

**USDA'S CONSERVATION SECURITY PROGRAM: PROVIDING INCENTIVES TO PROTECT  
AND ENHANCE NATURAL RESOURCES**

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**ABSTRACT**

With the signing of the 2002 Farm Bill, President George W. Bush authorized the implementation of the Conservation Security Program (CSP), a conservation stewardship program. In describing the new program, Bruce Knight, Chief of USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service, said, "CSP rewards the best and motivates the rest." CSP provides for payments to producers for maintaining effective conservation treatments on cropland and grasslands; implementing new conservation practices; and using resource treatment enhancements beyond the requirements of NRCS's conservation practice standards. For program eligibility the cropland/grassland must, as a minimum, treat soil quality and water quality concerns to meet NRCS quality criteria for resource protection. Base payments to the producer are greater if other resource concerns such as air quality, wildlife habitat, plant and animal health, irrigation water efficiency, and energy efficiency are also treated. In addition, incentives are provided for the implementation of treatment enhancements beyond the minimum requirements to meet resource quality criteria and the respective conservation practice standards. Examples include long-term no tillage systems, use of cover crops, precision ag systems, and integrated pest management. To assess resource conditions, NRCS uses several available models such as RUSLE2 and WEQ and numerous special assessment tools such as the soil conditioning index, pasture condition score, irrigation efficiency index, and the wildlife habitat index. The Conservation Security Program is a national program. However, because of fund limits, contracts were limited to eighteen selected river basin size watersheds in the pilot year (2004). With a significant increase in allocated funds, program participation has been extended to 202 additional watersheds for 2005.