

New Changes for the NRCS-Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)



Natural Resources Conservation Service has published changes to the current Conservation Stewardship Program. The new rule took effect March 10, 2016; however, additional updates delayed the sign-up for the 2016 year. NRCS plans to implement the new changes during the 2017 fiscal year.

According to NRCS, the purpose of CSP is to encourage producers to address priority resource concerns and improve conservation performance by adopting additional conservation activities and maintaining existing ones on eligible lands. Through CSP, NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to producers to conserve soil, water, air and related natural resources on their land.

Highlight of the various changes include:

An increase in minimum annual payment. NRCS has increased the minimum annual payment from \$1,000 to \$1,500 for all CSP participants. The minimum payment of \$1,000 was previously available to limited-resource farmers; beginning farmers and ranchers; and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. Under the new rule, the minimum payment is increased to \$1,500 and is available to all participants.

Contract limits. NRCS maintains its current contract limitations to \$200,000 per person or legal entity and to \$400,000 per joint operation. It prohibits any increase in contract limitations for restructuring operations. The new program prorates conservation performance so that a participant receives equal annual payments of the dollars received for conservation activities.

Stewardship thresholds. One additional conservation activity must be scheduled, installed and adopted by the end of the first fiscal year (first 12 months) of the contract, and all enhancements must be met by the end of the third fiscal year of the contract. In addition, a resource-conserving crop rotation must be planted on at least one-third of the rotation acres by the third fiscal of the contract. Participants adopting the resource-conserving crop rotation will be eligible for supplemental payments.

Renewal requirements. The new rule requires contracts to meet stewardship thresholds for at least two additional priority resource concerns by the end

of the renewed contract or to exceed the stewardship thresholds of existing priority resource concerns. The old rule only required one or more new conservation activities for contract renewal.

Removal of reference to Conservation Measurement Tool (CMT) (not necessarily!). NRCS uses CMT to determine payments to compensate for expenses to implement conservation activities. The overhaul of the program suggests the use of more transparent methods for determining eligibility, ranking and payments rather than relying on CMT alone to calculate payments; however, the use of a particular method(s) is not finalized. When using a combination of methods determining eligibility and ranking of conservation methods, it would be greatly helpful if NRCS can provide some clarity regarding the new method, such as:

- a. Whether payment calculations will account for expected conservation benefits.
- b. How the conservation activities addressing multiple resource concerns will get ranked (weighted).
- c. How the conservation outcomes from existing activities will be weighted compared to conservation outcomes from new activities.

Priority to enhancement bundles. Enhancement bundles are a suite of practices that provide greater environmental benefits when implemented in conjunction with one another. NRCS continues to emphasize the importance of such practices because of their greater environmental benefit. Some small farmers have expressed concern over priority given to large operations adopting enhancement bundles, citing that large operations have greater flexibility to adopt such bundles. Policy experts think one way to address such concerns is to rank conservation practices that provide a greater degree of environmental benefit and/or practices adopted in areas where resource concerns are at a critical level. Although not a perfect solution, such ranking provides some fairness to small operations that are willing to adopt practices that provide relatively greater conservation benefits.

Payment for existing conservation practices and new conservation activities. NRCS continues its provision of higher payments for new conservation activities and smaller payment amounts for existing activities within a farm operation.

Land eligibility. Land should be in production for four of the six years preceding February 7, 2014 (when the 2014 Agricultural Act became law). This rule applied to all eligible land including non-industrial forest land. NRCS plans to enroll 10 million new acres rather than the 12.8 million acres authorized by the 2008 Agricultural Act.

Allow land in other programs to enroll in CSP. NRCS has proposed enhancements that allow expiring CRP acres to enroll in CSP. It also allows enrollment of lands protected by agricultural land easements.

Environmental credits. NRCS continues to allow participants to qualify for environmental credits and participate in the credit-trading program as long as the participants ensure that the activities are consistent with CSP responsibilities. There was also a suggestion that carbon sequestration benefits accrued through some of the practices be taken into account while determining payments.

The LSU AgCenter anticipates more information regarding CSP in the coming months. We believe the information above provides farmers who are considering applying for CSP an understanding of the new changes to the program and helps them make better decisions on their farm. The Louisiana Master Farmer Program plans to provide a detailed description of how some of these changes can affect conservation efforts from a farmer as well as from a regional perspective.

Note: The content in the fact sheet has been adapted from the document “Conservation Stewardship Program,” Federal Register 81(47): 12573-12583. The text in this document does not substitute for any text in the CSP document.

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