

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

Obama-Biden Platform

“Partner with Landowners to Conserve Private Lands: Because most rural land is privately-owned, farmers, ranchers, and private landowners are the principle stewards of rural land and water. As a U.S. Senator, Barack Obama has supported conservation programs, such as the **Conservation Security Program (CSP)**, that serve as a resource to farmers and assist them with sustainable environmental planning and best land management practices. Barack Obama and Joe Biden will put an unprecedented level of emphasis on the conservation of private lands...They will also **increase funding for CSP** and the Conservation Reserve Program and will create additional incentives for private landowners for sustainable agriculture to protect and restore wetlands, grasslands, forests and other wildlife habitat.”

Relevant Program

Program: Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

Agency: Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) of USDA

Policy Recommendation – Administrative Action

Act very quickly to issue an interim final rule and implement the newly revised program for FY 2009. With the outgoing Administration essentially punting on rulemaking and program implementation, the clock will be ticking rapidly by January 20, with less than two months to go before the beginning of planting season in northern regions and already late in the south. It is vital therefore for the job of finishing the rule to be a very top out of the starting gate priority.

A letter and detailed set of rulemaking recommendations forwarded to USDA from 100 national, regional and local farm and conservation organizations is available at:

<http://sustainableagriculturecoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/12/csp-implementation-sign-on-letter.pdf>

Budget Recommendation

Guarding against budgetary and appropriations measures that threaten to cut mandatory funding is key to successful implementation of the CSP. It is critical that USDA Budget Requests assume full funding with no changes in mandatory spending and that the new leadership team at USDA fight any efforts to cut funding.

Background in Brief

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) is a comprehensive working lands conservation program designed to protect and improve natural resources and the environment for generations to come. CSP targets funding to address particular resources of concern in a given watershed or region and assists farmers and ranchers to improve soil, water, and air quality, provide increased biodiversity and wildlife and pollinator habitat, sequester carbon to mitigate climate change, and conserve water and energy.

The 2008 Farm Bill authorized a new nationwide, continuous sign-up for CSP which means farmers and ranchers anywhere in the country will be able to apply for the CSP any year and at any time of the year. Periodically during the year, USDA's NRCS will rank applications and then develop contracts with those farmers and ranchers with the highest rankings until funding for that ranking period is completely allocated. All watersheds will be eligible each and every year. The program has been streamlined by eliminating the tiered structure and going to a universal 5-year contract term and single \$40,000 payment limitation

The new farm bill provides sufficient funding for the program to enroll nearly 13 million acres each year. CSP acreage eligible for enrollment will be allocated to each state based primarily on the amount of agricultural land in that state relative to the national total.

Many aspects of the new CSP remain the same as the original program, including:

- a predominant focus on management practices;
- a strong emphasis on conservation systems and planning;
- an explicit dual reward structure for existing and new conservation effort;
- an emphasis on continual improvement and adaptive management;
- higher environmental standards relative to EQIP and other working lands programs;
- an innovative use of resource-specific indices to measure and compensate for environmental benefits and ecosystem services; and
- the opportunity for ongoing renewals of the 5-year CSP contract based on fulfillment of the contract terms and agreement to pursue additional conservation.

New elements include a competitive ranking system which selects for those making commitment to addressing priority regional environmental issues in breadth and depth, coordination between CSP and organic certification, payments more explicitly geared to the level of environmental benefits, and supplemental payments for resource-conserving crop rotations.