

CSP Offers Attractive Incentives for Alfalfa/Forage Producers

Article provided by the National Alfalfa & Forage Alliance

While many producers have become familiar with the term “CSP” as the acronym for USDA’s Conservation Security Program, CSP now refers to the renamed and completely revamped Conservation “Stewardship” Program, the forerunner’s replacement. Congress overhauled the program in an effort to improve its availability and appeal to a greater number of agricultural and forestry producers.

The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Farm Bill) authorized the CSP as a voluntary program which encourages producers to maintain existing conservation activities and adopt additional ones in order to improve the quality of soil and water, assist in addressing global climate change, and encourage environmentally responsible energy production. The program is slated to run from 2009 through 2017.

As the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s Steven Parkin put it, “Our old mantra used to be ‘reward the best, encourage the rest.’ Well now we’ve got a new program purpose which encourages producers to address resource concerns in a comprehensive manner by installing new conservation techniques and by maintaining the existing conservation they’ve got in place already.”

Steven Parkin, who provides leadership for CSP activities nationwide, and Norm Widman, NRCS’s National Agronomist, recently joined forces with NAFA for a webinar which detailed the purpose and scope of the new program.

To participate, applicants must demonstrate they are meeting the stewardship threshold for at least one resource concern and must address at least one additional priority by the end of the contract.

Parkin said payments will be made for installing and adopting additional conservation activities; improving and maintaining activities in place at the time the contract begins; engaging on-farm conservation research and demonstration activities; and pilot testing of new technologies or innovative conservation practices.

In describing the details of the new ‘resource-conserving crop rotation’ program Widman stated, “This is unique from other CSP activities in that, regardless of how many enhancements one does, producers can also receive a payment above and beyond that if they establish a resource-conserving crop rotation.”

According to Widman, a resource-conserving crop rotation:

1. Includes at least one resource conserving crop as determined by the State Conservationist;
2. Reduces erosion;
3. Improves soil fertility and tilth;
4. Interrupts pest cycles; and
5. Reduces depletion of soil moisture or otherwise reduces the need for irrigation in applicable areas.

A resource-conserving crop is one of the following:

1. A perennial grass, legume, or grass/legume grown for use as forage, seed for planting, or green manure. Typical examples:
 - Alfalfa
 - Hay, grass/legume/grass-legume
 - Pasture, grass/legume/grass-legume
 - Grass, seed (e.g., perennial ryegrass, fescue)
2. A high residue producing crop. Typical examples:
 - Winter/Spring small grains (e.g., oats, wheat, triticale)
 - Corn, field/sweet (not silage)
 - Flax

Parkin said local NRCS conservationists will be able to help producers identify an eligible rotation from a list of approved resource-conserving crops for their state. “I want to let everybody know, we deliver our services at the field level. If anyone has any questions about how this might impact their operation, we sure encourage them to visit with their local NRCS conservationist.”

CSP payment rates will be based on a combination of factors determined by the producer’s current and planned conservation enhancements. Although final payment rates for the 2009 CSP sign-up have not yet been established, the estimated range is expected to be: \$5-\$35/acre for cropland; \$3-\$21/acre for pasture; \$2-\$14/acre for range; and \$1-\$14/acre for forests. Payments are based on the cost of stewardship/conservation activities, forgone income, and environmental benefits achieved. To receive the high-end of payments one will need to commit to several additional activities. CSP payments to an individual or legal entity may not exceed \$200,000 for all contracts entered into during any 5-year period.

In contrast to the former CSP, which had limited sign-up periods and was eligible to producers in only a handful of watersheds each year due to inadequate funding, Parkin said this CSP has a continuous sign-up (with periodic cutoffs to rank submitted applications) and is open to all producers regardless of location. The program can enroll roughly 12.8 million acres each year.

To apply for the new CSP, Parkin encourages producers to use the self-screening checklist (http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/new_csp/special_pdfs/CSP_Producer_Self-Screening_Checklist.pdf) to determine whether the new program is suitable for them.

NRCS field staff also will conduct on-site field verifications of applicants' information. Once potential participants have been field-verified and approved for funding, they must develop a conservation stewardship plan. For information about CSP, including eligibility requirements, producers can go to http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/new_csp or visit their local NRCS field office.