

**Conservation Security Program
Summary of Proposed Rule
December 16, 2003**

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is issuing a proposed rule with a request for comments. This proposed rule implements the Conservation Security Program (CSP) set out in Title XII, Chapter 2, Subchapter A, of the Food Security Act of 1985, Public Law 99-198, 16 U.S.C. 3801 et seq., as amended by the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002, enacted on May 13, 2002, Public Law 107-171.

- This proposed rule describes how NRCS will implement the CSP to provide financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers who conserve and improve the quality of soil, water, air, energy, plant and animal life, and support other conservation activities.
- This proposed rule also addresses public comments that NRCS solicited in an advanced notice of proposed rulemaking (ANPR) published February 18, 2003, in the Federal Register and other comments NRCS received in public workshops and focus groups.

Comments must be received within 60 days after publication date in the FEDERAL REGISTER.
[insert date]

Overview

The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Pub. L. 107-171, May 13, 2002) (the Act) amended the Food Security Act of 1985 (16 U.S.C. 3801 *et seq.*) to authorize the Conservation Security Program (CSP). The program is administered by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The CSP is a voluntary program that provides financial and technical assistance to producers who advance the conservation and improvement of soil, water, air, energy, plant and animal life, and other conservation purposes on Tribal and private working lands. Such lands include cropland, grassland, prairie land, improved pasture, and range land, as well as forested land and other non-cropped areas that are an incidental part of the agriculture operation.

Following the principles in USDA's *Food and Agriculture Policy – Taking Stock for the New Century*, and recognizing CSP's unique opportunities in the context of USDA's conservation programs, the Secretary's vision for CSP is:

- (1) To identify and reward those farmers and ranchers meeting the very highest standards of conservation and environmental management on their operations;
- (2) To create powerful incentives for other producers to meet those same standards of conservation performance on their operations; and
- (3) To provide public benefits for generations to come. *In short, CSP should reward the best and motivate the rest.*

The fundamental philosophy and intent of CSP is to support ongoing conservation stewardship of working agricultural lands by providing payments and assistance to producers to maintain and

enhance the condition of the resources. To implement the Secretary's vision, the program will reward owners and operators of agricultural lands for their conservation stewardship efforts, and assist them with the implementation and maintenance of additional conservation measures that can improve the natural resource conditions of their agriculture operations. CSP particularly targets producers and activities that can provide the greatest additional benefits for the resource concerns identified in this rule and in CSP sign-up announcements.

CSP: An Entitlement Program with a Budget Cap

The Administration has been working diligently to complete the regulations for CSP. While developing the regulations to implement CSP, USDA has confronted several challenges while trying to balance the intent of the original statute with subsequent appropriations language.

As originally enacted, the Conservation Security Program is an entitlement program where all eligible producers will receive payments. Since enactment, the legislation has been changed by Congress on three separate occasions. These changes have each directly impacted the funding mechanisms and future projections for the initiative. Funding was not specified in statute, and the Congressional Budget Office assigned a ten-year score of \$2 billion to the Program. The Omnibus Appropriations Act of 2003 (P.L. 108-7) transformed the CSP into a capped entitlement at \$3.773 billion over a ten year period between FY 2003-2013. This change in statute was also predicated by a revised CBO score of CSP in January, 2002 assigning a \$6.8 billion estimate for the CSP program over ten years.

The idea of a capped entitlement offered the greatest challenge to the design of the new conservation program. The revised statute did not provide direction as to how the Administration should implement a capped entitlement within the statutory fiscal constraints. This created a paradox; to design a new conservation entitlement program with a cap on its expenditures. The limits imposed by the budget cap greatly reduced the potential scope of the program.

Currently, the Omnibus Appropriations Bill for FY 2004 (Conference Report H. Rpt. 108-401) contains language that once again has impacted the funding authority for the Conservation Security Program. If enacted into law, the FY 2004 Omnibus would remove the \$3.773 Billion funding limitation for the program over ten years, but institute a cap for FY 2004 of \$41 million. It is unclear what projections the Congressional Budget Office might assign to outlays over this period to implement CSP. Once the CSP language stabilizes in a final Appropriations Bill, the administration will take time to consider the ramifications of the final language and may amend this rule to address the potential change in law.

The Secretary is proposing ways to address the capped entitlement issue and still deliver an effective CSP program by conducting periodic CSP sign-ups and through the use of additional sign-up eligibility requirements, contract requirements for additional conservation treatment, enrollment categories for determining funding, and constrained base and practice payments.

In this rulemaking NRCS is proposing an approach based on five elements:

1. Limit Sign-ups: Conduct periodic CSP sign-ups.
2. Eligibility: Criteria should be sufficiently rigorous to ensure that participants are committed to conservation stewardship. Additionally, eligibility criteria should

- ensure that the most pressing resource concerns are addressed, including using priority watersheds and enrollment categories.
3. Contracts: Requirements should be sufficiently rigorous to ensure that participants undertake and maintain high levels of stewardship.
 4. Enrollment Categories: Prioritize funding to ensure that those producers with the highest commitment to conservation are funded first.
 5. Payments: Structure payments to ensure that environmental benefits will be achieved.

Below is a detailed discussion of the proposed approach. NRCS seeks comment on its overall approach and on the alternatives.

NRCS Preferred Approach

1. Limit sign-ups: Conduct periodic CSP sign-ups.

NRCS proposes to offer periodic CSP sign-ups, similar to sign-ups conducted by USDA for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). NRCS would publish a CSP sign-up announcement prior to the opening of the sign-up period. The public sign-up announcement would include important programmatic information (as discussed in Section 1470.20 of the regulation), including the length of the sign-up period and the “size” of the sign-up (as measured in the total dollar value of the CSP contracts NRCS enrolls into the program from a given sign-up). NRCS believes implementing CSP through sign-ups is the best way to manage and effectively deliver the program.

2. Eligibility: Criteria should be sufficiently rigorous to ensure that participants are committed to conservation stewardship. Additionally, eligibility criteria should ensure that the most pressing resource concerns are addressed.

The CSP statute defines eligible producers as those who submit an approved conservation security plan and enter into a CSP contract to carry out the conservation security plan. Eligible land is defined as all private agricultural land, including incidental forested land, excluding land that is under a CRP, WRP, or GRP contract, or that has not been planted or considered to be planted in the last 4 of the 6 years preceding the enactment of the 2002 Act.

To ensure that CSP participants have a demonstrated commitment to conservation, NRCS is proposing to require CSP applicants to address specified resource concerns, (such as soil quality and water quality), for tier I and tier II levels, prior to program enrollment; and NRCS estimates that requiring existing conservation stewardship will increase the environmental benefits generated by the program.

Additionally, to ensure that CSP’s limited resources are focused first on the most pressing environmental concerns, NRCS is proposing to impose eligibility requirements based on selected priority watersheds. Only producers located within those watersheds will be eligible for a given sign-up. A majority of the agricultural operation must reside in the selected watershed. The eligible watersheds will be announced and identified through CSP sign-up announcement. The watersheds selected for CSP eligibility may vary in each CSP sign-up.

NRCS proposes to identify watersheds (using eight-digit hydrologic unit codes developed by the U.S. Geological Survey) around the nation based on objective information from natural resource, environmental quality, and agricultural activity data. The watershed prioritization process will consider several factors, including the vulnerability of surface and groundwater quality, the potential for excessive soil quality degradation, and the condition of grazing land in the watershed.

By using a system of selected watershed and enrollment categories, NRCS can make the program available ultimately in all 50 States, the Caribbean Area, and the Pacific Basin area. The program would benefit participants without regard to the size of their operation, crops produced, geographic location, or any other factor unrelated to the conservation characteristics of the operation.

3. Contract requirements should be sufficiently rigorous to ensure that participants undertake and maintain high levels of stewardship.

The CSP statute requires that a conservation security plan for a Tier I CSP contract address one or more significant resource concerns on part of an agricultural operation. NRCS is proposing that CSP participants must address the nationally significant resource concerns of water quality and soil quality as described in Section III of the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG). In addition, by the end of the contract period, they must address the water quality resource concern over the contract acreage.

The CSP statute requires that a conservation security plan for a CSP Tier II contract must address one or more significant resource concerns on the entire agricultural operation. NRCS is proposing that CSP participants must address the nationally significant resource concerns of water quality and soil quality as described in Section III of the NRCS FOTG. In addition, by the end of the contract period, they must address an additional resource concern selected by the applicant and approved by NRCS, over the entire agricultural operation.

The CSP statute requires that a conservation security plan for a CSP Tier III contract must address all significant resource concerns on the entire agricultural operation. NRCS is proposing that CSP participants in all tiers must address, by the end of the contract period, additional requirements as required in the enrollment categories as selected by an applicant or in the sign-up announcement over the contract acreage.

NRCS is proposing, in addition to the statutorily mandated contract requirements, to give funding priority to producers who are willing to undertake enhancement activities, such as addressing locally identified resource concerns or providing important assessment and evaluation information.

4. Prioritize funding to ensure that those producers with the highest commitment to conservation are funded first.

To effectively implement the program, NRCS believes it is necessary to prioritize applicants based on their existing level of conservation performance and their willingness to undertake additional conservation activities above and beyond the regulatory contract requirements for their tier of participation. This does not mean that individual contracts must compete with each

other according to an Environmental Benefits Index, as in the Conservation Reserve Program. Rather, NRCS would place applicants in enrollment categories and include in the sign-up announcement the order in which those categories would be funded. All applicants in a category and a subcategory selected for funding would be offered a CSP contract. NRCS will develop criteria for construction of the enrollment categories such as the soil conditioning index, soil and water quality conservation practices and systems, and grazing land condition.

Sub-categories may be established within the categories. All applications which meet the sign-up criteria will be placed in an enrollment category regardless of available funding. An application will be placed in the highest priority enrollment category or categories for which the application qualifies. Categories will be funded in priority order until the available funds are exhausted.

One issue arises in grouping contracts by enrollment categories. What should happen if the first five priority categories can be fully funded, but the sixth cannot? Should NRCS prorate the funding for the sixth category, not fund that category at all (saving funds for a future sign-up), or choose amongst category six applicants according to some criteria (for example by date of application or by identifying priority subgroups)? NRCS invites comment on this issue.

5. Structure payments to ensure that environmental benefits will be achieved.

The Act requires base payments of CSP to be based on 2001 national rental rates by land use category or “another appropriate rate that ensures regional equity” (emphasis added). NRCS proposes using regional and local land rental data for FY2001 with adjustments to ensure consistency and regional equity. In addition, NRCS proposes to apply a consistent reduction factor to all regional rental rates to scale down the share of payments going to base payments (for all tiers of participation). The more that program payments are made toward aspects directly related to additional environmental performance, rather than on base payments, more conservation is likely to be obtained. NRCS proposes that the base rate, once established, will be fixed over the life of the program. NRCS invites comment on the appropriate reduction factor, and whether it should be fixed or vary by sign-up.

NRCS is proposing to utilize the enhancement component of a CSP payment to increase conservation performance regardless of the tier of participation (including activities related to energy conservation) as a result of additional effort. Enhancement activities would be determined by the State Conservationist with consideration of national priorities and any emphasis designated in the sign-up announcement. The statute offers five types of enhancement activities and NRCS is seeking comments on the following concepts:

- The improvement of a significant resource concern to a condition that exceeds the requirements for the participant’s tier of participation and contract requirements in Section 1470.5;
- An improvement in a priority local resource condition, as determined by NRCS;
- Participation in an on-farm conservation research, demonstration, or pilot project;
- Cooperation with other producers to implement watershed or regional resource conservation plans that involve at least 75% of the producers in the targeted area; or
- Implementation of assessment and evaluation activities relating to practices included in the conservation security plan.

The Proposed CSP Application and Sign-up Process

In preparation for the CSP sign-up, NRCS would receive public comment on the process and criteria used to select the eligible priority watersheds and enrollment categories used for selecting application for funding within the watersheds. Since this is a new capped entitlement program, NRCS proposes to preserve program flexibility by not including all the specifics in the rule, but to seek additional public input over the different sign-up periods. To apply for CSP, both the producer and their operation must first meet the basic eligibility criteria, including having the majority of the agricultural operation within a selected priority watershed. With the expected demand on the program, NRCS will ask potential participants to undergo a self-assessment process to determine if their operations can meet the standards of CSP and qualify for program participation. The self-assessment process would be completed using a self screening questionnaire for each land use to be enrolled. If the producer has successfully completed the screening process, they may submit an application. Additionally, they must prepare a benchmark inventory of their existing conservation treatment on the agricultural operation to document the operations resource condition on their operation. Once the producer has successfully met the eligibility requirements, completed the benchmark inventory, and completed other sign-up requirements, they may submit an application. Based on the resource inventory of benchmark conditions and a follow-up interview, NRCS will determine in which program tier (if any) the applicant could participate and the enrollment category placement.

CSP in relation to other NRCS Conservation programs.

Based on a 2002 Farm Bill concept of achieving the optimal environmental benefits while maintaining the economic viability of the agricultural operation, CSP is viewed as the potential integrator of all conservation programs within the Department. As described in the Secretary's "Food and Agricultural Policy" document, the portfolio approach is one that employs coordinated land retirement, stewardship incentives, conservation compliance, and regulatory assistance to achieve enhancements to both the agricultural sector and the environment. NRCS has worked to integrate CSP into a "portfolio" approach for conservation program delivery within USDA. NRCS is seeking comment on the opportunity to use CSP in a collaborative mode with other programs to effectively leverage the Federal contribution to resource improvement and enhancement. Other governmental agencies, including State, local, and Tribal governments, as well as private and not-for-profit organizations, are playing an ever-increasing role in the delivery of technical assistance and in incentive programs for conservation. NRCS is exploring the opportunities for collaboration in these collective efforts and in developing public-private partnerships and joint programs to leverage Federal resources and improve program access and implementation. By focusing in priority watersheds and by proposing those participants agree to additional conservation treatment through enhancement, NRCS believes it will offer greater opportunities for wildlife habitat development and management. NRCS is seeking comment on how to implement a program that uses collaboration and leveraging of funds to achieve resource improvements on working agricultural lands through intensive management activities and innovative technologies.

Environmental Performance, Evaluation and Accountability

NRCS intends to make CSP the most accountable conservation program it has ever implemented. In its pursuit of targeting the greatest resource benefits in a cost-effective manner, NRCS will endeavor to use CSP as an opportunity to learn more about the benefits and costs that derive

from conservation practices. Careful evaluation and monitoring activities can show what works, what does not, and what it depends on. Through the program’s enhancement provisions, participants will test intensive management activities and monitor the changes in environmental conditions, thus providing the data necessary for NRCS and other agencies to ground-truth its predictive models. NRCS can use these results to refine the targeting and activities of the CSP and other programs, and produce better overall program performance. Because of the limited program funding, NRCS is proposing that CSP require applicants to have achieved a high level of environmental performance to be eligible for CSP. The applicants must also be willing to achieve more, which will provide additional conservation and improved environmental performance.

Summary of Comments to the Advanced Notice of Proposed Rule Making

In developing this proposed rule, NRCS carefully considered its experience with conservation programs and the public comments it received through an advanced notice of proposed rule making (ANPR) found in 7 CFR, Part 1470. CSP raised fifteen policy issues that have not been addressed in other conservation programs. These issues and their disposition are fully discussed in the preamble to the proposed rule.

In addition to the ANPR, NRCS convened nine focus groups in November, 2002, to obtain public input related to CSP proposed rule development, and representatives from key agricultural and stakeholder groups were invited to participate. NRCS, also, organized 5 workshops to obtain feedback on CSP and its implementation from producers and NRCS field staff.

Summary of Provisions and Additional Requests for Comments

The following table summarizes the provisions in each section of the proposed rule. In the rule itself, NRCS explains the alternatives considered, justifies the preferred approach, and requests public comment on specific issues.

Section	Title	Description
1470.1	Applicability	Applicable to the 50 states, DC, US territories and islands and provides authority to begin accepting applications in calendar year 2003
1470.2	Administration	Establishes supervision under the Chief, NRCS Provides general information on program administration
1470.3	Definitions	Defines numerous terms used in the rule. Most notably: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agricultural land—Cropland, rangeland, pasture, private non-industrial forest land if it is an incidental part of the agricultural operation, and other land on which food, fiber, and other agricultural products are produced. • Agricultural operation—All agricultural land, and other lands determined by the Chief, NRCS, whether contiguous or noncontiguous, under the control of the participant and constituting a cohesive management unit, where the participant provides active personal management of the

Section	Title	Description
		<p>operation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimum level of treatment—The specific conservation treatment NRCS requires that addresses a resource concern, to a level that meets or exceeds the quality criteria according to NRCS technical guides as described in Section III of the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide.
1470.4	Significant resource concerns	<p>Designates soil and water quality as nationally significant resource concerns. Allows NRCS Chief to determine additional resource concerns of national significance.</p>
1470.5	Eligibility requirements	<p>Requires an applicant to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be in compliance with the highly erodible land and wetland conservation provisions. • Have control of the land for the life of the CSP contract (If the applicant cannot show control of a parcel for the life of the contract, that part of the agricultural operation does not qualify for any payment component. However, the land is considered part of the contract and is required to be maintained at the same conservation standard as the rest of the operation.) • Have an interest in the farming operation • The majority of the agricultural operation is to be located within a selected priority watershed. NRCS is proposing to use watersheds as a mechanism for focusing CSP participation. NRCS would nationally rank watersheds to focus on conservation and environmental quality concerns based on a score derived from a composite index of existing natural resource, environmental quality, and agricultural activity data. Once the highest ranked watershed's applications were funded, the next watershed would be funded, etc. Funding would be distributed to each priority watershed to fund sub-categories until it was exhausted. <p>Meet specific Tier requirements including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tier I—The applicant must address both water and soil quality to the minimum level of treatment on part of their agricultural operation. • Tier II—The applicant must address all nationally significant resource concerns to the minimum level of treatment on the entire agricultural operation. • Tier III –The applicant must address all resource concerns listed in Section III of the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide with a resource management system that meets the minimum

Section	Title	Description
		<p>level of treatment on the entire agricultural operation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete a benchmark inventory for the entire agricultural operation or the portion being enrolled. • Share, or be entitled to share, in the crop or livestock available for marketing from the agricultural operation. <p>Land enrolled in CSP must be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private agricultural land or other incidental land, as determined by NRCS (includes Tribal & Indian trust or allotted land) • Devoted to crop production, if converted to cropland after May 13, 2002, for at least four of the six years preceding fiscal year 2002.
1470.6	Enrollment categories	<p>Establishes enrollment categories and subcategories to identify, classify and prioritize contracts.</p> <p>Requires the Chief to announce, at the beginning of each sign-up, the order in which categories are eligible for funding.</p> <p>Enrollment categories and subcategories will be funded in order until available funds specified in the CSP sign-up announcement are exhausted.</p>
1470.7	Benchmark condition inventory and conservation security plan	<p>Establishes requirements for a CSP plan</p> <p>Requires all conservation practices to meet FOTG standards</p> <p>Requires applicants to conduct a benchmark condition inventory to identify the resource condition of the agricultural operation, or portion intended to be enrolled, in order to determine the tier of CSP participation</p>
1470.8	Conservation practices	<p>Requires NRCS to determine which structural, vegetative, and land management practices and intensive management are eligible for CSP payment and to make a list of such practices available to the public</p> <p>Prohibits practice payments for practices applied prior to application for the program.</p> <p>Allows for approval of interim conservation practice standards and financial assistance for pilot work to evaluate and assess the performance, efficacy and effectiveness of the technology or conservation practices.</p>
1470.9	Technical assistance	<p>Provides for the use of approved or certified Technical Service Providers in implementing CSP</p>
1470.20	Application for contracts and their selection	<p>Requires NRCS to publish, prior to each program sign-up, a notice of determinations made for the sign-up including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional eligibility criteria

Section	Title	Description
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on the priority order of enrollment categories for funding contracts. • Estimates of the number of enrollment categories and contracts that will be funded • Estimates of the total funds expected to be obligated <p>Provides the requirements for CSP applications including a benchmark condition inventory. Provides that NRCS will determine whether the application meets the eligibility criteria, and if so, will place participants in an enrollment category. Selection of applications will based on the criteria specified in the signup announcement until funding is exhausted.</p>
1470.21	Contract requirements	<p>Establishes requirements for CSP contracts including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contract duration • Practices to be maintained and implemented • Payment schedule <p>Establishes the expiration date of contracts as September 30 in the last year of the contract Program participants will only receive payments from one conservation security contract per agricultural operation. CSP participants must address the following to the minimum level of treatment by the end of the contract.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tier I—the nationally significant resource concerns and additional requirements as required in the enrollment categories or sign-up announcement over the contract acreage (unless stipulated that they must be in place at the time of application). • Tier II—A significant resource concern, other than the nationally significant resource concerns, over the entire operation • Tier III—Additional requirements in the enrollment categories as approved by NRCS, over the entire agricultural operation
1470.22	Conservation practice operation and maintenance	<p>Specifies that participants must operate and maintain the conservation practice(s) for the life span of the practice(s) or refund any of the cost-share, maintenance, or enhancement payments made under the contract Specifies that NRCS may periodically inspect the conservation practices during the lifespan of the practice</p>
1470.23	Program payments	<p>Specifies how the various CSP payments will be determined:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Base payment is the product of: the number of

Section	Title	Description
		<p>acres in each land use category (not including “other”); its corresponding base rate and a tier specific percentage. (Tier specific percentages are: 5%--Tier I; 10%--Tier II; and 15%--Tier III) Annual base payments cannot exceed \$5,000 for tier I, \$10,500 for tier II and \$13,500 for tier III</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing Practice (Maintenance) payment may be up to 75 percent (90% for a beginning farmer or rancher) of the average county cost of maintaining a land management, and structural practice that is documented in the benchmark inventory • New Practice payments may be up to 75 percent (90% for a beginning farmer or rancher) of the average county costs of installing the practice in the 2001 crop year for new conservation practices. • Enhancement payments may be provided if the CSP’s activities will increase conservation performance as a result of additional effort made by the producer that: improves a resource concern to a condition that exceeds the minimum eligibility requirements for the participants tier of participation or for other actions as listed in the authorizing legislation. (State Conservationists, with advice from the State technical Committee, will develop payment amounts for each activity. • Establishes annual dollar limits for CSP contracts as: \$20,000 for tier I, \$35,000 for tier II and \$45,000 for tier III
1470.24	Contract modifications, renewals, and transfers of land	<p>Establishes the requirements for participants to modify contracts including changing their tier of participation or extending their contract. (Participants may modify their contract to change their tier of participation under a CSP contract once the measures determined necessary by NRCS to meet the next tier level have been established and maintained for a period of 18 months.) Allows transfer of contracts if all parties agree</p>
1470.25	Contract violations and termination	<p>Gives participants a reasonable time to correct contract violations before contract termination. Provides that participants must forfeit all rights for future payments and refund all or part of the payments received plus interest if their contract is terminated</p>
1470.30	Fair treatment of tenants and sharecroppers	<p>Requires CSP payments to be divided among tenants and sharecroppers in a manner deemed equitable. NRCS may refuse to enter into a contract when there</p>

Section	Title	Description
		is disagreement among the tenant and landowner regarding distribution of payments.
1470.31	Appeals	Establishes the administrative review process for participants receiving an adverse decision. The administrative appeal process must be exhausted before any judicial action is taken Provides a listing of decisions that cannot be appealed
1470.32	Compliance with regulatory measures	Assigns CSP participants the responsibility for obtaining the authorities, permits, easements or other approvals necessary for implementation and operation of conservation practices.
1470.33	Access to agricultural operation	Provides that any authorized NRCS representative has the right to enter an operating unit for the purposes of verifying compliance with the CSP contract
1470.34	Performance based on advice or action of NRCS representative	Grants relief to CSP participants when advice of any authorized representative of the CCC was erroneous
1470.35	Offsets and assignments	Allows participants to assign payments to others
1470.36	Misrepresentation and scheme or device	Requires a producer who knowingly misrepresents any fact affecting a CSP determination to refund all payments plus interest received on all CSP contracts.

OTHER POINTS

Limited Resource and Beginning Farmers and Ranchers.

NRCS is committed to making CSP accessible to all working lands and the agricultural producers who are actively involved in day to day conservation decisions, including limited resource and beginning farmers and ranchers. NRCS believes that this goal can and should be fully consistent with a commitment to produce the greatest net benefits with the program.

Options that include adding specific enrollment categories and the adjustment of cost-share rates for limited resource producers and beginning farmers and ranchers are presented in the preamble of the proposed rule.

Technical Service Providers.

Section 1470.9 Technical Assistance -- describes tasks needed for program activities, including: (1) conduct the sign-up and application process; (2) conduct conservation planning; conservation practice survey, layout, design, installation, and certification; (3) training, certification, and quality assurance of professional conservationists; and (4) evaluation and assessment of the producer's operation and maintenance needs. NRCS is proposing that, consistent with NRCS's planning procedures policy, that Conservation Security Plans will be completed by certified conservation planners. This description is consistent with technical assistance requirements for other NRCS programs. NRCS is seeking comments on which tasks would be appropriate for approved or certified Technical Service Providers.

For More Information.

If you need more information about CSP, please contact your local USDA Service Center, listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture, or you local conservation district.

Information is also available on the World Wide Web at:
<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/csp/index.html> under “Additional Information”.