

Qualifying for CSP

an in-depth look from the farming perspective

The Conservation Security Program (CSP), the conservation centerpiece of the 2002 Farm Bill, marks where public sees a crossover point between production agriculture and natural resource concerns. The idea of CSP is to craft an agreement between government and farmers to compensate farmers for providing clean water, air, and wildlife habitat, to name a few, and to provide incentives to do more.

CSP covers land used for agriculture, horticulture and commercial forests, including pasture and rangelands, farmsteads, and livestock feeding and handling areas.

To qualify for CSP, more than half of a farmer's land must be within a selected watershed. If this criterion is met, there are two additional tests to get into CSP: the Soil Conditioning Index (SCI), and the Water Quality Eligibility Tool (WQET).

Soil Conditioning Index | the first CSP qualifier

The first step in qualifying for CSP is meeting the NRCS Soil Conditioning Index (SCI) thresholds, says Heath Ellison.

Ellison, an agricultural environmental specialist with the Iowa Soybean Association, manages the Iowa Soybean Association's CEMSA program (Certified Environmental Management Systems for Agriculture). He has been helping farmers who participate in CEMSA and other ISA programs in applying for CSP.

"SCI is a tool that measures the organic matter content of the soil, taking into account organic matter, field operations and erosion," he explains. He says SCI scores result from the RUSLE2 (Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation) program, a computer model for determining soil loss from erosion.

"Most farmers typically fall within a range between -1 to +1. CSP requires an SCI score of 0 to +1," he adds.

"A positive SCI indicates that organic matter level is being increased in the soil; a negative SCI indicates that organic matter levels are being depleted. SCI is scored on a field-by-field basis, and fields with negative SCI cannot be enrolled in the CSP," says Ellison. "If a farmer cannot enroll all of his or

(such as knifing in anhydrous), it can be considered as contributing to an increase in soil erosion, which decreases the SCI. In the case of manure, the RUSLE2 program does recognize the addition of organic matter with the manure — so manure application may improve SCI in some cases. Soil type, slope percentages and lengths, and application method will go a long way in determining the overall impact on SCI. But SCI is a formula, so the final outcome depends on a lot of factors."



Heath Ellison

her acres from a farming entity, he will be limited to a Tier 1 contract on any acres that do meet the program requirements."

Ellison says there is a direct relationship between CSP and nutrient application, which is a key element in the Iowa Soybean Association's On-Farm Network™ evaluations.

"Nutrient application can have both a positive and negative impact on a farmer's SCI scoring. For example, if the act of application disturbs the soil

WQET | the second CSP qualifier

"Once farmers score between 0 and +1 in SCI, the next step is the Water Quality Eligibility Tool (WQET)," says Gary Hammitt, who also is an agricultural environmental specialist with the Iowa Soybean Association. In addition to his ISA position, Hammitt also farms near Lehigh, and helped a number of farmers involved in CEMSA and the Boone River Watershed Project prepare CSP applications.

"WQET is a new tool for CSP. It was first used in Iowa with the South Skunk and Grant-Little Maquoketa enrollments last year. WQET replaces the nitrogen application limits that were used in the East Nishnabotna, Blue Earth, North Raccoon, Turkey, Upper Wapsipinicon, and Platte Rivers during the first year of CSP enrollment," he says.

Hammitt says WQET leads farmers through a comprehensive series of yes-or-no questions about how their management practices relate to water quality in eight areas:

- pesticide ground water nitrogen ground water
- phosphorus ground water
- pesticide surface water
- nitrogen surface water
- phosphorus surface water
- sediment, and
- salinity