

The Conservation Security Program

Conservation Plans for Working Lands

The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 became law in May of 2002. This farm policy will shape American agriculture for the next six years. The largest new program in the farm bill is the **Conservation Security Program**, an innovative conservation program that will provide farmers and ranchers with annual payments for implementing conservation plans on their working lands beginning in 2003.

Eligibility

Any agricultural producer—an owner, operator, landlord, tenant, or sharecropper who shares in the risk of producing any crop or livestock—is entitled to develop a **conservation security plan**. The plan must meet the approval of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and must contain:

- 1) Identification of designated resources and land to be conserved.
- 2) Description of selected tier level and practices to be implemented for resource conservation.
- 3) Schedule for conservation plan implementation.

Conservation Security Contracts

Once the conservation security plan is approved, the farmer will enter into a contract with the NRCS. In each of the three tier levels of contracts, NRCS will determine minimum requirements and required practices. All practices must meet NRCS standards.

Tier 1 Contract:

- Maximum annual payment of \$20,000.
- Partial farm enrollment
- 5 year contract, renewable for 5 to 10 years
- Must address at least one significant resource of concern for the enrolled portion of land

Tier 2 Contract:

- Maximum annual payment of \$35,000
- Whole farm enrollment
- 5 to 10 year contract, renewable for up to 10 years
- Must address at least one significant resource of concern for entire operation

Tier 3 Contract:

- Maximum annual payment of \$45,000
- Whole farm enrollment
- 5 to 10 year contract, renewable for up to 10 years
- Must apply a resource management system that addresses all resources of concern for entire operation

Payment Criteria

Annual payments are determined by the total of the following three amounts:

- 1) **Base Payment** uses the average national per-acre rental rate for a specified land use during the 2001 crop year
 - **Tier 1:** 5 percent of rental rate. Total base payment may not exceed 25 percent of the tier limit or \$5,000
 - **Tier 2:** 10 percent of rental rate. Total base payment may not exceed 30 percent of tier limit or \$10,500
 - **Tier 3:** 15 percent of rental rate. Total base payment may not exceed 30 percent of tier limit or \$13,500
- 2) **Cost share for Practices** uses the average county costs of practices for the 2001 crop year. Payment covers up to 75 percent of the total practice cost, or 90 percent for beginning farmers and ranchers. In addition to new practices, costs of maintenance of existing practices are covered. Practices include:
 - Land management and vegetative practices
 - Land-based structural practices
- 3) **Enhanced Payment:** An enhanced payment will be made for plans that include one or more of the following:
 - Multiple conservation practices that exceed minimum tier requirements
 - Address local conservation priorities in addition to resources of concern for the operation
 - Participates in on-farm research, demonstration, or pilot projects
 - Participates in watershed or regional conservation plan with 75% of producers involved
 - Carries out assessment and evaluation of activities covered in the conservation security plan

Conservation practices that may be implemented under a Conservation Security Contract:

- Nutrient management
- Integrated pest management
- Water conservation and quality management, including irrigation
- Grazing, pasture, and rangeland management
- Soil conservation, quality, and residue management
- Invasive species management
- Fish and wildlife habitat conservation, restoration, and management
- Air quality management
- Energy conservation measures
- Biological resource conservation and regeneration
- Contour farming
- Strip cropping
- Cover cropping
- Controlled rotational grazing
- Resource-conserving crop rotation
- Conversion of portions of cropland from soil depleting to soil conserving use
- Partial field conservation practices
- Native grassland and prairie protection and restoration
- Other practices approved by USDA

Eligible Land

Private agricultural land is eligible, including cropland, grassland, prairie land, improved pastureland, rangeland, and forested lands that are part of a farm.

Excluded Practices

No payments will be made for animal waste storage or treatment facilities.

Resources of Concern

Each state NRCS office will identify state and local resources of concern. Every conservation security plan must address at least one resource of concern, and Tier 3 plans must address all that are applicable to their operation. The resource of concern must be addressed to a level that meets appropriate non-degradation standards -- meaning that the combination of practices in the plan must solve the problem so that resources are sustained.

Note: Additional requirements are specified in the law, and rules now under development will contain further details. Contact your NRCS office for more information.



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