

The Whole Farm Planner

VOLUME VIII, NUMBER 2

www.mnproject.org

JULY 2003

National Conservation Leader Says CSP a Concept Long Overdue

By Mike McGrath

There is a lot of excitement about conservation in agriculture these days, and much of it is emanating from the Circleville, Ohio farm of conservationist Bill Richards, the Chairman of the Board of Conservation Technology Information Center (CTIC) and past chief of the Soil Conservation Service under the senior President Bush in the early 1990s.

Bill Richards is excited about conservation because the new Conservation Security Program (CSP) that is about to be launched is what he calls the “new deal” of conservation programs.

Of the Conservation Security Program, Mr. Richards says, “It’s fair, it’s just, and it’s long overdue,” predicting that the new comprehensive program will encourage agriculture producers everywhere to make conservation a big part of their farm plans.

“CSP is not just a program, it’s a concept,” declared Mr. Richards in a recent telephone interview.

For the Richards farm in central Ohio, conservation has been a concept for many years.

“We have a five-year plan, a total farm plan—stream bank protection, relocated levies, and 40 years of no-till,” explains Richards proudly of the 3,000-acre corn and soybean operation he runs with his sons.

The good conservation record of Bill Richards’ farm is well known. Even the NRCS, while in the early stages of CSP rule development, came out from Washington last fall to look at his farm as an example of an operation that will be able to enroll existing practices in the new program.

“They told us we might need more energy-efficient nozzles on the center pivot,” laughed Richards.

Mr. Richards, who also serves on the board of directors of the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), believes the Conservation Security Program will generate a new peer pressure amongst farmers to protect their natural resources.

“It’s peer pressure with dollar incentive and farmers will embrace it if they understand it,” Richards predicts. “The rules need to be tough, but they cannot be so tough that they turn people off.”

In a keynote speech at a NACD farm bill conference last fall, Mr. Richards predicted that pride, peer pressure, and landlord requirements will push farms to strive for a Tier III Conservation Security Plan, making them what he referred to as “Master Conservationists.”

“Personally, I would like to see them put Tier III in first, rewarding the people who do it right, who are doing total conservation on the total operation.”

While acknowledging that he is a life-long Republican, Mr. Richards gives Iowa’s Senator Harkin credit for sticking to the Conservation Security Program through the farm bill process.

“The Conservation Security Program is total conservation on the land, something a lot of us have been working on for many years,” notes Mr. Richards.

The former Soil Conservation chief sees that the biggest challenge now will be getting the word out to farmers about the new program. He notes that when the rules come out, and farmers see that this is a different concept from past conservation programs, he predicts farmers will compete to strive for the best conservation, and the best incentive payments, under the Conservation Security Program.

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On the Record: CSP Will be Available by Fall of 2003

By Loni Kemp

At recent Congressional hearings, the USDA committed to full and immediate implementation of the Conservation Security Program signed into law just over one year ago. Under questioning, officials promised a final rule this summer and initiation of farmer enrollment yet this fiscal year, which ends October 1, 2003.

When asked by Congressman Tim Holden of Pennsylvania at a June 4 House agriculture conservation subcommittee hearing if CSP would be ready for sign-up by the end of the fiscal year, USDA Deputy Secretary Jim Mosely said he hoped they could have rules finalized by August or September, depending on clearance by the White House Office of Management and Budget, repeating an earlier commitment he made to the Senate appropriations committee in May. Bruce Knight, Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service added that the proposed rule would be out this summer and they have every intent of meeting the timeline for program startup by late summer.

Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa grilled USDA Secretary Ann Veneman on funding issues at a May 8 Senate agriculture appropriations subcommittee. He asked her whether USDA was going to implement CSP as a mandatory funded, open-ended program using the full amount of \$3.773 billion over ten years, the funding cap established in this year's appropriations act. Veneman agreed that CSP would be administered as a mandatory entitlement program, and that USDA was allowed to use the full amount of funding for eligible farmers who enroll.

Senator Harkin also asked Secretary Veneman why the President was proposing \$2 billion over ten years in his 2004 budget when the 2003 appropriations omnibus bill committed to \$3.773 billion. She admitted that the Administration proposal came before this year's appropriations bill was completed, but she did not commit to a new number.

Regarding the cut made to the CSP budget from \$6.8 billion to \$3.7 billion to pay for the \$3.1 billion disaster aid package in the 2003 bill, Chief Knight recently pointed out that the revised cost estimate still leaves nearly twice the \$2 billion originally estimated for CSP in the farm bill debate. Congressman Holden asked the commodity and livestock panel at the June 4 hearing if losing CSP funding had been too high a price to pay for emergency disaster assistance. They all sidestepped the question, though noted that generally disaster aid is treated as emergency spending and

should not require an offset. In fact the American Farm Bureau Federation included strong statements in support of restoration of full CSP funding and a faster pace for implementation in their written and oral testimony that day.

Senator Harkin still plans to make good on Senate leaders' commitments to restore full CSP funding at the next legislative opportunity, possibly in a fall supplemental funding bill.

Demonstrating broad support from important constituencies, two nearly identical letters of support for CSP were sent to Secretary Veneman in May, one from 13 national conservation and sustainable agriculture groups, and the other from 10 national farm and commodity groups. The letters supported full funding and implementation of CSP as a national open-enrollment program as soon as possible, and were signed by the groups below. (See www.mnproject.org/csp/ for full text.)

Thanks to Ferd Hoefner of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition for sharing his notes on the these recent hearings on the Hill.

Groups that signed letter of support for CSP:

American Farmland Trust
Defenders of Wildlife
Environmental Defense
Henry A. Wallace Center
Minnesota Project
National Association of Conservation Districts
National Audubon Society
National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture
National Wildlife Federation
Natural Resources Defense Council
Sierra Club
Soil and Water Conservation Society
Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

National Corn Growers Association
American Farm Bureau Federation
American Soybean Association
National Association of Wheat Growers
National Grain Sorghum Producers
National Farmers Union
National Cotton Council
United Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Association
USA Rice Federation
US Rice Producers Association

USDA Receives Over 700 Comments on CSP

Staff Report

The USDA issued an Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking for the Conservation Security Program on February 18, 2003, with a public comment period that closed on April 3. The information gathered through the Advanced Notice process is being used to help draft the proposed rule, which USDA has said it will issue for public comment this summer.

The Advanced Notice consisted of 15 technical questions posed by USDA pertaining to program implementation. The questions dealt with issues such as conservation practices and standards, payment rates, landlord-tenant relationships, and monitoring and enforcement.

Over 700 groups and individuals responded, with comments coming in from 45 different states. The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition conducted an analysis of the public comments, and released that report on the one-year anniversary of the signing of the farm bill, May 13. The full analysis is available on the web at www.mnproject.org.

A few highlights from the coalition report include:

- In response to a USDA question suggesting the CSP might need to be scaled back and asking for ideas on the best ways to do so, 94% of those responding to this proposition called for the program to be implemented as an entitlement program with open, continuous enrollment as the farm bill requires, rejecting the premise of the question.
- In response to a USDA question suggesting the statute does not limit CSP contracts per producer and asking whether total payments per producer should be limited, 90% of those responding to this query stated their opinion that farmers enrolling in CSP must be limited to a single contract, with payments per farmer or rancher capped at the statutory rates, while another 7% suggested that multiple contracts be permitted for a single operator, but that the operator's total payments, no matter the number of contracts, should be limited at the three statutory levels.
- In response to a USDA question on whether it should set CSP "base" payments – one of three parts of the overall CSP payment structure – using national rental rates or using another rate to better ensure regional equity, 95% of those responding recommended using state or local

rental rates or land values rather than national rates. The majority of these favored state or local agricultural use land valuation.

The Coalition also tabulated some basic information concerning who responded to the Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, finding:

- Responses were received from 45 of the 50 states.
- 148 Individual farmers and ranchers from 38 states responded, equaling 20% of total responses.
- 36 National organizations responded, including 12 conservation/wildlife/environmental groups, 9 commodity groups, 4 sustainable or organic farming groups, 2 agribusinesses, and 1 general farm group.
- 11 State Departments of Agriculture, Natural Resources, or similar agencies responded, as well as 22 local Conservation Districts, 21 state or local conservation groups, 15 state or local farm and food groups, 14 state commodity groups, 8 state Farm Bureaus, and 4 state or regional Farmers Union chapters.
- 319 responders, including individuals and national, state and local organizations, specifically endorsed the detailed comments submitted by Sustainable Agriculture Coalition.

CSP 2004 Appropriation in Question

By Loni Kemp

In the first round of action on 2004 funding, the CSP was zeroed out by the House Appropriations Committee in late June. Amidst massive cuts to conservation and rural programs, the committee left commodity programs unscathed. The Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee will begin its work in mid-July. They have been allocated the same size of an overall cut to make in agriculture programs.

This is just the beginning of a long process, but it is going to take a lot of hard work to secure funding to get the CSP rolling. Last year the House voted to make CSP an Iowa pilot program, but the process didn't end up there, and it is unlikely the Senate will allow the House to eliminate CSP this year. Check our website for updates and action alerts www.mnproject.org/csp

The Willow Lake Farm: *A tradition of conservation innovation and habitat protection on the Southwestern Minnesota prairie*

By Mike McGrath

When Tony Thompson gives a tour of the Willow Lake Farm his enthusiasm about soil conservation and wildlife habitat becomes contagious, infecting even the most novice conservationist with an incredible sense of excitement and hope.

Like an island on a sea of corn and soybeans, where once, long ago, native Tallgrass prairie and wildflowers stretched far into the horizon, Willow Lake Farm is what Tony calls a “temporal refuge” for migratory birds and waterfowl.

Straddling the border of Cottonwood and Jackson counties in Southwestern Minnesota, the Willow Lake Farm contains numerous sloughs and riparian areas that are home to many diverse species of birds. To ensure that water quality and critical habitat are protected and enhanced, production of corn and soybeans at the Willow Lake Farm is managed to provide maximum resource conservation.

As the fourth generation of his family to farm Willow Lake, Tony takes great pride in his stewardship of the land. He practices conservation tillage, has set aside riparian areas in native prairie plantings under the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), and supports and encourages on-farm research and education programs.

Protecting natural resources while producing commodity crops in a competitive market requires extra financial resources as well as a dedicated commitment to good stewardship. That is why Tony is looking forward to implementing a Conservation Security Plan at the Willow Lake Farm.

Current Production Plan

The Willow Lake Farm is comprised of over 2,000 acres of cultivated crops, CRP, wetlands, prairie and prairie savannah restorations with additional acres rented, crop-shared or custom farmed. For the most part, trees are not natural here and the islands of trees that dot the horizon mark the locations of farm homesteads—past and present.

A stream that connects several sloughs dissects the main farm on which the homestead is located. Filter strips that are enrolled in the CRP program and planted in native species protect these important habitat areas.

All of the fields at the Willow Lake Farm are managed using ridge till conservation practices to

eliminate field runoff, to maximize crop residue left in the field, and to prevent soil erosion. The Willow Lake Farm has achieved very high water infiltration rates due to conservation tillage and maximum crop residue retention.



Photo by Mike McGrath

Tony Thompson with a rehabilitating Great Horned Owl at the Willow Lake Farm.

At the Willow Lake Farm, fertilizers and herbicides are banded. Soil testing occurs on an annual basis to determine nutrient needs. In addition to the use of biotech crops such as Round-up Ready soybeans and BT corn, innovative weed management practices include inter-seeding of legumes and small grains to discourage some weed species, as well as to encourage biological diversity to support invertebrate and animal habitat. At the Willow Lake Farm some native weed species are considered desirable to encourage bird nesting.

Since habitat management is a high priority in Willow Lake Farm’s production planning, field traffic is controlled to minimize disturbance to wildlife. A 45-day no entry policy is in effect during the summer season to maximize bird nesting success.

Tony has also set aside some acreage devoted to experimental organic production techniques that involve inter-seeding small grains, legumes and grasses as cover crops, the results of which will be incorporated in production planning to prevent soil erosion and to maximize flora and fauna diversity in the large, conventionally farmed production fields.

In addition to extensive production of corn and soybeans at Willow Lake Farm, Tony has also diversified into the production of native plant seed through his restoration company, Salix Ecological

Resources. Native grass seed is produced on several tracts of land that are remote from the Willow Lake Farm.

Research and education projects receive a high priority at the Willow Lake Farm. Working with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, Tony has conducted trials in broadcast seeding cover crops into corn and soybeans during the mid summer to take advantage of a growing window in the fall and spring.

Cover crops, such as nitro alfalfa, red clover, and hairy vetch, among others, whose mid to late summer growth is compatible with corn and soybeans, can be used to further reduce erosion, increase biodiversity and control undesirable weeds.

Also, for the past several summers the Willow Lake Farm has hosted graduate students who conduct butterfly research in the filter strips surrounding Fish Lake and the adjacent sloughs.

Resources of Concern: Implementing a Conservation Security Plan

The Willow Lake Farm is a working case study in innovative conservation techniques, excellently positioned for implementing a Conservation Security Plan.

Resources of concern at the Willow Lake Farm include:

- Soil Conservation
- Water quality and wetland protection
- Wildlife habitat
- Native prairie remnant enhancement and plant biodiversity

Tony Thompson manages the Willow Lake Farm to protect all resources of concern. Conservation tillage to protect and enhance soil resources is practiced on all production fields. The sloughs, lakes and streams are protected with filter strips, and wildlife habitat for waterfowl, migratory birds, and upland songbirds is given the highest priority.

Therefore, Tony would strive to achieve a Tier III Conservation Security contract that would address all resources of concern on the entire operation to non-degradation levels.

Conservation Practices

Soil Conservation is a primary resource concern in this often-windy area of lakes, sloughs, and critical

habitat. To address soil conservation and erosion concerns, the Willow Lake Farm has incorporated and would enroll in a Conservation Security Plan the following NRCS practices standards:

- **Residue Management—Ridge Till:** Growing crops on pre-formed ridges, alternated with furrows protected by crop residue to manage the amount, orientation and distribution of crop and other plant residues on the soil surface year-round. The beneficial conservation results of this practice include:
 - Reduces sheet, rill and wind erosion
 - Maintains and improves soil organic matter and tilth
 - Provides food and escape cover for wildlife
 - Manages snow to increase plant available moisture
- **Cover Crop:** Establishment of grasses, legumes, forbs, or other herbaceous plants for seasonal cover, to meet the following purposes:
 - Reduce erosion from wind and water
 - Increase soil organic matter
 - Scavenge and sequester excess nutrients in the soil
 - Increase biodiversity
 - Promote biological nitrogen fixation
 - Weed suppression
- **Nutrient Management:** To ensure the utilization of plant nutrients in a manner that maintains or improves soil and protects other important resources. Soil testing occurs on a regular basis at the Willow Lake Farm.
- **Pest Management:** Managing agricultural pest infestations including weeds, insects, and disease to reduce adverse effects on plant growth, crop production and environmental resources.

Possible other soil conservation practices that Tony could consider under a Conservation Security contract include:

- **Field Borders:** A strip of permanent vegetation, in this case native prairie grasses, established at the edge or around the perimeter of a field. Field borders produce added conservation benefits such as:
 - Reduction of erosion from wind and water

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(The Willow Lake Farm continued from page 5)

- Soil and water quality protection
- Management of harmful insect populations
- Provides wildlife food and cover
- **Conservation Crop Rotation:** Dependent upon crop marketing feasibility, a cropping rotation that incorporates a resource conserving crop could provide additional conservation benefits:
 - Increased soil erosion protection
 - Improve soil organic matter content
 - Increase wildlife food and cover
 - Manage the balance of plant nutrients

strip practices will complement the working lands conservation practices to help meet nondegradation levels of resource protection on the entire farm.

The Willow Lake Farm has a long tradition of wetland wildlife management. Existing management practices to protect and enhance the wetland wildlife habitat could be enrolled under a Conservation Security contract using the following NRCS conservation practice standards:

- **Wetland Wildlife Habitat Management:** Retaining, developing or managing wetland habitat for waterfowl, furbearers, and/or other wetland associated flora and fauna



Ridge tilled corn in the foreground, organic rye cover in middle ground, and the shaded homestead at the Willow Lake Farm in the background.

Water quality, wetland protection, and wildlife habitat are addressed at the Willow Lake farm not only through the soil conservation practices described above, but also with over 60 acres of riparian filter strips that are enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program. These filter strips provide buffers between the production acres and the sloughs, lakes and streams.

While a farmer will not be able to receive CSP payments for land that is enrolled in the CRP, the conservation benefits derived from the CRP filter

- **Riparian Herbaceous Cover:** Creation and enhancement of herbaceous cover in riparian ecosystems using grasses, forbs and other plants.

Native Prairie restoration and enhancement plays a significant role in the management plan of the Willow Lake Farm. Through Salix Ecological Services, Tony is producing seeds of native prairie species for marketing to public and private restoration projects.

As in most areas of Minnesota, invasive species are a problem. At the Willow Lake Farm Tony strives to eliminate exotic invasive species through the establishment of native plant species that also prevent erosion and provide food and shelter for native wildlife species, while also using more conventional methods such as mowing and spraying with a backpack sprayer.

Minnesota's Tallgrass Prairie is considered a resource in decline. Loss of Tallgrass Prairie habitat to agricultural production threatens native wildlife species and contributes to declining water quality through erosion.

Under a Conservation Security Program contract, the Willow Lake Farm could enroll its existing native prairie development and enhancement practices to provide financial incentives for management. The following NRCS practice would be implemented:

- Restoration and Management of Declining Habitats: Restoring and conserving rare or declining native vegetative communities and associated wildlife species. The purposes associated with this practice include:
 - Restoration of land or aquatic habitats degraded by human activity
 - Provide habitat for rare and declining wildlife species by restoring native plant communities
 - Increase plant community diversity
 - Management of unique or declining native habitats

Other NRCS practices that may be implemented to achieve non-degradation levels include:

- Early Successional Habitat Development/Management
- Prescribed Burning
- Range Planting

Note: All existing practices may or may not require modification to meet NRCS practice standards.

Enhanced/Bonus Payments

The Conservation Security Program provides for enhanced payments to the farmer/rancher who meets certain conservation planning criteria. These criteria include:

- Implements and maintains multiple conservation practices that exceed minimum requirements
- Addresses local conservation priorities

- Participates in on-farm conservation research, demonstration, or pilot project
- Participates in watershed or regional conservation research involving 75 percent of producers in a target area
- Conducts research, assessment, and evaluation practices

At the Willow Lake Farm, Tony implements multiple conservation practices to provide for a comprehensive approach to resource protection. As indicated above, soil conservation and erosion control practices, CRP filter strips, cover crops, native prairie plantings, and management of wildlife habitat all contribute to a resource management system that addresses important local conservation priorities, and provides for the long-term, sustainability of the Willow Lake Farm.

Over the past several years, the Willow Lake Farm has participated in research projects involving cover crop experimentation through the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, butterfly research on the CRP filter strips and adjoining cropland through Iowa State University, and critical wildlife and waterfowl habitat study and management through the North Heron Lake Game Producers Association.

Tony Thompson and his farming neighbors have worked closely together and supported each other since 4-H and childhood, trying to identify ways to make their farms optimally productive while at the same time protecting environmental, recreational and aesthetic qualities, and the ecology.

As the Willow Lake Farm and its neighbors enroll in the Conservation Security Program, research, assessment, and evaluation practices will continue to guide further enhancement of the precious resources of this Minnesota prairie landscape.

“Men and Nature must work hand in hand. The throwing out of balance of the resources of nature throws out of balance also the lives of men.” Franklin D. Roosevelt

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