

Further Develop & Expand the Conservation Security Program

In the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002, family farmers, conservation groups, rural communities, and the nation as a whole won a significant victory with the passage and subsequent implementation of the Conservation Security Program (CSP). The CSP rewards farmers who produce actual environmental benefits for society through good farming practices, by making payments to producers who practice effective conservation on their agricultural land, and by providing incentives for those who want to do more. CSP holds great potential to secure the long-term viability of our nation's farmlands, while encouraging better stewardship of our natural resources.

However, the Conservation Security Program has struggled through a delayed, ever-changing and confusing rule-making process and implementation, and has suffered because of seriously inadequate funding. Still, after three years of sign-ups (2004, 2005 and 2006), nearly 20,000 farmers and ranchers are currently enrolled in CSP.

Now is the time to build CSP from the current base into a bigger and better working lands conservation program that includes many more farmers and delivers real conservation benefits on America's working farmlands. We cannot afford to keep generating the unsustainable soil loss and severe water quality problems caused by agriculture production practices that are driven by current farm policy. CSP is a major part of the solution. The 2007 Farm Bill is an opportunity to build on the gains of 2002 and further expand the CSP. CSP needs to be accessible to a majority of farmers and ranchers, while maintaining environmental integrity that results in the protection our nation's soil, water and rural communities.

Building CSP Bigger and Better

1. **Adequate Funding.** Since CSP's inception, the program has been seriously underfunded with nearly \$4 billion being cut by Congress since it was passed in 2002. Because of inadequate funding and exclusionary provisions such as limited sign-ups and a complicated ranking process, many farmers and ranchers have been denied access CSP. In order to secure the vital conservation of our nation's soil and water, CSP needs to be funded at a level that allows all American farmers practicing effective conservation on their farmland to access this program. CSP needs at least \$1 billion a year in the 2007 Farm Bill.
2. **Continuous Sign-Up.** For optimum effectiveness, farmers must be able to apply for the CSP on a continuous or at least annual basis. The current limited sign-up process creates no incentive for producers to make feasible conservation improvements (like soil tests, or manure management plans) to their farm operation in order to be eligible and get into CSP, where they then could establish even more conservation practices. Continuous sign-up would allow a producer who didn't qualify for CSP one year, to make the needed conservation improvements, and then gain access during the next sign-up period, a short time away. The current program only allows producers to attempt enrollment once every 8-15 years. This misses the opportunity to achieve conservation outcomes by getting producers up to the level where they then can excel in CSP.
3. **Nationwide Implementation.** For CSP to have a real impact on family farmers and produce major conservation outcomes, it needs to be implemented in every watershed across the nation. Administering CSP by watersheds makes sense from an environmental perspective but to use watersheds as an exclusionary tool is a fundamental problem.

4. **Integrity of CSP Enrollments.** CSP needs to have strong conservation and environmental integrity. Eroding the qualifying criteria is not a solution to getting more conservation on working lands. It is important that getting into CSP means that effective conservation is already being practiced on a farm to a certain degree.
5. **Recognizing and rewarding proven conservation farming systems.** In its current form, CSP does not sufficiently recognize some important sustainable farming practices, especially resource-conserving crop rotations and organic farming systems.

For example, the Soil Conditioning Index (SCI), a tool used to measure soil health, is biased against producers with resource-conserving crop rotations and biased against organic producers. Other indexes such as the Soil Management Assessment Framework are needed to supplement the SCI to give a better understanding of soil health and soil quality trends on farms. Other conservation practices that need better recognition for the conservation benefits they produce are:

- Resource-conserving crop rotations, a critical soil-saving and soil-building practice;
- Limited or reduced pesticide use, including recognition of farming operations that use no pesticides; and,
- Forage crops in a rotation, which is important in protecting water quality

6. **CSP Must Remain in Title II and Under the Direction of the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS).** CSP is a conservation program, and as such, belongs in the conservation title and under NRCS. Attempts to change CSP into a version of a “green payments” component of the commodity title, utilizing commodity program funds, is a political non-starter and would put CSP under the control of agencies and outside interests whose expertise and interest is not conservation but commodity crop production. Building on CSP in Title II, under the direction of NRCS, is how CSP was crafted, is being currently delivered and needs to be carried forward. In addition, more resources should be targeted to NRCS to support expanded and greater implement of CSP in the 2007 Farm Bill.
7. **Renewable Contracts.** One of CSP’s strengths is that producers agree to a 5 or 10 year contract during which they increase conservation on their farm or ranch. Allowing for the renewing of these contracts is important in sustaining the conservation practices established and encourages more to be done. Currently under CSP, contracts cannot be renewed and this needs to be changed.