



SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE COALITION

110 Maryland Avenue N.E. Phone 202.547.5754
Washington, D.C. 20002 Fax 202.547.1837
www.msawg.org

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**Contact: Ferd Hoefner
202-547-5754**

Coalition Cheers CSP Announcement, But Raises Concerns

The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition applauded USDA Secretary Mike Johanns' announcement of the 2006 Conservation Security Program sign-up today. The Coalition joined other farm, commodity and conservation groups earlier this month in a letter to Secretary urging that there be no further delay in CSP implementation (*letter attached*). The January 10 letter specifically asked that sign-up begin before the end of January, and the Department has at least come close, announcing a sign-up period for farmers in particular watersheds nationwide from February 13-March 31.

"While not the previously promised December start time for sign-up, today's announcement at least ensures that CSP sign-up for the first time will not fall during the busy spring and early summer period when farmers are least able to spare the time to go through the enrollment and interview process," said Ferd Hoefner with the Coalition. "We appreciate the Secretary going to bat within the Administration to spring the announcement."

The USDA announcement, however, decreased the number of watersheds selected for program participation in 2006 from the 110 announced by Deputy Secretary Chuck Conner on August 25, to just 60. The decrease has been blamed on the limitation placed on CSP funding in the fiscal year 2006 agriculture appropriations bill, though that explanation appears incomplete at best. The letter from SAC and other farm groups had urged USDA to support a robust sign-up for both 2006 and 2007, to provide a full-scale test of the program going into the 2007 Farm Bill debate.

Without the limitation on funding, CSP would have been eligible for at least \$331 million for 2006 according to the Congressional Budget Office. However, President Bush proposed slashing this amount by \$57 million, to \$274 million, in his budget proposal last February. It was on the basis of this \$274 million amount that the 110 watersheds were selected and announced. Then, however, Congress settled on a \$259 million limitation, compromising between the House-passed \$245 million cap and the Senate-passed full funding at \$331 million.

The President's proposal, upon which the 110 watersheds were announced by USDA, represented an increase in CSP funding over FY 2005 of \$72 million. The final appropriations bill limited the increase to \$57 million. The ratio of the difference between those sums should have resulted in a final watershed number of about 87, not 60, assuming roughly equal sized watersheds.

"It appears the cost of getting today's announcement made without further delay was a deeper cut in the number of watersheds participating than the funding levels require," noted Hoefner. "While some of the difference might be accounted for by additional conservation activities and

thus higher payments for farmers already enrolled in the CSP, the cut in total watersheds is deeper still.”

“Many farmers in the 110 watersheds announced last summer have been busy preparing their conservation plans and records with the expectation they would have their chance to enroll,” Hoefner added. “For farmers and ranchers in 50 watersheds those plans are now unfortunately dashed.”

The Coalition plans to analyze the details of the CSP enrollment notice and new watershed map once they have been released, and may issue additional remarks at that time.

The Coalition will also be anxiously awaiting the President’s 2007 budget proposal, due to be released next Monday. Full funding for the Conservation Security Program in 2007 according to Congressional Budget Office figures will be \$441 million. The Coalition has urged the White House and USDA to support full funding for the CSP.

The Conservation Security Program is a comprehensive stewardship incentives program that provides financial and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers who develop and maintain conservation systems that solve critical natural resource and environmental concerns, rewarding them for investments of labor, management, and capital aimed at fostering healthy, productive, and non-eroding soils, clean air and water, energy savings, and wildlife habitat.

The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition represents grassroots farm, rural, and conservation organizations from across the country that advocate for public policies supporting the long-term economic and environmental sustainability of agriculture, natural resources and rural communities.