



CSP on Your Farm

Sign-Up is Now Continuous—12 Million Acres to be Enrolled Nationwide in 2013

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) is a voluntary initiative that rewards farmers and ranchers for managing their land in a way that produces real and measurable conservation outcomes — healthy soil, clean water and wildlife habitat, for example. The program is administered by the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). In the 2008 Farm Bill, Congress provided \$12 billion over the next 10 years to enroll nearly 13 million acres annually.[†] Since 2009, CSP has enrolled over 50 million acres nationwide, more than any other conservation program in that same time frame.

All farmers are eligible to apply to participate in CSP. Minimum requirements are:

1) Must have or must obtain a "farm record number" from USDA's Farm Service Agency (if you have participated in federal farm programs, you probably already have this number registered with the agency).

2) Must have "documented control of the land" to be enrolled in CSP (for example have a lease, deed or even a simple letter from a landlord).^{††}

3) Must be in compliance with highly erodible and wetland conservation provisions.

4) Must not exceed the Adjusted Gross Income limitations set by Congress.

Overview of how CSP Operates

All farmers across the country are eligible to enroll — USDA is no longer limiting sign-up to specific watersheds. CSP is available for all working agricultural land, whether it's cropland (corn, soybeans, small grains, hay, fruits and vegetables, etc.), pasture, rangeland, or a managed woodlot.

CSP does not prevent farmers or ranchers from receiving other farm program payments, although lands currently enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program, Grassland Reserve Program, Wetlands Reserve Program or the old Conservation Security Program are ineligible for the program until those existing program contracts conclude. All contracts are now five-year contracts and take a whole farm approach.

The sign-up period is now "continuous." Farmers can apply throughout the year and NRCS will do periodic rankings based on land stewardship and conservation outcomes to determine who is accepted into the program. During each round of sign-ups, farmers are required to submit conservation program application by a certain date. During

the following months, those applicants complete a more detailed conservation assessment and are given a point score. NRCS then performs a ranking of applicants, conducts site visits on farms and offers contracts to applicants based on ranking scores.

NRCS offers contracts by awarding the highest-ranked applications first, and following down the ranking scale until the acreage allotted for that year has been exhausted.

Each state is conducting a sign-up and farmers and ranchers can apply for CSP at their local NRCS office. Applications are accepted in one of two land classes:

- 1) Agriculture land (cropland, pasture and rangeland).
- 2) Non-industrial private forest.

The more detailed conservation assessment will be done using the **Conservation Measurement Tool**, an online questionnaire that calculates a score by asking producers about farming practices, management techniques and willingness to take on additional conservation activities.

Additional conservation activities that can be done by farmers over the life of a contract are recognized as "enhancements," which are activities that leverage more conservation and contribute to an applicant's total score.

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"The loss of soil and diversity of natural resources is a threat we're facing in ag. It is a threat I believe CSP helps us address and therefore represents the direction farm policy needs to go," says Darrel Mosel, a Sibley County dairy farmer who enrolled in CSP in 2009. "It provides incentives to work sound conservation into your farming system. It worked for my farm and I urge others to look into it. Talk to your local NRCS and see if it fits for your operation. What do you have to lose?"
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[†]As a result of recent federal sequestration requirements, acreage enrollment in 2013 is expected to be closer to 12 million acres nationwide.

^{††}If a farmer is unable to obtain "documented control of land" for rented acres, they can't enroll those undocumented acres in CSP, but the rest of the farm is still eligible.

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In 2012, 87 different enhancements were available in eight resource areas:

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| 1) soil erosion | 2) soil quality |
| 3) water quality | 4) water quantity |
| 5) air quality | 6) energy |
| 7) animals (wildlife) | 8) plants (biodiversity) |

Overall, the Conservation Measurement Tool score determines an applicant's eligibility and payment level, as well as influences an applicant's ranking.

CSP Payments

Minnesota ranks tops in the nation in terms of number of

All CSP payments must be attributed to actual persons.

Tips for Enrolling in CSP

While CSP may not work for everyone, LSP strongly encourages you to check it out and evaluate its viability for your own farm or ranch. A few tips:

- Keep good records, such as soil test results, nutrient data, as well as yield and rotation history.
- Look over the CSP application materials prior to visiting NRCS. See **Additional Resources** below to find the links to the Conservation Measurement Tool Inventory questions and CSP checklist.
- **Avoid over-extending on enhancements—do what is reasonable and makes sense on your farm.** Enhancements will increase your score and payment, but often require additional management.

Minnesota CSP 2009-2012

Year	Land Use	# Contracts	Acres	Funding	Average Contract*	Per acre rate
2009	Agriculture**	649	410,815	\$9,578,110	\$14,758	\$23.31
2009	Forest	260	56,967	\$353,228	\$1,358	\$6.20
2010	Agriculture**	510	406,744	\$11,095,682	\$21,748	\$27.28
2010	Forest	159	41,356	\$351,300	\$2,209	\$8.49
2011	Agriculture**	625	522,778	\$16,032,485	\$25,651	\$30.67
2011	Forest	136	27,488	\$346,697	\$2,549	\$12.61
2012	Agriculture**	834	643,833	\$18,761,732	\$22,496	\$29.14
2012	Forest	55	11,746	\$58,064	\$1,055	\$4.94
2009-2012 MN CSP Totals		3,228	2,121,727	\$56,577,298	\$21,163—ag land \$1,793—forest	\$27.60—ag land \$8.06—forest

*These are average rates over the life of a five-year contract, and not a median value of contracts. **Agriculture** represents both cropland and pastureland. It should be noted that the payment rate per performance point for pasture is nearly half of what it is for cropland. This difference in rates skews the average contract amount and per-acre payments lower. Minnesota had no rangeland enrolled in CSP.

contracts (3,232) and funding obligated (over \$260 million). The state has consistently experienced strong demand for CSP. In 2012 alone there were nearly 1,600 applicants, with 893 receiving contracts. CSP payments vary by land type, the extent of existing conservation that will be managed and maintained, and the amount of new conservation practices and activities agreed to. The national average for CSP as written in law is \$18 per acre. Yet because lands such as non-industrial private forest (NIPF) and rangeland receive substantially less per acre than the national average, cropland rates have been higher than \$18 an acre. (See the chart above for details on rate differences during the 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 sign-up in Minnesota.)

Payment Limits

While some farm programs have virtually unlimited payments, CSP payments are capped at \$200,000 over the life of a five-year contract, which is equivalent to \$40,000 per year.

- **Keep copies of the CSP report that is developed during the sign-up process.** The Conservation Measurement Tool will provide a summary of your farm's ranking, point score and agreed-upon enhancements.

If you have any questions about the CSP enrollment process, contact LSP's Adam Warthesen at 612-722-6377 or adamw@landstewardshipproject.org.

Additional Resources

- **NRCS CSP website:** www.nrcs.usda.gov
- **NSAC Farmers Guide to CSP:** <http://sustainableagriculture.net>
- **LSP CSP Web Page:** www.landstewardshipproject.org/organizingforchange/federalpolicy/conservationstewardshipprogram

This fact sheet is brought to you by the members and staff of the Land Stewardship Project, a nonprofit organization devoted to fostering an ethic of stewardship for farmland and to seeing more successful farmers on the land raising crops and livestock. For more information, call 612-722-6377 or visit www.landstewardshipproject.org.