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**From:** Tade Sullivan [TSullivan@iowacorn.org]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, March 02, 2004 7:26 AM  
**To:** FarmBillRules  
**Subject:** Conservation Security Program Comments from Iowa Corn Growers Association



CSP comments for  
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Here are our comments on the proposed rule for CSP published in the January 2, 2004 Federal Register

Iowa Corn Growers Association  
5505 NW 88th Street, #100  
Johnston, IA 50131

NO 57

Iowa Corn Growers Association  
5505 NW 88<sup>th</sup> Street, #100  
Johnston, IA 50131

March 1, 2004

Honorable Anne M. Veneman  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Re: 7 CFR Part 1480, Conservation Security Program Proposed Rule

Dear Secretary Veneman:

I write on behalf of the Iowa Corn Growers Association (ICGA) to comment on the proposed rule for the Conservation Security Program (CSP). The ICGA brings together over 6,300 grower members to manage issues that advance the Iowa corn industry. I appreciate this opportunity comment on the proposed rule – we believe that by taking input from the producers who will be directly affected by this rule, you will make this a stronger program.

The Iowa Corn Growers Association was one of the early supporters of the Conservation Security Program. When the law was passed, we were enthusiastic about the potential for the program since it focused conservation dollars on working lands, and rewarded good stewards for the conservation work that they had done. We also were interested in the potential for CSP, since it provides a mechanism for farm payments that are compliant with our international trade agreements.

Our enthusiasm, however, has been tempered by USDA's proposed rule, as we have serious concerns about the proposed regulations to implement the Conservation Security Program, as published in the January 2, 2004 *Federal Register*.

We have met with Conservation Operations team members, with NRCS Chief Bruce Knight, and with the Iowa Congressional delegation to express our strong opposition to major portions of this rule. We believe the rule does not reflect the intent of the law, and we urge NRCS to reevaluate major portions of the proposal.

The rule states that "...Congress is currently considering legislation that amends the CSP statute. Pending the enactment of this legislation, NRCS intends to publish a supplement to this proposed rule..." Our organization sees an opportunity to correct this rule, and urges you to fulfill your promise now that the appropriations legislation referred to has been passed and signed into law.

**Priority Watershed Requirements**

The proposed rule limits eligibility to producers located in priority watersheds but does not explain how USDA intends to prioritize watersheds, other than that they will be selected by NRCS staff in Washington, DC. Our understanding from discussions with NRCS Washington is that NRCS intends to rank all watersheds in the country using a Natural Resources Index.

This ranking scheme is not provided for in the law. It is also inconsistent with NRCS' desire to implement locally-led conservation practices, and it relies too heavily on modeling and not enough on local input. We urge you to remove this arbitrary and unlawful watershed approach. Instead, allow all producers to participate in the program if they meet the requirements of the law, rather than making an arbitrary selection of a few watersheds deemed most needy by Washington, DC.

**Quality Criteria Requirements**

The proposed rule requires producers to have reached the quality criteria level (as stated in NRCS conservation handbooks) for both water and soil quality in order to be eligible for CSP. The CSP statute did not single out water and soil quality criteria, as the rule suggests, but instead offers producers a menu of options to address, including soil, water, air, energy, and wildlife.

NRCS staff has indicated that they would not envision producers using CSP to install practices but would instead ask producers to participate in other programs like EQIP before they are eligible for CSP. CSP was designed to encourage producers to maintain current practices and to adopt new practices. As passed, CSP did not require that a producer have those practices in place prior to enrollment. We suggest that you remove the restrictive requirement that producers must meet soil and water criteria before participating in CSP. For CSP to deliver its fullest benefits, producers need access to CSP funds and technical assistance so they can expand their conservation practices.

ICGA urges you to establish more reasonable eligibility requirements that allow producers to participate if they are willing to implement the necessary practices by the end of the contract.

**Base Payment Calculation**

The ICGA supports the rule's provision to allow state and local rates to be the basis for base payments. However, the rule also proposes reducing the base payment to 1/10th of the rental rate. This rate will not cover the costs of practices that NRCS will require for establishing a higher priority in the ranking process. This arbitrary reduction does not ensure regional equity and is inconsistent with the law. ICGA urges you to adopt the base and maintenance payments as outlined in detail in the law.

**Enrollment Categories**

The ICGA is very concerned about NRCS' proposal to use enrollment categories. The proposed rule creates a *de facto* bidding system that will effectively limit participation to those producers who have extensive conservation already on the ground and the financial means to add a lot more conservation. The bidding system created under the rule may put younger or beginning farmers at a disadvantage.

CSP was designed to be an uncapped program open to all producers who want to implement conservation practices at a high level. Enrollment categories violate that principle by establishing a bidding and ranking system inconsistent with the law. We urge you to eliminate the requirement for enrollment categories.

**Cost Share Rates**

Finally, ICGA is very concerned that the cost-share rates in the proposed rule will be less than those in any other conservation program administered by USDA. The law specifically states that CSP's cost share rates should be commensurate with EQIP. We urge you to allow for cost share rates commensurate with EQIP or higher where state conservationists determine that would result in the greatest conservation benefits.

Madame Secretary, there was widespread support for the Conservation Security Program as it was written in the law – but there is nearly universal opposition by our members to the rule as proposed. At the recent listening session NRCS hosted in Urbandale, Iowa, groups as diverse as the National Rifle Association, Sierra Club, National Farmers Union, Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, and Iowa Corn Growers Association spoke with one voice: The rule should be revised.

We appreciate your consideration of these concerns and look forward to commenting on the revised supplemental rule.

Sincerely,

David A. Sieck  
President