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Rule Change Helps Producers Implement More Conservation Activities

WASHINGTON, October 8, 2020 – The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) today released the [final rule](#) for its [Conservation Stewardship Program \(CSP\)](#). The rule makes updates to the popular conservation program as directed by the 2018 Farm Bill and integrates feedback from agricultural producers and others.

CSP is offered in all 50 states and the Pacific and Caribbean areas through continuous signups. The program provides many benefits, including increased crop yields, decreased inputs, wildlife habitat improvements, and increased resilience to adverse weather. CSP is for working lands, including cropland, pastureland, rangeland, nonindustrial private forest land, and agricultural land under Indian tribe jurisdiction.

“NRCS has prioritized the implementation of the 2018 Farm Bill, including important changes to the Conservation Stewardship Program, which is designed to help farmers put more robust conservation activities in place,” said Kevin Norton, acting Chief of USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The final rule better aligns CSP with NRCS’s Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) through common applications, contracting operations, conservation planning, conservation practices, and related administrative procedures. EQIP is a voluntary conservation program that helps promote agricultural production and environmental quality by providing producers financial and technical assistance to implement structural and management conservation practices on working agricultural lands.

NRCS received more than 600 comments on an interim final rule that was published in November 2019. Based on that feedback, the agency made the following changes in the final rule:

- Added emphasis to enhancing soil health as a way that program participants can achieve program goals.
- Modified language pertaining to locally led conservation by specifying that NRCS will solicit input from the State Technical Committees and by adding new Tribal Conservation Advisory Councils.
- Specified that, with local working groups, these entities will “develop state-level technical, outreach and program materials.”
- Made minor edits to and amended definitions for “enhancement,” “management-intensive rotational grazing,” and “resource-conserving crop.”
- Provided clarity to producers by adjusting language related to the set-aside for historically underserved producers.
- Adjusted the language for early start waivers to align with EQIP and reflect that the provision applies only to new conservation activities.
- Allowed for more than one contract renewal but extend the two-year program ineligibility period to include those who apply for renewal and are not selected.

Initial updates to CSP included in the interim final rule:

- Increased payment rates for adoption of cover crop rotations.
- Introduced a new supplemental payment for advanced grazing management.
- Created a one-time payment for developing a comprehensive conservation plan.
- Provided specific support for organic and transitioning to organic production activities.

NRCS state offices announce sign-up periods for CSP. Additionally, existing CSP participants may have an opportunity to renew their contracts in the first half of the fifth year of their five-year contract.

CSP helps producers enhance the conservation activities on their working lands, it contributes to USDA's [Agriculture Innovation Agenda](#) of reducing the environmental footprint of U.S. agriculture in half by 2050. Earlier this year, Secretary Perdue announced the department-wide initiative to align resources, programs, and research to position American agriculture to better meet future global demands.

View the [final rule](#) on the *Federal Register*. For more information on how to sign up for CSP in your state, visit your state website from nrcs.usda.gov, or contact your local [NRCS field office](#).

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