

The Conservation Security Program: A New Conservation Program That Rewards Historic Land Stewards Who Have Applied and Managed Effective Conservation Systems

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Abstract

The Conservation Security Program (CSP) is a voluntary program that provides financial and technical assistance to promote the conservation and improvement of soil, water, air, energy, plant and animal life, and other conservation purposes on tribal and private working lands. Working lands include cropland, grassland, prairie land, improved pasture, and rangeland, as well as forested land that is an incidental part of an agriculture operation. In the first signup, CSP was offered in 18 watersheds located in 22 states. In 2005, the program is available in all 50 states, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Basin. The program provides equitable access to benefits to all producers, regardless of size of operation, crops produced, or geographic location.

Introduction

The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (2002 Farm Bill) (Pub. L. 107-171) amended the Food Security Act of 1985 to authorize the Conservation Security Program (CSP). The CSP is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The CSP is a voluntary conservation program that supports ongoing stewardship of private agricultural lands by providing payments for maintaining and enhancing natural resources. The CSP identifies and rewards those farmers and ranchers who are meeting the highest standards of conservation and environmental management on their operations (NRCS 2004).

The program provides financial and technical assistance to promote the conservation and improvement of soil, water, air, energy, plant and animal



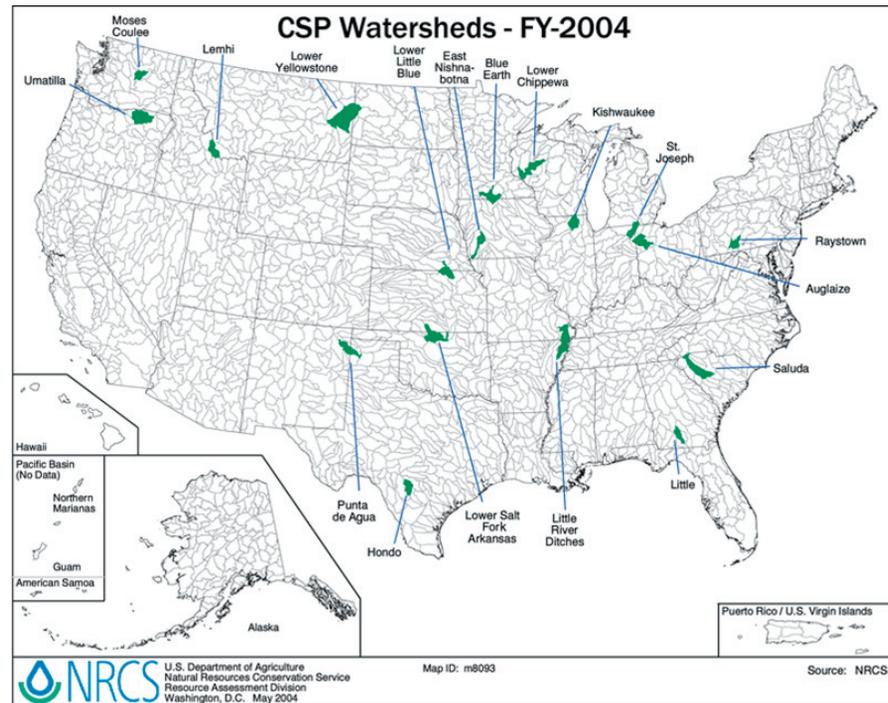
Contour buffer strips in highly erodible cropland. (T. McCabe, USDA-NRCS)

life, and other conservation purposes on tribal and private working lands. Working lands include cropland, grassland, vineyards/orchards, prairie land, improved pasture, and rangeland, as well as forested land that is an incidental part of an agricultural operation (NRCS 2004). The CSP will help producers maintain conservation stewardship and implement additional conservation practices that provide added environmental enhancement, while creating powerful incentives for other producers to meet those same standards of conservation performance.

Watershed Selection

For CSP, NRCS decided on a staged, watershed-based implementation process. This was done for economic and administrative reasons. Focusing on high-priority watersheds reduced both the administrative burden and costs of processing a large number of applications for which funding was not available. For the 2004 CSP sign-up, 18 watersheds in 22 states (some watersheds were in multiple states) were selected (Figure 1). There were several criteria for selecting the 18 watersheds. These included watersheds that had a wide variety of eligible land uses, have a history of good land stewardship on the part of landowners, have high-priority resource issues to be addressed, and have technical tools necessary, such as digitized soils information, to streamline program implementation. There were 2,200 CSP contracts signed in the 18 watersheds selected for the FY 2004 sign-up. These contracts accounted for 1.9 million acres entering the program.

Figure 1. Map of watersheds included in CSP in 2004. There were 2,200 CSP contracts signed in these 18 watersheds in the contiguous U.S. for the fiscal year 2004



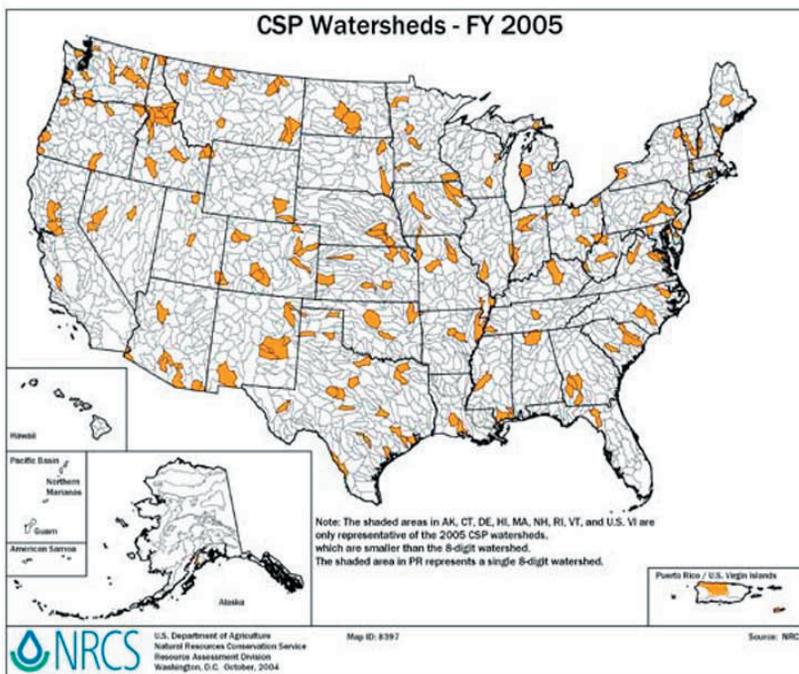


Figure 2. Map of 202 CSP watersheds for 2005.

For the FY 2005 CSP signup, land in 202 watersheds representing every state and the Caribbean will be eligible to participate in the program (Figure 2). Combined, these watersheds cover a little more than 83 million acres. The same criteria were used to select these watersheds as were used to select the watersheds in the FY 2004 signup.

The intent of the program is to rotate watersheds available for CSP on an 8-year cycle. Each year, approximately one-eighth of the nation's 2,119 watersheds will be eligible for the signup. Producers who aren't eligible for the signup can utilize other funding and technical programs offered by NRCS and other state, federal, and private partners to help them achieve a higher level of conservation so that they can apply for CSP in the future.

Land Eligibility

To be eligible for CSP, the producer and the producer's operation must meet the following basic criteria:

- The land must be privately owned or tribal land, and the majority of the land must be located within one of the selected watersheds.
- The applicant must be in compliance with highly erodible and wetland provisions of the Food Security Act of 1985, have an active interest in the agricultural operation, and have control of the land for the life of the contract.
- The applicant must share in the risk of producing any crop or livestock and be entitled to a share in the crop or livestock marketed from the operation.

Once basic eligibility is met, all applicants must meet the following minimum tier eligibility and contract requirements, plus any additional requirements in the signup announcement:

- For Tier I, the producer must have addressed water quality and soil quality to the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) standards on part of the agricultural operation prior to acceptance.
- For Tier II, the producer must have addressed water quality and soil quality to the FOTG standards on the entire agricultural operation prior to acceptance and agree to address 1 additional resource by the end of the contract period.
- For Tier III, the producer must have addressed all resource concerns to a resource-management system level that meets the FOTG standards on the entire agricultural operation prior to acceptance and must agree to additional enhancement activities outlined in the signup announcement.

Soil-quality practices include crop rotations, cover crops, tillage practices, prescribed grazing, and providing adequate wind barriers. Water-quality practices include conservation tillage, filter strips, terraces, grassed waterways, managed access to streams, nutrient and pesticide management, prescribed grazing, and irrigation water management.



Proper nutrient management of hog manure. (T. McCabe, USDA-NRCS)

Potential Impacts on Wildlife Habitat

The potential for improving wildlife habitat across the landscape through the CSP is enormous. By using the watershed approach, states can target locally or nationally significant wildlife species or habitat types that are in critical need of improvement. By concentrating the management activities in selected watersheds, the benefits can be far greater than if the same management activities were scattered across a state. If installed and managed with wildlife as a consideration, the conservation practices applied to address soil and water quality for CSP will also add to the wildlife habitat benefit.

Each state develops a list of conservation practices or enhancements (activities) for which producers can receive payments. The state then sets a per-acre payment or a fixed payment amount per activity. For example, a state may offer to pay \$5 per acre for inter-seeding native forbs into established nonnative grass stands. An example of a fixed payment is a state that pays \$250 per vernal pool that a producer creates and maintains. These payments are made each year for the life of the contract. Since the CSP is intended to reward producers who are good land stewards, these payments can be made for activities that producers have already installed, as well as for activities the producers are willing to install.

In Tier I and Tier II, a producer is not required to address wildlife habitat concerns. In Tier III, a producer must meet FOTG standards for wildlife. However, producers may elect to receive payments for wildlife habitat activities in any tier. Figure 3 shows a breakdown of payments for habitat-management enhancements by watershed and tier for the 2004 CSP contracts. These payments totaled approximately \$960,000. Some watersheds had producers receiving payments for wildlife habitat activities in all 3 tiers while producers in other watersheds only received payments in 1 or 2 tiers. Samples of various activities producers received payments for included constructing brush piles; establishing habitat transition zones using native vegetation beneficial to wildlife; controlling access to sensitive designated wildlife or riparian areas; reducing livestock grazing to 50% of the recommended carrying capacity; installing resting, basking, and hibernation structures for amphibians and reptiles; and managing the land to improve wildlife habitat evaluation scores above the minimum quality criteria required by NRCS policy to meet the FOTG standards. These are just a few of the many activities states were willing to pay producers for improving or maintaining wildlife habitat.

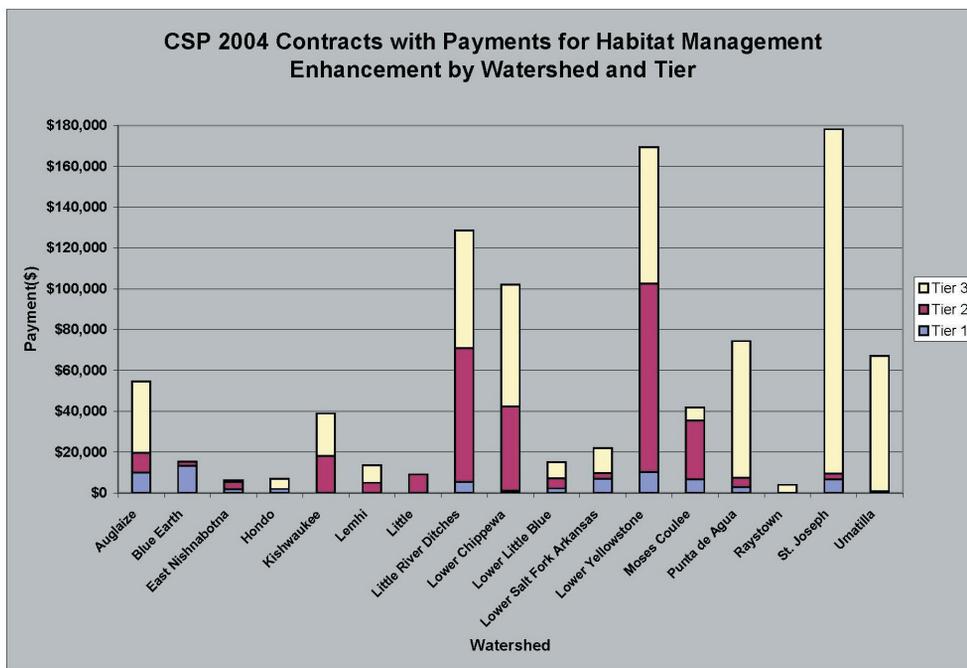


Figure 3. Breakdown of payments for habitat-management enhancements by watershed and tier for the fiscal year 2004 CSP contracts.

Conclusions

At this time, there is not a national database that gives a breakdown of the acres or individual activities installed by watershed. Currently, to get this information, an individual would have to go to each state, and in some cases, each watershed and review the contracts. Once this information is available on a national database, information such as acres of field borders established and maintained, acres of riparian areas excluded from grazing, acres of grazing land and pasture managed for wildlife,

and acres of various wetland types created will be readily available. This information will help managers and researchers assess the effectiveness of the Conservation Security Program.

Literature Cited

[NRCS] Natural Resources Conservation Service. 2004. 2002 national resources inventory. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Resources Inventory Division, Washington, D.C., USA. <<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/csp/>>. Accessed 2005 Jun 29.