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**Conservation Security Program Sign-up Set for July**

Washington, D.C. - Starting July 6th and for the remainder of the month, farmers in 18 USDA-selected watersheds covering portions of 22 states may offer to enroll their farms in the new Conservation Security Program (CSP). During the sign-up process, farmers interested in participating must complete a conservation self-assessment survey for their farm and then visit their local Natural Resources Conservation Service office for an interview. Those selected for the program will develop a long-term contract and conservation plan in August and September. The CSP is designed to provide incentive payments to farmers committed to exceptional stewardship of natural resources and the environment.

"We are glad to see the CSP open for business," said Ferd Hoefner of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. "While the Administration delayed the program for over a year and then chose to limit its geographic scope, we remain confident this first-ever U.S. 'green payments' program will blossom into the new standard for the next generation of federal farm programs."

The USDA has established a set of 18 [watershed-specific websites](#) to provide farmers and the public with program and sign-up information. Surprisingly, despite the start of the sign-up today, only one of the 18 watershed sites -- the Blue Earth watershed in MN/IA -- includes all of the relevant CSP payment information, and only 3 of the 18 -- the Blue Earth plus the East Nishnabotna (IA) and the Moses Coulee (WA) -- include any payment information. The Coalition has been urging the Administration to make this basic program information widely available, but to date without success.

"Farmers want to know the eligibility requirements for CSP participation, what conservation practices and systems may be pursued, and what the likely payment rates will be under different scenarios and options," said Hoefner. "It is distressing to know that even as sign-up is starting, USDA has not made complete payment information widely available."

The Coalition and several of its member organizations intend to list full CSP payment information on their own websites as soon as NRCS offices make it available.

The 2002 Farm Bill includes two per farm payment limitations provisions for the CSP, one to limit the size of the total payment per farm, and a second sub-limit to cap the amount of the base payment per acre. To that relatively simple and straightforward set of caps, the Administration has added four extra payment limits, including one on environmental enhancement payments and one to limit the total contract payment rate per acre. The latter will limit severely the size of CSP incentive payments for both smaller acreage farms and farms and ranches of any size with very low rental rates and will likely result in few enrollments among those types of operations.

"The Administration's implementation plan for CSP payments is not only incredibly complicated, but favors larger farms over smaller ones and those with high rental rates over those with lower rental rates" said Hoefner. "Farmers will need to study the proposal carefully in deciding whether it makes sense for their particular operation. As USDA prepares a final program rule later this year, we sincerely hope they will rethink the decision to discriminate against certain types of farms and will instead refocus on opportunities and incentives to reward environmental performance and enhancement."