

USDA Offers Renewal Option for Expiring Conservation Stewardship Program Contracts, Extends Deadline for General Sign-up Applications

WASHINGTON, Feb. 24, 2015 – Natural Resources Conservation Service Chief Jason Weller today announced that the U.S. Department of Agriculture is offering a renewal option through Tuesday, March 31, 2015 for eligible agricultural producers and forest landowners with expiring Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) contracts. These producers must be willing to adopt additional conservation activities aimed at helping them achieve higher levels of conservation on their farms, forests and ranches.

USDA will also extend the deadline for general sign-up CSP applications until Friday, March 13, 2015 providing farmers, ranchers, and private forest managers two additional weeks to apply for this funding round of \$100 million.

“CSP producers are established conservation leaders who work hard at enhancing natural resources on private lands,” Weller said. “This contract renewal period will provide greater opportunities for these conservation stewards to voluntarily do even more to improve water, air and soil quality and enhance wildlife habitat on their operations. By extending the deadline for general sign-up applications, we are ensuring that landowners will be able to take advantage of a program that will enroll up to 7.7 million acres this year.”

Changes in the 2014 Farm Bill will allow CSP participants with expiring contracts to renew them by exceeding stewardship thresholds for two or more existing natural resource concerns specified by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) or by meeting stewardship thresholds for at least two new natural resource concerns such as improving water quality or soil health. NRCS administers CSP.

About 9,300 contracts covering more than 12.2 million acres are nearing the end of their five-year term and can be renewed for an additional five years. The agricultural producer or forest landowner must complete all conservation activities contained in the initial contract before a renewal can be granted.

The renewal process is optional but benefits CSP participants with expiring contracts because it is non-competitive. In order to renew, an agricultural producer or forest landowner must meet the minimum criteria established by NRCS. Contract renewal also offers these agricultural producers and forest landowners an opportunity to add new conservation activities to meet their conservation goals and protect the natural resources on their farms, forests or ranches. The 2014 Farm Bill includes an expanded conservation activity list that offers producers more options to address natural resource challenges. New conservation activities include cover crops, intensive rotational grazing and wildlife-friendly fencing.

USDA's largest conservation program by acreage, CSP pays participants for conservation performance — the better the performance, the higher the payment. Nearly 70 million acres have been enrolled in the program since its launch in 2009.

Along with the renewal option announced today, [USDA announced last month](#) that it will make available \$100 million this year through the CSP in 2015. Although CSP applications are accepted all year, farmers, ranchers and forest landowners should submit applications by the funding deadline, extended to Friday, March 13, to ensure they are considered for this year's funding. Applications should be submitted to local NRCS offices, and as part of the CSP application process, applicants will work with NRCS field personnel to complete a resource inventory of their land, which will help determine the conservation performance for existing and new conservation activities. The applicant's conservation performance will be used to determine eligibility, ranking and payments.

USDA offers financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers or forest landowners for the active management and maintenance of existing conservation activities and for carrying out new conservation activities on working agricultural land. Eligible lands include cropland, grassland, prairie land, improved pastureland, rangeland, non-industrial private forestland and tribal agricultural land. Applicants must have control of the land for the 5-year term of the contract.

Agricultural producers or forest landowners with existing contracts scheduled to expire this calendar year and who wish to renew for an additional five-year term must submit an application indicating their intent to renew to their local NRCS office prior to the national application deadline of March 31, 2015.

To learn more about CSP contract renewals, visit your [local NRCS office](#). Visit the [Conservation Stewardship Program](#) page for more information about this program.

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