



United States Department of Agriculture

Conservation Stewardship Program

Building Better Outcomes



Conservation Stewardship Program

The Conservation Stewardship Program – CSP – is the largest conservation program in the United States. Starting as the Conservation Security Program in 2002, a complex watershed-based pilot with just 2 million acres in its first year, the Conservation Stewardship Program has evolved to a nationwide program that has enrolled more than 70 million acres since 2010. Fifteen years of experience and evolution in the program bring us to where we are today, poised to deliver improvements to a program that kicks conservation up another notch.

Through CSP, agricultural producers and forest landowners earn payments for actively managing, maintaining, and expanding conservation activities like cover crops, rotational grazing, ecologically-based pest management, buffer strips, and pollinator and beneficial insect habitat – all while maintaining active agriculture production on their land. Crop producers, ranchers, dairy farmers, forest landowners, poultry producers, organic farmers, and specialty crop farmers all participate in the program. It is delivering real results on the ground and the nation’s natural resources.

CSP is Unique

CSP taps into producers’ deep-rooted commitment to conservation. CSP participants voluntarily enroll in the program because it helps them enhance natural resources

and improve their business operations - providing food, fiber, and energy. Participants enroll their entire ag operation in the program under a 5 year contract, with the option to renew for another 5 years. NRCS helps producers maintain or improve the existing conservation activities on their operations, and adopt new ones. The program offers greater incentives for producers who want to kick their conservation up a notch with bundles of enhancements with a higher payment rates.

The Evolution of CSP

CSP has proven to be effective, with a large enrollment and high demand, but it’s important that it also be progressive and keep up with technology and producer’s desires to improve resources on their land. Through feedback from across the country we made improvements to make a good program even better.

Our goal is a program that is clear and understandable, is flexible, and accommodates local priorities. We want it to be customer friendly while providing more conservation options to a wide variety of producers.

What’s New

Straightforward Conservation Process

CSP has relied on a tool called the Conservation Measurement Tool (CMT) to evaluate operations and



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determine payments. We know that the results from the tool are difficult to understand and to explain. We are redesigning CSP tools to create a clearer and more logical process – from initial performance evaluation to application ranking and payments.

The new approach draws on planners' conservation knowledge and experience to work with applicants to complete the performance evaluation and identify additional activities that would work best for their operations. Applicants and planners work together to identify resource concerns that are not currently being addressed and discuss alternative conservation activities that can be implemented to address those resource issues. Ultimately, this helps the producer make decisions that best fit their conservation goals while addressing resource concerns.

Better Integrated with Other NRCS Programs

The approach strengthens CSP's connection to the agency's conservation planning process by clearly connecting solutions with identified. CSP will be better integrated into the continuum of assistance we offer, instead of it being the more isolated program approach that it has been in the past.

The CSP tools are revamped and will be integrated with existing program software, and the reporting mechanisms for overall performance measurement and contract management application tools for our other programs. For instance modifications for operational adjustments will be greatly simplified and similar to the processes used for other conservation programs, allowing more flexibilities to modify participant's contracts based on operational changes. These updates to CSP provide more effective ways to align practices and enhancements with the agronomy and ecology of farming and ranching and ultimately help promote more sustainable production

Better Connection to our Conservation Standards

Enhancements now are linked closely to the conservation practices. Even more opportunities for conservation are offered through the program, with up to 40 percent more enhancements (173 total) and 100

percent more conservation practices. Less than 10 percent of former enhancements are no longer available (11 total). Many of the new enhancements reflect recommended additions from partners and other stakeholders.

Accommodating Local Priorities

We're updating CSP to allow greater opportunities for local input. NRCS in consultation with local partners and stakeholder groups will focus the program to address natural resource concerns specific to the state and on ways to get the good stewards into the program. There are flexibilities to establish targeted resource concerns and applicable the conservation activities in local fund pools. Additionally, the application ranking tool will use local issue questions to prioritize applications that are effectively addressing the identified local priorities. States continue to be able to identify additional enhancements needed for local resource concerns.

Continuing the Improvements

70 million acres of productive agricultural and forest land enrolled in CSP translates into a massive, concerted effort to conserve and improve natural resources – and the effort of these farmers, ranchers and forest landowners is commendable. The conservation benefits achieved through CSP on private lands benefit all of us through improved water and air quality, increased soil health, and improved wildlife habitat, to name just a few.

With more enhancements and better results reporting tools, we are going to be able to tell our customers what these enhancement activities mean for their operation. We are going to be able to better tell the story of what the nation's biggest conservation program is doing for natural resources, for agriculture, and for the nation

NRCS is committed to continuing the evolution of CSP to ensure increased success of the program and that it remains effective for all of agriculture and private land forestry.

