



Fostering an effective green payment program

Abstract: The creation of the Conservation Security Program (CSP) was greeted with enthusiasm by farmers. This project looked at how well CSP worked out in practice.

Question & Answer

Q: What role can farmers plan in the policy arena?

A: There is no more effective spokesperson for sustainable agriculture than a sustainable farmer. The farmers also became better aware of the time-consuming and convoluted process of law- and rule-making. They now better understand how policy change occurs and how powerful are the forces for the existing agricultural policy system.

Background

When the Conservation Security Program (CSP) was enacted as part of the 2002 Farm Bill, hopes for its success were high. It was intended to reward farmers who had always done the right things for conservation, and also to encourage other farmers to adopt more conservation practices. Several years later, the jury was still out, and Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) took a look at how the program was working for Iowa farmers and what suggestions they had for improved implementation.

PFI member Steve Reinart, a grazier in Carroll County, found that the Conservation Security Program rewarded him for the extensive conservation he had done on his farm—and encouraged him to do more.



Objectives outlined for the project were to:

1. Tap farmer knowledge and experience to develop a clear set of recommendations and action steps to achieve effective CSP implementation.
2. Increase understanding of and participation in the CSP by educating a strong group of farmers committed to the program who will act as CSP and agricultural conservation policy spokespeople.
3. Build understanding and positive dialogue between farmers and NRCS officials who are implementing this program and other conservation programs.

Approach and methods

PFI fulfilled the objectives through activities conducted at their field days programs, their annual conference, a policy report, a Farmer Fly-in to Washington, D.C., and media coverage.

Results and discussion

Field days: Three 2006 PFI field days focused on the CSP. More than 150 people attended the events held at farms in McGregor, Glidden, and Creston. NRCS staffers also were present, which provided a good opportunity for sharing information between district conservationists and farmers.

Principal Investigator:
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Budget:
\$21,755 for year one
\$21,755 for year two

Annual conference: The 2007 annual meeting included a session on CSP with Ron Dunphy and Tom Frantzen giving presentations about their farms and their CSP contracts. Thirty people participated in the session with lively exchanges about what worked and what didn't. The program was videotaped and is available for purchase from PFI.

Policy report: CSP expert Traci Bruckner, of the Nebraska-based Center for Rural Affairs, produced a paper summarizing farmers' opinions on CSP. Her report, *The Conservation Security Program: An Assessment of Farmers' Experiences with Program Implementation*, (available at www.practicalfarmers.org/programs/policy) offered these conclusions:

1. PFI farmers who have received contracts are quite happy with them and highly supportive of the program.
2. The farmers disagreed with restricting enrollment to a small number of watersheds and with the lack of full funding of the program.



For Dick Thompson, however, the Conservation Security Program rules were biased toward no-till systems. "What we need is a more diverse rotation, including oats and hay and other crops, not no-till using chemicals," Thompson says. Both Reinart and Thompson shared their insights throughout the Midwest and with policy makers in Washington.

3. The Soil Conditioning Index should not be used as prominently to determine eligibility and payment rates.
4. On-farm research and demonstration is very important to a majority of the farmers interviewed, and they would like the CSP to recognize that fact. In the 2002 Farm Bill, research and demonstration was a factor for which CSP can provide enhancement payments, but the U.S. Department of Agriculture has implemented it in very few places and under very limited conditions.
5. Farmers were generally pleased with their payment rates, but disappointed with the declining nature of the enhancement payments provided by contracts in 2005.
6. Arbitrary measures, such as a soil testing requirement, were used to narrow program participation. Some organic farmers and grass-based farmers do not typically test their soil because their farming systems do not use synthetic inputs.

Farmer Fly-in to Washington, D.C.: This event took place in November 2006 as Congress was considering funding cuts to the program in the FY2007 appropriations budget. Three PFI farmers (Ron Dunphy, Ken Wise, and Steve Reinart) who have CSP contracts met with NRCS staff, including the NRCS administrator and the head CSP administrator. In addition, one PFI member shared an actual CSP contract with the Sustainable Ag Coalition staff in Washington, which allowed for more accurate policy analysis of the contract process.

Media coverage: PFI member Steven Reinart has been widely interviewed on the need for full funding of CSP. One story about his experiences was aired on 59 radio stations. PFI continues to provide updates on the program in its newsletter and these stories are being picked up by the larger agricultural media outlets.

Conclusions

Farmers are the people most affected by the CSP program, and often are the group least consulted about what could be done to improve the program. This project offered an opportunity for those voices to be heard in Iowa and in Washington.

Through this project, PFI farmers developed a variety of insights. First of all, it became clearer to many of them

what a valuable role they can play in the policy arena. There is no more effective spokesperson for sustainable agriculture than a sustainable farmer. The farmers also became better aware of the time-consuming and convoluted process of law- and rule-making. They now better understand how policy change occurs and how powerful are the forces for the existing agricultural policy system.

Impact of results

As a result of this project, PFI has developed a cadre of farmers who are policy-savvy and leaders in the conservation policy arena. Some of their opinions can be seen on the web site, www.practicalfarmers.org/programs/policy. These farmers are submitting editorials and letters to the editor, and traveling to meet with government officials. One farmer has been appointed to serve on the

NRCS State Technical Committee for PFI.

Leveraged funds

Additional support for work on the CSP has been leveraged from the McKnight Foundation and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. Through this funding, PFI was able to collaborate with other Midwest nonprofit organizations on a similar project. It focused on farmers' reactions to the CSP, and interviewed NRCS and other conservation officials for their opinions on the program.

Photos courtesy Teresa Opheim

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