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Landmark Conservation Farm Program Awaits Start-Up *Coalition Releases Conservation Security Program Analysis*

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Today, on the first anniversary of the signing of the 2002 farm bill, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition released its analysis of public comments submitted to the U.S. Department of Agriculture on implementation of the Conservation Security Program (CSP), the landmark centerpiece of the farm bill's conservation title. The CSP provides financial and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers who develop and maintain conservation systems that solve critical natural resource and environmental concerns. In signing the farm bill a year ago, President Bush cited its conservation provisions and funding as one of the best things about the legislation.

"The public has spoken and hands-down it wants this innovative program now," said Ferd Hoefner, Washington Representative of the Coalition. "Our analysis shows overwhelming support for the CSP and remarkably unified positions on its implementation."

According to the Coalition's analysis, of over 700 responses from 45 states to USDA's "Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking" for the CSP, nearly all supported the program, with only 6 negative responses. Over 400 responders, moreover, specifically urged USDA to get the program underway this fiscal year.

The 2002 farm bill directed USDA to finish CSP rulemaking by February 7 of this year, but that deadline passed without action and was followed by issuance of the advanced notice of rulemaking on February 18. The public comment period for the advanced notice closed April 3.

With the comments in hand, USDA now puts the final touches on the proposed rule, the publication of which will give the public one more chance to comment before the program goes online. At a Senate Agriculture Appropriations hearing last week, USDA Deputy Secretary Jim Moseley reiterated publicly the Department's intent to have the program operative by the end of this summer.

"The Administration should redouble its efforts, issue the long overdue rule, and get the CSP's comprehensive conservation incentives into farmers' hands this year," said Hoefner. "Delay in implementing this program serves no one - not the stewardship-minded farmers and ranchers, who have been waiting for it, nor the general public, which deserves a smarter approach to ranch and farmland conservation."

In its review of all the public comment submitted to USDA, the Coalition found substantial unanimity of views on the need to ensure that program implementation requires real resource concerns will be addressed in CSP conservation plans and contracts. USDA was encouraged to set strong, reasonable minimum requirements for program participation. Most of those commenting also supported making the full array of conservation practices eligible for support, except those specifically excluded by statute such as animal waste storage and treatment facilities. In addition, the Coalition found that:

- 94% of those responding to a USDA question concerning the scope and nature of the program called for the CSP to be implemented as a nationally-available entitlement program with continuous, open enrollment as the farm bill envisions.
- 90% of those responding to a USDA question about whether or not there should be a per farmer payment limitation said CSP participants should be limited to a single contract, with payments per farmer or rancher capped at the statutory rates of up to \$20,000, \$35,000, and \$45,000 (graduated payment limits based on the conservation level or "tier" at which the producer enrolls), 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 capped at the three same statutory limits.
- 98% of those responding to a USDA question about how to balance the various components of the total CSP payment to producers recommended "base" payments not exceed the limits set by statute (\$5,000, \$10,500, and \$13,500 by conservation tier), the balance of the total CSP payment include cost-share, maintenance, and "enhanced" payments, and the enhanced payments be used to sharply focus the program on strong environmental outcomes.
- 95% of those responding to a USDA question on how to calculate base payment recommended using state or local rental rates or land values rather than national rental rates, with just 1% of those responding favoring the use of national rental rates.

Earlier this year, congressional leaders regrettably cut \$3.1 billion from the CSP to offset the costs of emergency disaster payments. That action capped CSP expenditures at \$3.77 billion through 2013. However, in a floor dialog with CSP sponsor Senator Tom Harkin as the disaster package was being approved in the Senate, Appropriations Committee Chair Ted Stevens, Agriculture Committee Chair Thad Cochran, Majority Leader Bill Frist, and Minority Leader Tom Daschle committed themselves to removing the cap and restoring full CSP funding in an appropriations bill later this year. At the same time, House Agriculture Committee chair Bob Goodlatte and ranking member Charlie Stenholm also expressed their deep concern over the cut made to the CSP.

"We urge the Administration to rally behind restoration of full funding and accelerated implementation and delivery of this program," said Hoefner. "Farmers and ranchers are anxious to participate in this effort to protect and improve the natural resource base on which our long-term food security depends."

The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition represents grassroots farm, rural, and conservation organizations that advocate public policies supporting the long-term economic, social, and environmental sustainability of agriculture, natural resources and rural communities. The Conservation Security Program was among the Coalition's priorities for the 2002 farm bill.

[Read highlights of SAC's analysis of the public comments.](#)

Brief background information on the CSP follows.

CSP Background: The Conservation Security Program is a comprehensive stewardship incentives program that provides financial and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers to reward them for investments of labor, management, and capital aimed at fostering healthy, productive, and non-eroding soils, clean air and water, energy savings, wildlife habitat, and prairie, wetland, and other ecosystem restorations. The lead congressional sponsors of the CSP during the farm bill debate were Senators Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Gordon Smith (R-OR) and Representatives John Thune (R-SD) and Marcy Kaptur (D-OH).

The forward-looking CSP is the first broad-based federal farm conservation program ever that by statute requires participants to solve resource problems to the non-degradation or sustainable resource use level. It also is the first to allow participation by producers who are currently doing an exemplary job of conservation, to emphasize continual maintenance and improvement of conservation systems, and to offer three levels of participation. The top level or "tier" requires the farmer to develop and implement a whole farm resource management system plan that addresses all major resource concerns.

Like the farm bill's commodity programs, the CSP is an entitlement program with direct access to the Commodity Credit Corporation, but in this case open on a voluntary basis to all producers with strong conservation qualifications. Unlike the commodity programs, the CSP is open to all farmers and ranchers, rather than just the minority that grow corn, cotton, wheat and other "program" crops. Under the CSP, farmers and ranchers make their own choices of the mix of crops and livestock produced while receiving conservation payments aimed at increasing and maintaining environmental benefits and sustainability. Also unlike the commodity programs, CSP payments are capped at a modest amount per farm per year and are fully compliant with international trade obligations.

The CSP differs from the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in that it rewards farmers for using sustainable methods on working farms, whereas the CRP retires farmland from production. It also differs from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) in many ways. CSP is a long-term, annual program whereas EQIP is generally just a three-year program. EQIP provides cost-share assistance only, and only for newly implemented practices, whereas CSP provides more comprehensive support for new and ongoing, actively managed practices. EQIP increasingly focuses on helping to pay for expensive equipment and structures, whereas CSP emphasizes more cost-effective management practices and alternative farming systems. CSP also requires resource concerns be solved to the non-degradation or sustainable use level, whereas EQIP pays for practices and structures regardless of the outcome. Finally, EQIP involves a funding allocation system, a sign-up period and bidding system, and an annual dollar program cap, whereas CSP is open on a continuous basis for enrollment of everyone with eligible land and a qualified, approved conservation plan that meets the given criteria.