

Sign-up started Monday in NRCS offices

Agriculture Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan announced on Aug. 6, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) was to begin a continuous signup for the new Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) on Monday, Aug. 10, with the first funding signup period cutoff scheduled for Sept. 30.

NRCS State Conservationist Steve Chick said, "The 2008 Farm Bill renamed and revamped the former Conservation Security Program to improve its availability and appeal to agricultural and forestry producers. The previous program was only available in certain watersheds, but this signup is available statewide."

CSP is a voluntary program that encourages agricultural and forestry producers to maintain existing conservation practices and adopt new ones in their operations.

Eligible lands include cropland, grassland, prairie, improved pastureland, rangeland, non-industrial forestland (new to the program) and agricultural land under jurisdiction of an Indian tribe.

NRCS will soon be announcing a schedule of public meetings across the state to help inform producers about the program.

"The Sept. 30 cutoff is established so applications received by that date will be considered in the first ranking period. Applications received after that date will likely be considered for funding in 2010. Congress capped the annual enrollment at 12,769,000 acres for each fiscal year nationwide," said Chick.

To apply for the new CSP, potential participants are encouraged to first complete the 2009 conservation stewardship self-screening checklist to determine whether the program is suitable for them. The checklist is available at NRCS offices or on-line at www.nrcs.usda.gov/new_csp.

"Applicants to CSP must be the operator of the land. This means if you are the landowner, but not listed in USDA Farm Service Agency records as the operator of the land, you can not apply directly for this program. This doesn't prevent a landowner from sharing in the program benefits, but rather the operator must make the application," said Chick.

Nebraska, like other states, divided the state into four ranking areas so applicants with similar resource concerns will compete with comparable operations. These ranking areas were established with input from Nebraska agricultural groups. The CSP ranking areas are generally eastern Nebraska, south-central Nebraska, the Sandhills, and the Panhandle with extreme southwest Nebraska (see map above).

"For example, a Sandhills rancher application will be ranked against other ranchers and not against no-till irrigated cropland in the eastern part of the state," explained Chick.

Each producer who applies will have a scheduled appointment with NRCS to review their farming or ranching operation. Data from the producer will be entered into NRCS "Conservation Management Tool" software, which will be used to rank each application.

NRCS staff will conduct on-site field verifications of the top ranking applications. Once the participant has been field verified and approved for funding, then a contract can be developed. Contracts are set at five years.

"This part of the process will not occur until October," said Chick.

USDA is finalizing the program's policies and procedures. The CSP interim final rule has been

published in the Federal Register and is open for public comment through Sept. 28.

For more information about the Conservation Stewardship Program, contact any NRCS office in a USDA Service Center or attend one of the upcoming public meetings. Information is also available at www.ne.nrcs.usda.gov.