



There's Money for That

Trained personnel offer their expertise to producers and financial assistance is available.

Story & photo by **Troy Smith**, field editor

Do you operate a farm or ranch and want to make improvements to your land? Do you want to design a plan for pasture fencing or stock water development to improve grazing management? Maybe you need a strategy for control of invasive plant species. Or, perhaps you want to implement practices or projects to enhance wildlife habitat.

Agricultural producers interested in conserving natural resources can seek advice from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), an agency within the USDA. Since 1935, the primary service of the NRCS (originally known as the Soil Conservation Service) has been to provide technical assistance to private landowners and managers. Trained agency personnel will apply their expertise to the development of customized conservation plans and resource management systems. The assistance is free to the producer.

With funding authorized through the federal farm bill, the NRCS also provides financial assistance to implement approved projects that benefit both agricultural producers and the environment. When there is existing or potential for degradation of soil, water, air, plant or animal resources, to the extent the sustainability or intended use of those resources is impaired, the NRCS can help tailor a remedy and can, in many cases, help pay for it.

So says Brad Soncksen, who is NRCS assistant state conservationist for Nebraska and responsible for managing various NRCS programs in his home state. Soncksen also says producers are sometimes surprised

when, after seeking advice for a particular need, an NRCS staffer says, "There's money for that."

EQIP and CSP

The most recent (2014) farm bill authorized funding for various voluntary, incentive-based conservation programs, but most fall within three general types: financial assistance, conservation easements or partnership programs. Most familiar to producers, perhaps, is the financial assistance available through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

According to Soncksen, producers may be eligible for EQIP assistance for approved grassland management practices associated with improved grazing management, such as fence and water pipeline installations or brush and weed control. Prescribed burns also fall within the many EQIP practices.

On cattle-feeding operations, EQIP may also apply to animal waste and runoff water management practices. On cropland, EQIP assistance is available for practices that enhance conservation through nutrient management, improved irrigation efficiency and integrated pest control. The planned use of cover crops for conservation purposes, or the development of cover crop rotation schemes for forage production also may be for assistance through EQIP.

Soncksen said producers may apply, at any time, for EQIP assistance for practices they wish to apply to land they own or to land they lease and will control through the duration of a contract period. NRCS staff will

assist with development of a plan of operations describing the resource concerns and selected management practices.

Approval is based on application ranking for greatest need and greatest positive impact on the environment. Consideration is given to plans including practices that address natural-resource issues important to the local area. Producers whose applications are approved are granted a contract containing the specifics of cost-share assistance to be awarded.

"Payment rates are set each fiscal year and are attached to each EQIP contract when it is approved," explains Soncksen. "Payments are made after practices meeting NRCS technical standards are completed."

While EQIP payments are made on the basis of set rates for each specific practice, participants in the CSP earn payments on the basis of performance of their working lands. Management of a producer's entire operation is considered and higher performance means more money.

Soncksen says more than 70 million acres of private land, nationwide, have been enrolled in CSP. Applicants meet with NRCS personnel to evaluate natural resources on their respective properties and the current management system. Applicants must be addressing at least two resource concerns, at the time of application, and plan to implement practices to address at least one additional concern.

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Just a few of the popular practices include range monitoring, wildlife-friendly haying, wildlife-friendly fencing, introduction of cover crops, or enhancing wildlife habitat by leaving strips of unharvested grain or seeding of pollinator plant species. A CSP contract will specify any new practices a producer agrees to implement along with modifications or enhancements to current stewardship.

CSP applications are ranked according to the number of resource concerns already met, the number of new practices planned and the number of acres benefitting from new activities. A higher ranking earns the approved applicant a contract offering higher payments. These include yearly payments, on a per-acre rate, for maintaining existing conservation practices. For new practices, payments vary with the specific activity. Payment rate tables are found at state CSP websites. Payments are made after Oct. 1 for activities completed in the previous fiscal year.

“CSP contracts are for a period of five years, and producers have the option to renew their contracts for an additional five years,” states Soncksen. “If a contract lapses without renewal, the producer cannot get a new contract.”

ACEP

The second general type of NRCS financial assistance is available through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), which has two components. The Agricultural Land Easement component serves to protect enrolled working lands by limiting development for non-agricultural uses. Among the added benefits are protection of wildlife habitat and environmental quality. ACEP’s Wetlands Reserve Easement component helps restore, protect and enhance enrolled wetlands.

By contributing toward the cost (typically 50%, but up to 75% in some situations), NRCS partners with entities — non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as state or local governments and Indian tribes — to purchase an easement, or deed restriction, from participating landowners. NRCS cannot own the easement, so it must be held by a nongovernmental entity such as a land trust.

When selling an easement, landowners retain their rights to use the land for agricultural production, within a required Agricultural Conservation Easement Plan developed for each specific property to encourage good stewardship. Income from the sale of conservation easements may be used by landowners to reinvest in the operation, reduce debt, invest for retirement or implement conservation measures. In essence, sale of an easement reduces the speculative value of the land, and may help

keep land affordable for beginning farmers and ranchers.

The ACEP Wetlands Reserve Easement component allows NRCS to provide direct financial incentives to enhance or restore wetlands and to protect them in perpetuity. For a permanent easement, the landowner receives full compensation for the value of the easement plus 75%-100% of restoration costs. Enrollment under a 30-year easement provides the landowner with 50%-75% of the easement value, plus 50%-75% of restoration costs.

For a reduction in wetland reserve easement value, landowners may choose to retain a portion of their grazing rights. A site-specific grazing plan will be developed that assures the conservation value of the wetland property, while allowing the landowner to graze at least 75% of the animal unit months (AUMs) available in normal years.

RCPP

The third way NRCS provides financial assistance to conservation-minded producers is through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). According to Soncksen, RCPP authorizes NRCS to collaborate with a variety of conservation-driven organizations, plus state and local governments, to enter into unique and innovative contract and easement agreements with producers. NRCS works with partnering entities to leverage their financial assistance to producers and landowners.

Of particular interest are projects targeting resource concerns in eight regions dubbed Critical Conservation Areas. These include: Chesapeake Bay Watershed, Great Lakes Region, Mississippi River Basin, Colorado River Basin, the Southeast’s Longleaf Pine Range, Columbia River Basin, Prairie Grasslands Region and California Bay Delta.

Soncksen emphasizes that NRCS services, both technical and financial assistance, are available to help producers manage natural resources for the benefit of the environment, thus benefiting society as a whole, while maintaining and even improving agricultural production. He said information regarding specific programs and conservation practices is available at www.nrcs.usda.gov, but recommended that producers visit their local NRCS office for information about programs, producer eligibility and enrollment.



Editor’s Note: Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb.