Understanding the USDA Conservation Stewardship Program: A Primer for North Coast Farmers and Ranchers

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What Is CSP?

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) is the nation's largest Farm Bill conservation program, supporting agricultural producers who are committed to sustainable land management. It rewards efforts to improve soil health, sequester carbon, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, combat erosion, enhance water and air quality, support biodiversity, conserve water and energy resources, and promote wildlife and pollinator habitats.

This program is designed to recognize and compensate farmers and ranchers for their existing conservation practices while also providing funds to expand efforts. The program rewards conservation practices through 5-year renewable payment contracts to farmers, ranchers, and foresters to actively maintain and expand conservation practices such as brush management, cover cropping, rotational grazing, and integrated pest management. For example, CSP can provide additional funding to support the use of intensive, multi-species cover crops to improve soil health and increase soil organic matter.

CSP is ideal for those who are actively engaged in conservation activities, such as soil health management, support for pollinators and wildlife, or practices that improve water quality. To qualify, land managers must demonstrate a commitment to environmental stewardship by addressing at least one additional resource concern such as soil, water, air quality, livestock conditions, or wildlife habitat.

How the Program Works

When agricultural producers apply for CSP, they receive guidance and support from a conservation planner from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The planner will assess the producer's existing conservation activities, identify which resource concerns are already being met, and recommend new practices or enhancements to existing practices. New activities will be designed to address at least one additional resource concern as part of

the five-year CSP contract. During this period, producers receive annual payments for their efforts.

Step 1: Submit an application to your local NRCS office using form CPA-1200.

Step 2: Work with your local Farm Service Agency (FSA) to obtain a farm number and complete other documents required for USDA programs eligibility if you have not previously enrolled.

Step 3: A NRCS conservation planner will set up an appointment to determine your operation's eligibility based on the land use, existing conditions, and current management and discuss your goals and objectives.

Step 4: Work with the conservation planner to identify conservation practices or enhancements to existing practices as part of developing a conservation plan.

Step 5: Applications are ranked at NRCS, and funding selections are based on ranking score outcomes.

Is CSP a Good Fit for Small and Underserved Producers in the North Coast?

It can be! Many small producers in the North Coast region are already practicing conservation techniques that could qualify for compensation under CSP. The program supports these producers in achieving their environmental goals by building on existing efforts and expanding current projects.

While the program has been around for decades, recent changes have made CSP more appealing to small producers. The minimum annual payment has increased from $1,500 to $4,000, making the program more worthwhile for smaller operations. According to a local NRCS office, "*The new, higher minimum payments can significantly help small farmers cover the costs of conservation improvements.*" Although Farm Bill programs require detailed paperwork, the higher payments provide a strong incentive for participation. When asked if the amount of paperwork was reasonable, one producer responded, "*Absolutely - I was expecting a high volume so I was pleasantly surprised.*"

Many small, beginning, and historically underserved producers in the North Coast are already accessing CSP funding. One farmer in Marin County shared, "*The Conservation Stewardship Program has helped us feel supported in our conservation practices. It's rewarding to be compensated for the work we're already doing, and the year-end check is a nice bonus. The paperwork isn't overwhelming, and it helps keep our record-keeping on track*."

Some farmers are utilizing CSP to support biodiversity projects - a small farmer in Lake County shared, "*We are in a CSP program which provides funding for a number of smaller projects to enhance the biodiversity of the farm through practices like alley cropping, bat houses, and native tree planting. We are happy with the funding levels for all projects we have completed with the NRCS, including EQIP projects, which have had a significant positive impact on our operations. These are all long term goals and the current CSP program is definitely helping us achieve these goals*."

While the program is becoming more popular, the region has seen high application acceptance rates for CSP in past years and the program has been undersubscribed. Given the increase in annual payment rates, the program is expected to become more competitive over time. A Sonoma County producer noted, "*This is a win-win program. Definitely take the time to explore your options and see how your practices can be supported*."

Who is Participating in CSP in the North Coast?

Producers in the North Coast region are using CSP to enhance forest, range, pasture and crop lands. Current participants include small diversified crop growers, wine grape growers, and fruit growers.

CSP vs. EQIP: Understanding the Difference Between Farm Bill Programs

NRCS offers several programs, including CSP and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). While both fund conservation activities, they cater to different needs. EQIP is often a better starting point for producers new to conservation as it focuses on funding new practices to address outstanding natural resource concerns. The most successful path for many producers is to begin with EQIP projects and later transition to CSP when they are ready to expand their conservation activities.

It can be challenging to know where to start when addressing large natural resource issues on the farm. One farmer who is new to CSP and experiences challenges with water quality from their agricultural water source shared the following advice, "*I would suggest working through EQIP opportunities before moving into CSP. For us, it made a lot more sense to work through water quality management with EQIP versus CSP, but it was not clear until we got partway through the enrollment process."* This experience highlights the importance of working closely with a NRCS conservation planner to identify all potential natural resource concerns and pathways for funding.

It's important to note the difference in payment rates for some conservation practices compared to EQIP and discuss payment rates with NRCS staff during the conservation planning process. A farmer in Lake County shared, "*My advice to other farmers would be to meet with the NRCS representative and provide documentation of all goals and current*

issues preventing achievement of these goals. Work through EQIP opportunities first, looking for contracts that reduce labor and help save money to provide an immediate return, such as mulching to reduce or eliminate weed management."

However, if you have done previous conservation work, CSP may provide an opportunity to maintain the ecological health of the land. A producer in Sonoma County with a current CSP contract shared, "*We are in the 'maintenance' phase with our land, and the program funding allows us to continue managing it to meet our needs.*"

The local NRCS office can help navigate this process and recommend the most appropriate program for your site-specific conditions and operational goals.

Important Considerations for Potential Applicants

CSP may not be the right program for all producers. Before applying, it's important to be aware of a few key requirements:

- Applicants must have a social security number or an employer identification number issued by the IRS.
- There is no minimum acreage requirement, but all land must comply with USDA's highly erodible land and wetland conservation provisions.
- Eligible land must be in active agricultural production. Land that is being prepped for future production does not qualify.
- Applicants must demonstrate control of the land (own or lease) and must meet the USDA Adjusted Gross Income limitations.

How to Apply for CSP

A great first step is contacting your local NRCS field office to discuss whether CSP is right for you. NRCS offers free, confidential technical assistance and can guide you through the application process.

Farmers can apply at any time. Typically, once a year, usually in late winter, NRCS reviews applications, ranks them based on the total environmental benefits they provide, and enrolls the highest-ranking proposals in five-year renewable contracts. Applications are accepted on a continuous basis, but they're considered for funding in different ranking periods. Be sure to ask your local NRCS office about the deadline for the CSP ranking period to ensure you turn in your application in time.

To find your local NRCS Field Office, visit
https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/contact/find-a-service-center

Resources

Visit the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program webpage:
https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/csp-conservation-stewardship-program

A full list of eligible CSP bundles and enhancements can be found here: https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/csp-conservation-stewardship-program/csp-enhancements-and-bundles

National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's Grassroots Guide to Farm Bill Programs https://sustainableagriculture.net/publications/grassrootsguide/conservation-environment/conservation-stewardship-program/

National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's Farmers Guide to Conservation Stewardship Program - March 2025 Edition and Stewarding Success under CSP: https://sustainableagriculture.net/publications/

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