

New Conservation

Stewardship Program Premieres

Signup Will Be Open Coast To Coast



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WASHINGTON, D.C.

While many farmers and ranchers already pride themselves on protecting soil, water, and wildlife, USDA's newest program is designed to help pay for those stewardship activities and encourage more. Starting August 10 and running through

Sept. 30, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service offices will accept the first applications in the new Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

Many of you may remember these initials from the past, but the Conservation Stewardship Program is a brand new program, sharing nothing but its CSP initials with the discontinued Conservation Security Program. As part of the 2008 Farm Bill, Congress renamed and revamped the former Conservation Security Program completely to improve its availability and appeal to agricultural and forestry producers. NRCS Chief Dave White says the new program will be open coast-to-coast, with states determining resource areas of concern.

"The minimum requirement is that the producers have to meet one resource of concern on their entire operation, such as meeting soil erosion on your entire farm, or it could be water quality or wildlife for instance," says White. "Each state will determine what the resources of concern are for their state, so air quality could be a resource of concern in California but not in Alaska. To be eligible you have to meet one resource of concern on your entire farm, and then you have to be willing to meet one additional priority resource of concern within the five-year contract."

Because CSP is new, producers won't know at signup what reimbursement rates will be right away. As laid down by Congress in the Farm Bill, the new CSP can enroll 12.7 million acres each year from 2009 to 2012 at a national average of \$18 per acre. The first signup will help determine the mix of rates, with rangeland potentially averaging less and cropland averaging more, in order to meet the \$18/acre goal.

"NRCS won't know what the reimbursement per acre will be until we've had the first signup, as a kind of a pilot for future signups," White says. Based on this first signup, he says, in future signups NRCS will offer a fixed national price per acre for each type of land, whether cropland or range or forest. He says the program will be a farmer-friendly menu-driven system "based on environmental points, on how much environmental benefit your particular ex-

isting operation provides and how much benefit your particular offer for the future creates."

Start enrollment now

For this year only, interested farmers need only to submit a basic application to the program expressing their interest in participating by the end of the fiscal year (September 30). The more detailed enrollment process can then occur after October 1, yet still count as a Fiscal Year 2009 enrollment.

The more detailed process of completing the Conservation Measurement Tool, which will be used to rank applications, and then, if accepted into the program, having a field visit from NRCS and completing the conservation plan and program contract can then occur later this fall. But the only way to get to that second more detailed step is by getting the short application completed by September 30, says Ferd Hoefner with the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition.

"For interested farmers, the bottom line is to be part of the initial 2009 class of participants in the new CSP, get into the office and get the application filled out now in order to have the chance to complete the other enrollment steps later in the year."

To apply for the newly revamped CSP, potential participants will be encouraged to use a self-screening checklist first to determine whether the new program is suitable for them or their operation. It will be available on NRCS Web sites and at NRCS field offices.

After self-screening, the producer's current and proposed conservation practices are entered in the conservation measurement tool (CMT). This tool estimates the level of environmental performance to be achieved by a producer implementing and maintaining conservation activity. The conservation performance estimated by the CMT will be used to rank applications. States will determine their own priority resource concerns, one of the criteria that will be used to rank applications. States will establish ranking pools to rank applications with similar resource concerns.

NRCS field staff also will conduct on-site field verifications of applicants' information obtained from the CMT. Once the potential participant has been field verified and approved for funding, he or she must develop a conservation stewardship plan. White expects field verification will be done in September, with contracts offered in October.

For information about CSP, including eligibility requirements, producers can visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/new_csp or visit their local NRCS field office. Δ

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