

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Massachusetts farmers encouraged to comment on new Conservation Security Program

Massachusetts farmers have until March 2 to comment on the proposed rule to implement the new federal Conservation Security Program (CSP). CSP, which will be administered by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), is designed to reward the best conservation stewards of the most environmentally sensitive areas.

Authorized by the 2002 Farm Bill, the fundamental intent of CSP is to complement existing conservation programs by supporting ongoing conservation stewardship of agricultural working lands and enhancing the condition of America's natural resources.

To ensure that CSP's limited resources are focused first on the most pressing environmental concerns, the rule proposes to prioritize eligibility based on selected national priority watersheds. The eligible watersheds will be determined based on science-based issues such as water quality vulnerability and excessive soil quality degradation, and will be announced through a CSP sign-up notification, which is targeted for the summer of 2004.

Additionally, through practices that will increase soil and water quality, such as conservation tillage, nutrient management and grazing management, the program is expected to yield significant benefits for critical wildlife habitat and at-risk species of wildlife.

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Under the proposal, agricultural land in cropland, orchards, vineyards, pasture and range will be eligible for CSP, regardless of size, location or crops produced. Exceptions are forest land or land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program, Wetlands Reserve Program or Grassland Reserve Program.

Applicants must address water quality and soil quality concerns as program eligibility criteria and enrollment will be targeted to those demonstrating the highest levels of stewardship. CSP payment limitations will be based on three “tiers” that represent increasing levels of resource treatment. Payments rise with increased levels of treatment.

Payments can include four components: 1) an annual base component for the benchmark conservation treatment, 2) an annual existing practice component for maintaining existing conservation practices, 3) a one-time new practice component for implementing additional practices, and 4) an enhancement component for exceptional conservation effort. The three tiers are capped at \$20,000, \$35,000 and \$45,000 annually and will last for five years for Tier I and 5-10 years for Tier II and Tier III.

The proposed rule, as well as more information on CSP and other conservation programs, is available on the NRCS web site at www.nrcs.usda.gov. Farmers can also contact their local NRCS field office for more information. A list of field offices can be found on the NRCS Massachusetts web site at www.ma.nrcs.usda.gov.

This proposed rule has a 60-day comment period after publication in the January 2nd Federal Register (www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/). As part of the comment process, listening sessions will be held in a number of locations across the country to gain additional input. Locations, times and additional information on the listening sessions will be published in an upcoming Federal Register notice. Comments on the CSP proposed rule may be sent to david.mckay@usda.gov or by mail to Conservation Security Program Comments, ATTN: David McKay, NRCS Conservation Operations Division, P.O. Box 2890, Washington, D.C. 20013.

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