establish base payments based on NRCS land capability classes, not current land use.

The proposed rules state:

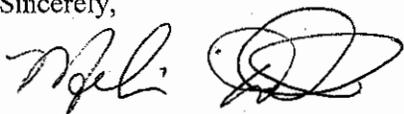
*"Concerns have been expressed through the ANPR process that producers not accept stewardship payments while at the same time operating land outside the CSP contract at a less than acceptable level of treatment."*

We understand this to imply that some farmers might use land not in the program as a 'sacrifice' area, and that the positive effect of CSP could be negated by poor resource management on another area of the farm. This could happen. But if you implement a rule that says all parts of the farm must address at least one 'resource of concern', you have negated the whole introductory value of Tier I. In fact, Tier I would not exist. NRCS must define the 'acceptable level of treatment' and we propose that the land be treated as it currently is, or better. This may include additional monitoring, including monitoring of land not contracted to CSP.

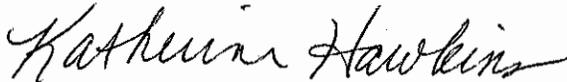
Finally, we wish to introduce our expert system interface. The system was created as part of a class during the spring of 2003, and is based on our understanding of the program at that time. The specific wording will no doubt have to be changed, but it offers a structure and method for helping farmers self-determine their eligibility. We have enclosed a decision tree for it as well as a CD, operable on any desktop PC.

In closing, we are very interested in seeing the CSP implemented well, and as soon as possible.

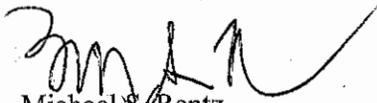
Sincerely,



Melissa A. Driscoll  
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Katherine K. Hawkins  
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Michael S. Rentz  
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Conservation Security Program Comments February 18th 2004

My comments are mainly based off of the thirteen-page summary of proposed rules dated Dec. 16 2003. I have read the entire 119 page rules provided to me by my District Conservationist as well. I will try to put a page number with my questions for a better explanation.

First, this program had the budget caps removed by the 04 Omnibus Budget as approved by congress restoring it to its original statutory intent, so the caps talked about in the rule should be removed.

This program should reward those that have done conservation practices already for many years. Not encourage those that have not to try to catch up by installing additional practices. There are enough funds for this already though EQIP, CCRP and state funds.

On page 3 NRCS Preferred Approach No. 2 Eligibility. Would waterways already under continuous CRP or buffer strips or headlands and in the land owners name be eligible for any benefit to the tenant? Not necessarily for money but just as part of the practices of conservation on the farm even though not paid for by the tenant when constructed. I think I understand that they would but am not sure from what is written on that page.

Also on that page in the last paragraph selected watersheds are talked about. CSP was written as a full national uncapped entitlement program and should not discriminate from anyone that is eligible no matter where his or her operation is located. There should not be any limitations such as the watershed only approach.

On this same matter I have talked to my State Conservation Chief and in my opinion he is not pushing the CSP. His attitude is that only those people that would qualify for Tier 3 should participate and he thinks no one will qualify at this level. He does not think it worth the time to sign up unless a farm would fit into Tier 3. NRCS wishing for failure of the program?

On page 4 Paragraph 3 my personal opinion is that all lands in the operation should meet the criteria for Tier 1 not just part. I like the statement that this program "should reward the best and motivate the rest" so the best should already have their whole operation at its conservation best at this point in time.

Page 5 number 5 Structure payments to ensure... Who will set Regional equity? I feel this should be a local working group. On a state level there is still too much variance with in a state much less the nation. Then final approval would come from the state committee. The national average for cash rent is also not favorable to me. The cash rent in my county and others in Illinois are much higher. Also in other parts of the country where specialty crops are grown they are much higher. These should be determined by a local working group for cash rent values and also local input for those areas of the

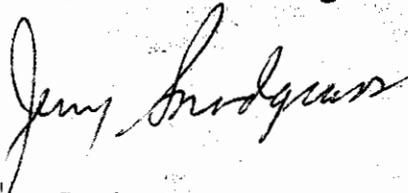
country that don't have cash rent to determine payment. Possibly NRCS is looking for rates so low that no one will participate in CSP. Again a way for the program to fail.

Page 8 1470.5 Many farms are a three to five year lease. Or are a one-year lease automatically renewable but no one that I know, or of the six leases that I have, does it state that the tenet has control for ten years. This is a major concern to me if I would ask for a ten-year commitment from the landowner. I think that it could be handled as FSA handles their contracts.

On page nine under this heading I like that the payment goes to the person that has a share and risk in the crop or livestock being produced on this operation. That is very important for cash rent farmers. I believe that this will clarify who gets the payments if they must show risk or actual income from the crop of livestock. This is also stated on page two of the Fact Sheet of Farm Bill 2002 conservation security program dated December 2003. It is not stated in the full 119-page rule and this bothers me. Which document will be the final rule? I would like to see this stated once and for all that the person or persons with a risk in what is being produced get the benefits of CSP. This is stated in both 1470.30 and 1470.5 but could still be defined better.

1470.21 on page 10 Can more land be entered into this contract if purchased or rented or would a new contract be needed for each new piece of land? This is also mentioned under 1470.25 on page 11.

As the rule is currently written it seems that NRCS is hopping the program will fail or have such low participation that they will not have to do any work for it. I think the program is workable and will allow more participants each year, as more money is available if the above changes are made before the final rule is written.



Jerry Snodgrass  
13501 N 1700 Ave.  
Geneseo Illinois 61254  
NACD Board Member, Illinois  
Illinois Grain Farmer

USDA / NRCS

David McKay

Conservation Operations, NRCS

P.O. Box 2890

Washington, DC 20013-2890

Attention: CSP

70 Long Drive 467  
Eaton, OH 45320

February 20, 2004

Dear Sir:

My letter is in response to changing the rules for implementing the Conservation Security Program.

I strongly endorse a full, nationally implemented CSP. It is important to meeting our resource conservation goals for working agricultural lands. I believe this was the original intent of the U.S. Congress for the implementation of this program. Two significant shortcomings are that the rule doesn't provide for the rewards system for conservation farmers as originally intended by the law, and it doesn't provide for a program nationwide.

Also the funding cap limitation needs to be removed. In the 2002 Farm Bill CSP was authorized as an entitlement program. Congress has removed the appropriation cap limitation and now NRCS should amend the rule to reflect the actions of Congress to make it an entitlement program.

Another key issue concerns watershed limitation. The CSP rule states that NRCS will identify and offer CSP only in high priority watersheds, chosen at the national level. This is not locally led conservation as was so widely promoted in the 2002 Farm Bill, and creates the opportunity for the program to be politically driven as opposed to being available to all eligible producers nationally.

According to the law, all resource concerns in the USDA Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) such as soil, air and water quality, wildlife and plant habitat, and forest stewardship, are eligible for participation. The proposed rule requires soil and water quality to be addressed for all three tiers and places a lower priority on all other resource concerns.

Also the proposed rule requires cost-share payments to be less than EQIP. The original authorization provided a cost-share limit of 75 percent, which is the same as EQIP and WHIP and other cost-share programs.

The proposed rule also changes the rental rate language. The original law requires that 2001 national rental rate, or an appropriate rate where the national rental rate does not accurately reflect local conditions, be used to establish CSP base payment. The proposed rule uses state and local rental rates, but reduces the base payment down to 10 percent of the already reduced rate in the law. The original language stated "the Secretary shall not provide a rate lower than the national average rental rate."

Also NRCS proposes to offer a substantially reduced list of eligible practices. The law only provides two limits: animal waste transport and storage, therefore all other practices are eligible.

The Congress and the constituents they represent believe the Conservation Security Program to be a good law and so do I. This law addressed the many concerns that had been neglected for so many years, so please follow their recommendations. Please keep it in tact. Thank you.

C.C. Senator George Voinovich  
Senator Mike DeWine  
Representative John A. Boehner

Sincerely,

Lewis E. Jones  
70 Long Dr.  
Eaton, OH 45320