



**Natural Resources
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USDA accepting applications for Conservation Stewardship Program for Longleaf Pine Range expected to attract enrollment of 50,000 acres for conservation

Auburn, Ala., February 12, 2015 – The USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) announced today that farmers, ranchers and forest landowners are invited to apply for \$100 million in funding through the Agency’s Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). Although applications are accepted continuously, farmers, ranchers and forest landowners should submit applications by Feb. 27, 2015 to ensure they are considered for this year’s funding. Applications received after that date will be considered for future funding. This year’s investment is expected to result in the enrollment of up to 7.7 million acres in the program by private landowners.

“CSP is a way of incentivizing farmers, ranchers, and private forest managers who maintain a high level of conservation on their land and agree to adopt higher levels of stewardship,” said Chief Jason Weller of USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service. “By focusing on multiple resource concerns, landowners are able to achieve a sustainable landscape and maintain or increase the productivity of their operations.”

Through CSP, participants take additional conservation steps to improve the resource conditions on their land, including soil, air and habitat quality, water quality and quantity, and energy conservation.

Weller said CSP producers are conservation leaders, showing how science-based conservation and technological advancements can improve the environment and farming operations at the same time. For example, Alabama farmer Jared Darnell uses a combination of enhancements that use advanced technology to maintain and enhance water quality and improve soil health on his Lawrence County farm.

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The 2014 Farm Bill brought changes to CSP including an expanded conservation activity list that will offer participants greater options to meet their conservation needs and protect the natural resources on their land. These conservation activities, called enhancements, include cover crops, intensive rotational grazing and wildlife friendly fencing.

CSP will also help broaden the impacts of NRCS' Landscape Conservation Initiatives through a new pilot effort, which accelerates private lands conservation activities to address particular goals, such as creating habitat for at-risk species and conserving and cleaning water. One designated initiative, the Longleaf Pine Initiative, focuses on restoring the longleaf pine ecosystem in the following states:

- Applicable states: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia. For Alabama, the Longleaf Pine range will be the focus area.

“CSP is a great addition to our conservation toolbox for our Landscape Conservation Initiatives, which rally together landowners at the broader level to make conservation improvements that help us tackle our nation's resource issues,” Weller said. “Historically, other conservation programs have driven these initiatives, but now with CSP, we'll be bringing more farmers, ranchers and forest landowners to these efforts.”

For the Longleaf Pine Initiative area in Alabama, NRCS has established a target enrollment of 3,000 acres. Those forest landowners that have completed Longleaf Pine Initiative contracts or Conservation Reserve Program contracts are strongly encouraged to consider the Longleaf Pine Initiative's CSP pilot.

Applications should be submitted to local NRCS offices. 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.

A CSP self-screening checklist is available to help producers determine if the program is suitable for their operation. The checklist highlights basic information about CSP eligibility requirements, stewardship threshold requirements and payment types.

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For more on technical and financial assistance available through conservation programs, visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/GetStarted or a local USDA service center.

Today's announcement was made possible by the 2014 Farm Bill. The 2014 Farm Bill builds on historic economic gains in rural America over the past five years, while achieving meaningful reform and billions of dollars in savings for taxpayers. Since enactment, USDA has made significant progress to implement each provision of this critical legislation, including providing disaster relief to farmers and ranchers; strengthening risk management tools; expanding access to rural credit; funding critical research; establishing innovative public-private conservation partnerships; developing new markets for rural-made products; and investing in infrastructure, housing and community facilities to help improve quality of life.

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