

National Whole Farm Planning Policy Enacted

Conservation Security Program In Farm Bill

By Loni Kemp

After years of shaping and endorsements by farm, conservation and environmental groups, President Bush signed the Conservation Security Program into law as part of the 2002 farm bill on May 13, 2002.

The Conservation Security Program is the biggest new program in the farm bill, and marks the first time that the government will provide stewardship incentives beyond cost sharing for farmers to implement conservation plans on their working lands.

“This is a wonderful accomplishment. I think we are off to a new era of visionary farm programs,” said former Minnesota Congressman and past sponsor of the Conservation Security Program, David Minge.

Said Loni Kemp, Senior Policy Analyst at the Minnesota Project, “In light of the fact that most of the farm bill continues commodity subsidies that cost taxpayers billions of dollars, the Conservation Security Program serves as a shining star for the future, rewarding those farmers and ranchers who have been doing a good job on their land, and providing incentives for others to also farm in a way that sustains rural economies, family farms, and a cleaner environment for all Americans. It could be the model for future farm bills.”

The National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture made the program a top priority in their farm bill agenda, and it was strongly supported by diverse groups including the National Farmer’s Union, the American Farm Bureau Federation, conservation groups, and virtually every major environmental organization.

The farm bill went into conference committee with the full Conservation Security Program included in the Senate bill, but absent from the House bill. Toward the end of conference committee negotiations, a farm bill framework agreement was announced that would have funded the Conservation Security Program at \$2 billion over the next six years, but Senator Tom Harkin, Chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee and chief author of the proposal, never gave up on his top priority. When the dust finally settled, the new program was adopted with full entitlement status, not subject to a spending cap, which puts it on par with existing commodity programs.

"By giving the Conservation Security Program entitlement status, farm bill conferees said we want a new framework for farm programs, one that recognizes and rewards farmers for implementing conservation on working lands," said Ferd Hoefner, Washington Representative for the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. "This represents a milestone in the history and evolution of federal agricultural programs," added Hoefner.

As an entitlement, any eligible farmer or rancher who implements an approved conservation security plan will be eligible for payments, without the need for an allocation and bidding system, or the inevitable waiting list and backlog so common in other conservation programs.

The final bill includes all the major features of the original Senate version, including three tiers of progressive conservation plans, eligibility of all farms and ranches across the nation, cost sharing for both new practices and management of existing practices, bonus payments for exceptional conservation performance, and state designation of conservation priorities that must be addressed.

Several features were modified during the legislative process, including the payment formula. One significant change was the inclusion of a strict standard for the minimum extent of conservation practices, requiring that plans fully resolve the resource concern they have chosen to address. Another change condensed the list of eligible practices for each tier into one list for the whole program, and significantly abbreviated the list of purposes of the Program.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service will work out additional details in rule language. The NRCS plan is to release a draft interim rule this summer, followed by a public comment period and then a final rule. Farmers and ranchers can expect to begin implementation in 2003.

The final bill language can be viewed at <http://www.fb-net.org/FB/CSA.htm>. For those who wish to avoid the legalize language, we have included an abridged version of the Conservation Security Program in this edition of the Whole Farm Planner.