

Contact:

Greg Walker, Assistant State Conservationist, Programs
(919) 873-2104

FEDERAL CONSERVATION AGENCY BEGINS STATEWIDE SIGN-UP FOR THE NEW CONSERVATION STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

Continuous Sign-Up Begins Aug. 10

Raleigh NC, Aug. 10, 2009—The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will begin continuous sign-up for the new Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) on August 10, in North Carolina. The first cutoff for ranking purposes is scheduled for Sept. 30, State Conservationist Mary Combs announced today.

“The Conservation Stewardship Program changed dramatically in the 2008 Farm Bill,” said Combs. “NRCS took the time to develop a program that would appeal to our diverse customers and offer them an equal chance to participate. We hope that agricultural and forestry producers in North Carolina take full advantage of the benefits this newly revised program offers.”

The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Farm Bill) authorized the Conservation Stewardship Program. Congress renamed and revamped the former Conservation Security Program completely to improve its availability and appeal to agricultural and forestry producers. The Conservation Stewardship Program will be offered in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the Pacific and Caribbean areas through continuous sign-ups with announced cut-off application dates for ranking periods. The maximum annual enrollment is capped at nearly 12.8 million acres nationwide.

NRCS administers CSP, a voluntary conservation program designed to encourage agricultural and forestry producers to adopt additional conservation practices and improve, maintain and manage existing ones.

To apply for the newly revamped CSP, individual producers, legal entities and Indian tribes will be encouraged to use a self-screening checklist first to determine whether the new program is suitable for them or their operation. The checklist is available on NRCS Web sites and at NRCS field offices.

After the self-screening, the producer’s current and proposed conservation activities are entered in the conservation measurement tool (CMT). This tool estimates the level of environmental performance to be achieved by a producer implementing and maintaining conservation activities. The conservation performance estimated by the CMT will be used to rank applications.

A producer must treat at least one resource concern and one priority resource concern during the length of the CSP’s five-year contract. North Carolina will select between three to five priority resource concerns, one of the criteria that will be used to rank applications. The State Technical Committee in will advise the NRCS State Conservationist as he or she selects North Carolina’s priority resource concerns. North Carolina will establish ranking pools to rank applications with similar resource concerns. The State’s priority resource concerns are water quality, soil erosion, soil quality, water quantity, animals, and plants.

NRCS field staff will conduct on-site field verifications of pre-approved applicants' information provided for the CMT.

Another major change in the program is the method of payments. CSP will offer two possible types of payments—annual and supplemental. The annual payment will be established using the conservation performance estimated by the CMT and calculated by land use type for enrolled eligible land. A supplemental payment is also available to participants who also adopt a resource-conserving crop rotation. The annual payment limitation for a person or legal entity is \$40,000. A person or legal entity cannot exceed \$200,000 for all contracts entered into during any five-year period.

Individual producers, legal entities and Indian tribes must meet several requirements to obtain a Conservation Stewardship Program contract. They must be listed as the operator in the USDA farm records management system for the operation being offered for enrollment. They must document that they control the land for the term of the contract and include all eligible land in their entire operation in that contract. They must comply with highly erodible land and wetland conservation provisions and comply with Adjusted Gross Income provisions.

Eligible lands include cropland, grassland, improved pastureland, non-industrial private forestland—a new land use for the program—and agricultural land under the jurisdiction of an Indian tribe.

Land enrolled in the Conservation Security Program, Conservation Reserve Program, Grasslands Reserve Program and Wetlands Reserve Program are ineligible for the new Conservation Stewardship Program.

The new CSP is very different from the old Conservation Security Program. Under the old program, producers were eligible if they were in the selected watersheds. All contracts under the old CSP will be honored until the end of the contract term.

For more information about the new CSP, please visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/new_csp/. For more information about conservation programs in North Carolina, please visit www.nc.nrcs.usda.gov/2009-CSP-index.html .

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