

CEMSA helps farmers with CSP and TMDL

The Conservation Security Program (CSP) was designed to reward producers who are good conservationists.

The USDA recently identified the next three Iowa watersheds included in the national 2006 CSP sign-up. They include the South Skunk watershed in central and southeast Iowa, the Middle Iowa watershed in central and eastern Iowa, and the Grant-Little Maquoketa Watershed in parts of two northeast Iowa counties.

To qualify for CSP payment, farmers must be able to document a history of conservation-oriented management. Farm records and some paperwork are required.

Heath Ellison, agricultural environmental specialist with the Iowa Soybean Association, says farmers who have participated in the Iowa Soybean Association's Certified Environmental Management Systems for Agriculture (CEMSA) program, the On-Farm Network, or ISA Watershed Programs are finding that they are at an advantage in the application process.

Documenting improved nitrogen management is one piece in the overall puzzle.

"It's primarily because they have tested, documented and improved environmental performance alongside their goal of improved agronomic performance," says Ellison. "CEMSA provides farmers with a functioning, dynamic environmental management system (EMS). That seems to be working in their favor when it comes to qualifying for the higher tiers of CSP."

Ellison spends much of his time helping CEMSA participants assem-

ble the documentation required for the first NRCS interview for CSP.

"We've been working with farmers in CSP watersheds to get their EMS together to help with sign up. All Iowa Soybean Association environmental field staff are certified crop advisors and NRCS technical service providers. We use the same tools NRCS uses to estimate soil loss and soil conditioning index, and to catalog the conservation practices they've already put into place to give farmers an idea of what CSP tier level they might qualify for," says Roger Wolf, ISA director of environmental programs.

Ellison cautions farmers who are interested in how CEMSA can leverage a higher CSP Tier to get in on the process early.

"We might be able to help some farmers find ways to improve their 'Tier' level before going into the NRCS. Many farmers who participated in CEMSA found that the program helps establish a paper trail of nutrient management and conservation efforts. So it's best to be working