

Working Lands Programs Can Encourage Conservation and Environmental Planning

When you read through the chart on pages 10 and 11 of this issue, you'll see the myriad of conservation and environmental programs available from the Iowa and federal governments, all designed to protect, preserve and restore environmental integrity in the countryside.

Most of these programs address specific practices or solutions. Sometimes, more than one program is available for practices that reduce erosion, establish buffer strips or wildlife habitat, reestablish forests, improve fish habitat, and so on.

For conservation on working cropland, there are two federal programs that every farmer should be aware of.

The first of these is the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Defined in the 2002 Farm Bill, EQIP is implemented at the local level, through Soil and Water Conservation District offices. Its goal is to provide farmers with cost-share incentives to help address specific natural resource concerns, including manure management, grazing management, erosion control on pasture and cropland, and, importantly, water quality improvement.

Depending on local priorities, cost sharing for approved practices under EQIP can be up to 75% of the cost. The purpose of EQIP is to provide incentives to farmers and landowners to try new practices. The local SWCD commission decides which practices they'll recommend from a list of several provided to them by NRCS. In addition to some of the more traditional conservation measures, Iowa growers may also be offered cost-sharing for practices that allow them to evaluate nitrogen management, including replicated strip trials for comparing nitrogen rates, timing and fertilizer form.

The Conservation Security Program (CSP), the second federal program, was intended to recognize and reward farmers and landowners who have made conservation and water quality a part of their farm management and land use planning.

CSP can be interpreted as an offer from the public to pay farmers and landowners for providing environmental commodities, like clean water, clean air and abundant, high-quality wildlife habitat on a long-term basis.

However well intentioned it may have been, CSP has been woefully under-funded since its inception as Congress diverts funding to other priorities.

This has left NRCS, charged with administering

the program, in a quandary as to how to equitably distribute limited funding to deserving farmers. The agency chose to handle this necessarily discriminating procedure by accepting applications from specific watersheds, and limiting eligibility. The paperwork for farmer applicants for the program has been confusing and time consuming. Of the farmers who made through the paperwork, only a few were accepted, even though many more met qualifications at some level.

Farmers are frustrated with what they interpret as limited rewards available from a program they believed was supposed to repay them for their own expenses in maintaining clean water and conserving soil. Congressional supporters of CSP are frustrated that implementation has been slower than they anticipated. NRCS staffers are frustrated that they have had to take the heat when Congress takes back promised funding.

Despite problems with CSP, this type of program has potential to improve conservation and water quality because it recognizes and encourages conservation and environmental planning on America's farms. This type of planning has long been a priority of the Iowa Soybean Association.

In the end though, it's up to Congress – acting on behalf of the general public – to decide whether CSP is indeed the type of conservation/environmental program it wants for farmers.



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