

# The Conservation Security Program: *Encouraging and Rewarding Good Conservation*

## Rewarding Land Stewardship

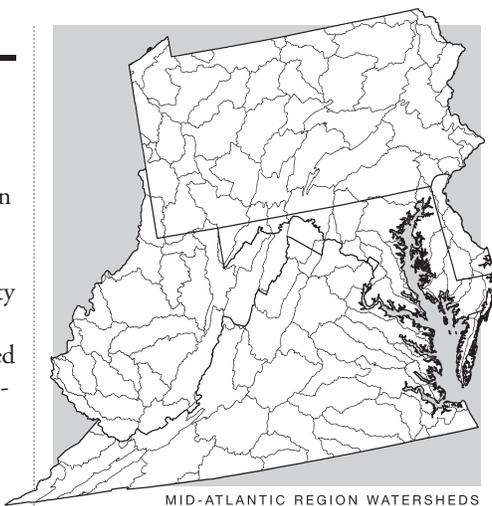
The Conservation Security Program (CSP) is a new USDA-sponsored program that encourages and rewards farmers practicing outstanding stewardship on working farmland by offering financial incentives that increase with the level of conservation effort. Soil and water quality are the primary focus of the CSP. However, program goals also include improved wildlife habitats, air quality, environmentally responsible energy production, and related natural resource concerns.

Administered by USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the CSP is different from some programs in the past, which focused on encouraging farmers with natural resource problems to apply corrective practices. The CSP, authorized by the 2002 Farm Bill, is the first program to reward farmers who have adopted good conservation systems and provide substantial incentives to expand or enhance current conservation efforts.

## A Watershed-Based Approach

The CSP is different from other programs in that it is watershed based, as opposed to operating along county or state lines. A watershed is the land area that drains to a particular stream, river, or lake. Because watersheds are natural boundaries, they are a useful way to group farmers addressing similar natural resource concerns.

The CSP watersheds are based on a classification system developed by the U.S. Geological Survey. Consequently, there are more than 2,000 CSP watersheds throughout the nation. The 2002 Farm Bill provides that all farmers and ranchers nationwide practicing outstanding conservation efforts are eligible to participate in the CSP. However, USDA is currently



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limiting signup each year to selected priority watersheds. The current USDA plan is to reach every watershed in the country by 2011. Even though the CSP might not be offered in your watershed this year, keep practicing and documenting your conservation efforts so you'll be prepared.

Contact your local NRCS office to determine which watershed your farm is located in or visit the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Surf Your Watershed Web site at <http://www.epa.gov/surf/>. To find out if your watershed is eligible for the CSP this year, contact your local NRCS office or visit the national NRCS Web site at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/csp/>.

## Determining Eligibility

**Land Eligibility.** Most Farm Bill programs have been designed primarily for cropland, especially the major commodity crops. But the CSP includes all types of cropland, pastureland, hay land, irrigated land, truck crops, orchards, vineyards, nurseries, and organic farming systems. Land must be privately owned and in compliance with Highly Erodible Land (HEL) and Wetland Conservation provi-

sions. Rental land can be enrolled if the operator has control over the land during the length of the CSP contract. The CSP does not have a minimum acreage requirement for enrollment, so you can enroll any amount of eligible land.

The CSP has three "tiers" or levels of conservation. At Tier I you can enroll any amount of eligible land, from a single field to the entire farm, and your conservation plan must address at least soil and water quality concerns. At the higher two tiers, the entire farm must be enrolled, with Tier II requiring that soil and water quality plus at least one other resource concern are addressed, and Tier III requiring a total resource management plan.

**Applicant Eligibility.** The applicant must have an active interest in the operation, share the risk of production, and be entitled to share in the profit of the operation. The applicant must be able to control the land enrolled in the CSP for the length of the contract.

**Conservation Practice Eligibility.** The CSP rewards farmers who are protecting resources with documented conservation efforts. You may qualify for CSP payments on the basis of your current management practices or conservation measures. These could include, for example, soil testing, applying nutrients based on your land-grant university's recommendations, establishing a grass filter strip, planting winter cover crops, and using integrated pest management. The CSP will also offer payments for practices you may initiate in the future. Conservation enhancements that may qualify for CSP include energy conservation measures, resource-conserving crop rotations, wildlife-friendly grazing techniques, and on-farm evaluation of conservation practices.

## CSP Payments

CSP contracts are for five years in Tier 1, or for between five and ten years at Tiers 2 or 3. Payments include:

- a stewardship or (base) payment based on a small percentage of local land rental rates;
- an existing practice maintenance payment;
- new practice cost-share payments if new practices are being added; and
- enhancement payments for superior conservation performance.

Total per-farm payments may not exceed \$20,000, \$35,000, and \$45,000 for Tiers 1, 2, and 3, respectively, and on most farms will be considerably less than these payment caps.

## Applying for CSP

The CSP requires you to assess your own eligibility based on answers to questions about your farming operation and conservation practices. Complete the CSP Self-Assessment Workbook (available at your local NRCS office or on the Web at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/csp/>) and start gathering the records you'll need to document conservation practices on your farm. With organized records in hand, determining your eligibility will be much easier. You can also find guidance and more information at your nearest NRCS office.

## Tips for Interested Farmers

**Get Your Foot in the Door.** Currently, the CSP is available only in selected priority watersheds each year. If there is a signup in your watershed, consider enrolling part of your farm and then expand in future years. You can qualify for the CSP even if you have *just one* field, pasture, or orchard that meets the designated standards. While payments might be low for a CSP contract involving just a few acres, once you are enrolled you will be able to upgrade your enrollment by adding more acres and conservation enhancements. Land eligible for the CSP must meet minimum NRCS standards for soil and water quality, so consider how much of your land might qualify.

**Get Started Now!** If the CSP is offered in your watershed this year, complete the CSP Self-Assessment Workbook, gather documentation for tillage, crop rotations, soil testing, and nutrient and pesticide applications, and attend a local NRCS informational meeting. The importance of record keeping cannot be overstressed. Farmers who received CSP payments last year had good records of past manure, nutrient, and pesticide management practices. If you are interested in the CSP for the future, review the self-assessment workbook and the soil and water quality standards for your operation and start or continue documenting conservation efforts.

**Visit with NRCS.** Even if you are unsure you have land that qualifies for the CSP, consider speaking with your local NRCS professionals, just to be certain. If you're interested in the CSP for the future, visit with NRCS to see if there are practices you should begin now to qualify and if there are programs to help.

## For More Information

Contact your local NRCS office or your state NRCS public affairs specialist:

**Delaware:** Paul Petrichenko, phone: 302-678-4180

**Maryland:** Carol Hollingsworth, phone: 443-482-2902

**Pennsylvania:** Stacy Mitchell, phone: 717-237-2208

**Virginia:** Pat Paul, phone: 804-287-1681

**West Virginia:** Carol Lagodich, phone: 304-284-4826

If you have Internet access, visit the National NRCS Conservation Security Program Web site (<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/csp/>) or your state NRCS Web site for more information:

**Delaware:** <http://www.de.nrcs.usda.gov/>

**Maryland:** <http://www.md.nrcs.usda.gov/>

**Pennsylvania:** <http://www.pa.nrcs.usda.gov/>

**Virginia:** <http://www.va.nrcs.usda.gov/>

**West Virginia:** <http://www.wv.nrcs.usda.gov/>

For additional copies of this publication or to learn more about other CSP education resources, contact one of the

following state land-grant university extension specialists:

**Delaware:** David Hansen, University of Delaware, [djhansen@udel.edu](mailto:djhansen@udel.edu)

**Maryland:** Douglas Parker, University of Maryland, [dparker@arec.umd.edu](mailto:dparker@arec.umd.edu)

**Pennsylvania:** Charles Abdalla, The Pennsylvania State University, [CAbdalla@psu.edu](mailto:CAbdalla@psu.edu)

**Virginia:** James Pease, Virginia Tech, [peasej@vt.edu](mailto:peasej@vt.edu)

**West Virginia:** Thomas Basden, West Virginia University, [Tom.Basden@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:Tom.Basden@mail.wvu.edu)

Prepared by Alyssa Dodd, senior extension associate in agricultural environmental policy, Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, Penn State; Krista Weidner, writer and editor; Charles Abdalla, associate professor of agricultural and environmental economics, Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, Penn State; and Thomas Simpson, coordinator, Chesapeake Bay Agricultural Programs, University of Maryland.

Reviewed by Barry Frantz, Pennsylvania state resource conservationist for programs, USDA-NRCS; and Ferd Hoefner, policy director, Sustainable Agriculture Coalition.



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To learn more about the Mid-Atlantic Regional Water Quality Program visit our Web site at: <http://www.mawaterquality.org/>.

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