



## OHIO CORN GROWERS ASSOCIATION

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February 27, 2004

Conservation Operations Division  
 Natural Resources Conservation Service  
 P.O. Box 2890  
 Washington, D.C. 20013-2890

Attention: Conservation Security Program

On behalf of the Ohio Corn Growers Association (OCGA), I would like to thank the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for the opportunity to comment on the proposed rule for the Conservation Security Program (CSP). OCGA appreciates the time and effort NRCS took to develop this proposal. OCGA also would like to thank the agency for its commitment to developing a conservation program for working lands.

In late January, the OCGA Board of Directors met in Washington to thoroughly review the proposed rule and to meet with NRCS staff members. Over the course of three days the group discussed general CSP issues, specific concerns and developed recommendations. Also, OCGA members attended a recent NRCS listening session in Ohio. OCGA supported the creation of CSP as a conservation program for working lands and will work with NRCS and others to implement that concept.

### General Comments

Overall, OCGA is disappointed in the proposed rule. It does not meet corn grower expectations. None of the OCGA growers who participated in the Washington meeting or who attended the listening session believe they will be eligible to participate. In addition, many question whether the requirements of the proposed rule would be worth the effort financially. Unfortunately, the proposal is not designed to meet the needs of the average, commercial corn farmer. Generally, the proposal is not farmer-friendly as the land control requirements are too high a barrier to entry and it does not recognize the trend toward renting.

### Watersheds

Although OCGA would prefer CSP to be available to nearly every farmer right away, we understand the need to geographically limit the program *in the early years* based on watersheds. OCGA would prefer CSP get off to a meaningful start and believe it is in the best interest of farmers and the agency to get it right from the beginning. Key to a successful CSP is a program that works for farmers. To do this, NRCS should ensure an adequate number of farmers in a watershed participate and the results of their conservation can be measured. Then, the program can be scaled up from there.

### Eligibility Requirements

Under the proposed rule, a farmer would have to have control of the land for the life of the proposed contract period. Any land that a farmer did not have control of could not be part of CSP, yet the farmer would be required to implement and maintain the same conservation practices and standards on that part of the operation.

Very few OCGA members have control of all of the land they farm for the length of time -- five to ten years -- envisioned by CSP. Most corn growers rent land on an annual basis, and the size and make up of their operations varies from year to year. In addition, it is highly unlikely many landlords would agree to long-term leases.

The control requirements are stringent and exclusionary. In addition, they have the potential to add substantial costs if a producer decides to participate yet cannot secure control of all of his operation but still must meet all conservation requirements.

OCGA does not believe the intent of the proposal is to limit CSP to small, wealthy, hobby farms as that would severely limit the potential environmental benefits of CSP. Yet, this is what these provisions seem intended to accomplish. If included in the final rule, most corn growers could not participate in the program.

### Enrollment Categories

OCGA believes the use of enrollment categories is a reasonable approach to begin to implement CSP. OCGA recommends that they not be too restrictive and encourages the administration to support sufficient funding for the program.

OCGA encourages NRCS to ensure the enrollment categories and subcategories are fairly and consistently applied to all farmers across the nation. Today, many conservation programs are not consistently implemented on the local or state level. For example, growers know firsthand that HEL provisions are not applied the same in Nebraska as they are in Ohio. Inconsistent application of conservation laws, programs and standards can have the unintentional effect of helping one farmer while hurting another and diluting environmental benefits.

### Contract Requirements – Tier Three

As proposed, participation in Tier III would be severely restricted because of the cost to address all resource concerns on an entire operation. For example, just the record keeping required of Tier III participants will be monumental. OCGA recommends the conservation requirements be kept in line with what they are worth for the benefits received. It would not help farmers or NRCS if CSP were a program that chased incremental benefits for high costs.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comments.

Sincerely,



Mark Schwiebert  
President

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"TO PROTECT, UPHOLD, AND ENHANCE THE PRESTIGE OF THE TERM 'INDIAN RIVER'."

# INDIAN RIVER *Citrus League*

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March 1, 2004

Mr. David McKay  
 Conservation Planning Team Leader  
 Conservation Operations Division  
 USDA/NRCS  
 P. O. Box 2890  
 Washington, DC 20013

Dear Mr. McKay:

On behalf of the Indian River Citrus League, an 1,100-citrus grower trade association with 41 affiliated packinghouses situated on Florida's east coast, we want to express our enthusiasm to participate in the new conservation security program.

In reading about the program, it is almost identical to the needs and goals of the Indian River Citrus Best Management Practices Program that was initiated in 1998 by the Indian River Citrus League growers. This program came together with the help of NRCS, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, University of Florida's institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, the South Florida Water Management District and over ten other agencies to make this proposed program a reality.

This program has now spread to over 190,000 acres of Indian River citrus and is now also being duplicated in other citrus growing regions in the middle and the southern parts of the state.

We have found that growers, if they fully understand the benefits to a program will participate in a large way. As when we first started this program, we had over 200 growers sign up for various committees to assist in this process.

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The BMPs process now has gotten so popular and is proven to be so effective that the Commissioner of Agriculture has utilized it for his centerpiece in his state water policy.

We are extremely proud of our grower membership for embracing this win win situation and we think it provides a tremendous template for success and it fits so well for this region to be part of the initial implementation of the conservation security program.

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to comment on this important program and look forward to working with you as this develops. If you should need any information on this area or BMPs program, please do not hesitate to contact this office on this important topic.

Sincerely,



Douglas C. Bournique  
Executive Vice President

DCB/kss

Cc: IRCL Board of Directors  
IRCL Production Committee  
IRCL Water and Land Management Committee  
Donna Smith, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

# National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture

P.O. Box 396 Pine Bush, NY 12566 Tel: (845) 361-5201 Fax: (845) 361-5204 Email: campaign@sustainableagriculture.net  
www.sustainableagriculture.net

Re: Conservation Security Program Comments

David McKay  
Conservation Operations  
NRCS  
P.O. Box 2890  
Washington, DC 20013-2890

March 2, 2004

Dear Mr. McKay,

I am writing as Executive Director of the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, a nation-wide network comprised of hundreds of local, state, regional and national organization working for a more sustainable agriculture system through unified federal policy education and advocacy.

Over the past four years, hundreds of farm, ranch, agricultural, environmental, consumer, faith, labor, and other groups and thousands of concerned constituents have advocated for the Conservation Security Program and its practical, results-oriented approach to our nation's conservation problems. These concerned citizens considered passage of the CSP as a landmark victory that established a nationwide 'green payments' program to provide stewardship incentives supporting excellence in private working lands conservation. Congress designed the CSP to assist farmers and ranchers who develop and maintain conservation systems that solve critical natural resource concerns and thus foster clean water, healthy and stable soils, improved wildlife habitat, restored wetlands and prairie, energy savings, and related public benefits.

Family farmers and ranchers across the country--joined by environmentalists, faith groups, consumers, workers and many others--have fought hard for passage and implementation of the Conservation Security Program (CSP). It is imperative that this important program be implemented fully and quickly--as it was passed by Congress and signed by President Bush in 2002. We need a national CSP available to all farmers and ranchers that truly "rewards the best and motivates the rest". Unfortunately, as currently written, the proposed CSP rule falls abysmally short of that goal.

The CSP is an extremely important program for encouraging excellent environmental performance on working farm- and ranchlands that provides very substantial benefits to all of society. CSP holds tremendous promise for conserving and restoring natural resources, for rewarding farmers and ranchers who care for their land, and helping other farmers and ranchers make the transition to more and more sustainable practices. This is precisely the way taxpayer support for farming should be focused, and the CSP rule must therefore reflect the letter of the law and the spirit of the program.

First, USDA should immediately issue a supplement to the rule--open to public comment for 30 days. The supplement should fix major problems with the proposed rule issues in January, and bring the rules into compliance both with the law authorizing CSP, and the funding allocated by Congress that restored CSP to its full, uncapped, national entitlement program status.

More specifically, the rule should:

1. Create a nationwide program, available to all farmers and ranchers in all regions of the country with all types of conservation objectives. The severe restrictions limiting enrollment to certain watersheds, certain classes of farmers and ranchers, and to a limited set of resource concerns should be removed.

2. Retain very high environmental standard and allow farmers and ranchers to achieve those high standards *while in the program* rather than requiring that the highest NRCS conservation standards for soil and water quality be achieved *prior to* becoming eligible for the CSP. This is in direct conflict with the law, which stipulates that relevant conservation standards must be met *as a result of* participation in the CSP.

3. Restore Meaningful Stewardship Incentives. Establish cost-share rates on par with cost-share rates under other USDA conservation programs. Cost-share rates for newly installed practices should be equivalent to the rates under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. Cost-share rates for the management and maintenance of existing conservation practices should be set at the 75% maximum rate established in the CSP law. Base payments should be set at the rates established in the CSP law without the 90% reduction. Enhanced payments should reward the most environmentally beneficial systems and to the maximum extent possible pay for results. Enhanced payments for on-farm research and demonstration projects and for on-farm monitoring and evaluation activities should allow the producer to recover costs. The enhanced payments for treating resource problems to a level beyond the NRCS standards, for addressing additional resource problems, and for collective action within a watershed should not be treated as cost-share but rather as real bonuses to reward exceptional performance.

4. Reward resource-conservation crop rotations, rotational grazing, and buffers with enhanced payments. *Solution:* USDA should make the enhancement payments for these big pay-off conservation systems a highlight of the program by providing direct, substantial incentives for farmers and ranchers to adopt them. The rule should be amended to name these conservation systems in the rule as qualifying for enhanced payments on a nationwide basis.

5. Utilize a the one producer, one-contract approach to CSP contracts; this is best way to guard against program fraud and abuse, and to ensure fair treatment of all producers. All CSP payments should be attributed to real persons (not business or corporate entities), and the strict payment limits set in the law must be maintained.

6. Conserve Germplasm. Ensure that CSP provides natural resource concern and conservation practice recognition, with significant incentives and enhanced payments, to farmers and ranchers for biological resource conservation and regeneration—as provided for in the 2002 Farm Bill. This must include plan and animal germplasm conservation and on-farm seed saving, preservation, screening, evaluation, selection, and plant and animal breeding activities. These practices preserve and enhance biodiversity, contribute to longer and more diverse cropping systems, enhance wildlife habitats, and help conserve critical resources for the long-term productivity and health of our food and agriculture system.

7. Treat Grass-Based Agriculture Fairly. Base payment should not be based on currently land use, but rather on NRCS land capability classes.

8. Respond to the Needs of Organic Producers. CSP should allow farmers with USDA-approved certification plans under the National Organic Program (NOP) to certify simultaneously under both the NOP and CSP. Farmers and ranchers who meet the NOP organic farm plan requirements should automatically qualify for Tier Two or Tier Three CSP payments, with additional CSP water quality requirements dealt with as an addendum, rather than requiring separate NOP and CSP applications.

9. Restore a Comprehensive, Locally Driven Approach to Conservation. Allow CSP conservation resource concern priorities to be set at the state level so the program can be as responsive as possible to the major resource issues in each region of the country, and make all conservation practices eligible. The full range of

NRCS-approved practices should be considered as part of site-specific CSP conservation plans and systems. The rule should also encourage farmer innovation through a robust process for on-farm demonstration and pilot testing of innovative practices.

10. Provide for Ongoing, Not One-Time Support. Farmers must be able to remain in the program over time, in order to succeed in maintaining and enhancing conservation systems long term. The rule should comply completely with the law and allow contracts in good standing to be renewed at the option of the producer.

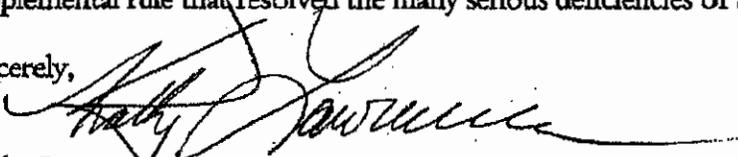
11. Don't Penalize Cash Renters. The rule should provide fair treatment for tenants, allowing a tenant's CSP contract to exclude such land entirely, or allowing the farmer or rancher to receive CSP payments on land meeting CSP standards as long as the tenant controls the land.

12. Provide for a Continuous Sign-Up Process. The rule should provide for a predictable, continuous, nationwide signup process.

In closing, the CSP is of major importance to sustainable and organic producers, and to everyone concerned about the health and productivity of our natural resources. This program is too important to delay, and far too important to implement poorly.

We appreciate this opportunity to provide comments on the proposed rule, and look forward to seeing a supplemental rule that resolved the many serious deficiencies of the first proposed rule.

Sincerely,



Kathy Lawrence  
Executive Director