



Conservation Stewardship Program Rewards Producers for Conservation Activities



The Conservation Stewardship Program rewards producers for practicing good pastureland management on their land.

By Angela Magstadt

Farmers and ranchers are often referred to as stewards of the land. But even with the monumental task of caring for the nation's most precious resources, farmers and ranchers seldom get rewarded for all they do to preserve them.

What is the Conservation Stewardship Program?

The 2008 Farm Bill included a program to do just that – encourage producers to maintain existing conservation activities and adopt additional activities on their operations. The Conservation Stewardship Program (Stewardship Program) is a voluntary conservation

program administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) that provides farmers and ranchers with financial and technical assistance to conserve and enhance soil, water, air, and other natural resources on their land. It both rewards producers who have been excellent stewards of the land, and provides an incentive for them to expand their conservation activities. “The Conservation Stewardship Program is unique in that it allows North Dakota farmers and ranchers to showcase their stewardship accomplishments, build upon it, and bring conservation to a whole new level in their operations,” says Jennifer Heglund, North Dakota’s NRCS assistant state conservationist for programs.



Producers who practice conservation tillage on their farms are eligible for Stewardship Program funding.

Eligibility

There are more than 12.7 million acres eligible annually for the Stewardship Program in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the Caribbean and Pacific islands. North Dakota's 2010 allocation is 439,000 acres. The program is available to all agricultural producers, regardless of the size of their operations or the type of crops they produce. Eligible lands include cropland, grassland, improved pastureland, rangeland, non-industrial private forest land, and agricultural land under the jurisdiction of an Indian Tribe.

In order to qualify for the program, applicants must:

- Be the operator of record in the USDA's farm records management system for the eligible land being offered for enrollment;
- Have documented control of the land for the term of the proposed contract;
- Include the eligible land in their entire operation as represented for other USDA programs;
- Be in compliance with the federal regulation codes concerning highly erodible land, wetland conservation, and adjusted gross income provisions.

Benefits to Participants

In addition to technical assistance that NRCS provides producers as part of this program, participants can receive financial compensation as well. Annual payments are given to producers who implement new conservation activities and maintain existing practices. Supplemental payments can also be earned by participants that receive annual payments who also adopt a resource-conserving crop rotation. Producers who have five-year contracts receive their payments as soon as practical after October of each year for contract activities installed and maintained in the previous year. For all contracts, payments cannot exceed \$40,000 in one year and \$200,000 during a five-year period. Each contract is limited to \$200,000 over the term of the contract.

How are Producers Chosen?

Applicants will be selected for the program based on a conservation assessment of their operation. Those having the most positive impact to natural resources are funded first. Preference is given to producers who address natural resource issues specific to the state in



Residue management such as chaff spreading on no-till farmland helps retain moisture and prevents erosion.

which they live. North Dakota's priority resource concerns are soil erosion, soil quality, water quality, plants, and animals. "NRCS will financially assist in the input costs of conservation practices, but it is anticipated that most of the financial backing within the contracts will come from the implementation of new conservation activities and strategies such as establishing pollinator habitat, implementing resource conserving crop rotations, and planting cover crops, to name a few," Heglund says.

The first deadline to apply for the Stewardship Program was September 30, 2009 and 21,300 applications covering some 33 million acres were received nationwide. "NRCS received enough applications to carry out conservation activities on more than twice the number of acres Congress authorized for the Conservation Stewardship Program this year," says NRCS Chief Dave White. "This incredible response shows that conservation-minded producers and landowners want to attain higher levels of conservation stewardship."

Heglund says North Dakota had 405 applications totaling 1 million acres. "We actually expected many more applications, but the late harvest impacted the amount of time ag producers had to visit the NRCS field offices. But, since this program is offered on a continuous signup basis, we expect many producers will apply during the winter months." The applications are currently being processed, and decisions will be made in early November as to which

applicants will receive funding.

Heglund encourages producers who are interested in applying for the Stewardship Program to apply soon so there will be ample time to consider their applications for the next funding cycle, which will be on or around January 15, 2010. Producers can begin the application process by completing a self-screening checklist, which helps potential applicants decide for themselves whether this is the right program for them. "This is not an entitlement program, it is a competition for funding," Heglund says. The level of environmental benefit to be achieved will be estimated to determine eligibility, rank applications, and establish payments.

Once applicants are approved, NRCS will request the producers' conservation activity records and conduct on-site field verification to ensure that the information provided is accurate. Once the information is verified, NRCS and the applicants will develop program contracts.

For more information on the Conservation Stewardship Program or to apply, contact your local NRCS office.



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Estimated Range for Annual Payments

Cropland	\$12 to \$22 per acre
Non-industrial private forest land	\$6 to \$12 per acre
Pastureland	\$7 to \$14 per acre
Rangeland	\$5 to \$10 per acre

Estimated Range for Supplemental Payments

Resource conservation crop rotation	\$12 to \$16 per acre
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Any individual's payment level could fall outside these ranges based on the specific level of conservation performance on an operation. Each participant's annual payment on a land use is dependent on a new conservation activity being scheduled and installed on that land use. If no new conservation activity is applied on a land use, there will be no annual payment for that land use.



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