

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

Fri, 7/9 3:09PM 10:13

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

nracs, farmers, program, csp, iowa, practices, conservation, kate, conservation stewardship program, contract, nracs office, ranchers, programs, deadline, operation, staff, usda, financial assistance, eligible, center

SPEAKERS

Kate Hansen, Christa Hartsook, Olivia Hanlon

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- C** Christa Hartsook 00:15
Hello, and welcome to the Small Farms Podcast, a production of the Small Farms Program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Our podcast covers the opportunities and challenges associated with rural life.
 - O** Olivia Hanlon 00:29
In this episode I visit with Kate Hansen, policy assistant with the Center for Rural Affairs on the Conservation Stewardship Program. I'm Olivia Hanlon, Education Extension Specialist, and we hope you enjoy the show. Kate, welcome to the show. Thanks for coming back again this week.
 - K** Kate Hansen 00:44
Thanks so much for having me back.
 - O** Olivia Hanlon 00:47
So like I just said, we heard from you last week on Organic Crop Insurance, but in case someone missed that, could you tell us a little bit about the Center for Rural Affairs and what your role is there?



Kate Hansen 00:58

Certainly, the Center for Rural Affairs is a nonprofit established in 1973. And we work to strengthen family farms, rural communities, and small businesses. We have four staff based here in central Iowa in Nevada. But our main office is in Lyons, Nebraska, and we also have staff in South Dakota and Minnesota. And as part of my role, I work on what are called Federal Working Lands Conservation Programs. These are programs offered by the US Department of Agriculture and the working lands part means that they'll help you add conservation onto land that is still in production or still working land.



Olivia Hanlon 01:34

Okay, so one of those USDA programs that you work on is the Conservation Stewardship Program. What can you tell us about that specific program?



Kate Hansen 01:43

So the Conservation Stewardship Program or CSP is I'll probably refer to it from here on out, is a program designed to help farmers enhance and advance conservation on their operations. So it's a program set up for a producer who's already doing some conservation practices, but wants to scale up those practices or maybe add some more. It's administered by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, or NRCS. And they have Field Service offices in every county. CSP contracts are five years in length with the option to renew. And over those five years, NRCS is providing both technical and financial assistance to the producer. So on the technical side, the farmers working with the conservation staff to put together a plan for their contract. So they'll decide what set of practices they're going to implement over the five years. And also NRCS staff can provide additional assistance. For example, if you do rotational grazing as part of your contract, they'll sit down with you and help you figure out your grazing plan how you're going to divide up your paddocks, how frequently rotate, details like that. And on the financial assistance side, you do receive an annual payment for being in the program. And that payment amount is dependent on specifics of your operation, what practices you're doing, things like that. And one last thing is that it's great we're talking about this today, because the deadline to apply in Iowa this year is February 19th.



Olivia Hanlon 03:05

So you mentioned that this program is pretty widespread. What areas is this program run in?



Kate Hansen 03:11

So it's available in all 50 states, but there are a number of ways that the Midwest and Iowa really lead in program use. So a few months ago, we did kind of a deep dive into the data around the program to put together some informational resources. And we found for example, if you look at 2018, there are over 3000 active CSP contracts in Iowa. And they accounted for about 1.6 million acres of farmland or about 5% of the total farmland in Iowa. And the following year 2019, there were over 400 Iowa farmers that either entered new CSP contracts or renewed existing ones. And this lines up with what we know too, which is that Iowa is a leading state as far as new contract enrollment. And that's just kind of good feedback for the program that farmers continue to enroll in and renew when they can.



Olivia Hanlon 04:00

So obviously, there are farmers out there utilizing the CSP program. Another common one we hear about is CRP. How are these different?



Kate Hansen 04:09

Yeah, that's a good question. Some of this feels a little bit like alphabet soup with all the acronyms. But this question goes back to what I was talking about earlier with the working lands. So with CRP or the Conservation Reserve Program, you're essentially taking land out of production. And with CSP, you're putting together a set of practices that you're going to implement while still using the land for production. So for example, a practice available in the program is cover crops, which is actually the top practice in Iowa that producers are signing up for in the program. Or another one I mentioned might be rotational grazing. So you're still using the land, it's still in production. And these are practices you're doing kind of on top of that, or with that.



Olivia Hanlon 04:48

So obviously, the monetary aspect is a benefit to these farmers out there. But are there any other benefits that farmers received from being enrolled in this program?



Kate Hansen 04:57

Certainly, as you said, I mean, the two big ones are the technical and financial assistance. But we see too that farmers and ranchers that use it elsewhere are just really satisfied with the program. So a few years ago, we surveyed more than 800 CSP users across the

Midwest, and 84% of them reported high or very high satisfaction with CSP. And that attracts with what we hear on the ground as well. So as a part of my work, I talk with a lot of farmers, as I said, in some other states, like Nebraska, some ranchers who use CSP, and if they were eligible, of course, it means they were already doing some conservation. And the program is assisting them to enhance that conservation or scale it up with new practices. So they're getting that financial support, they're getting that technical support. And it's just a really good way to achieve those conservation goals they have. And of course, the sort of bigger picture here is that enhancing conservation has so many benefits from soil health to water quality.



Olivia Hanlon 05:57

Okay, so when we look at applying for this program, what do we need to get started in the application process?



Kate Hansen 06:03

Good question. So as I said, you do have to have some existing conservation on your operation. So if you don't, you might look into other programs that might be a better fit, and maybe be Environmental Quality Incentives Program or Equip. But with CSP, as you go along and application process, NRCS staff are going to make a farm visit, talk with you about your operation, your existing conservation and any resource concerns you might have, talk with you, you know, what practices might you be interested in doing? And then eventually, you'll put together a plan of the practices that you're committed to doing over the contract and a timeline that they'll be implemented by things like that.



Olivia Hanlon 06:41

Okay, so once we have our plan in place, how do people actually go about applying? Where can they find the application? And then if you could share with us, again, that application closing date for Iowa?



Kate Hansen 06:53

Yeah, so the most important thing is that the deadline to apply this year is February 19th, at least in Iowa. And the first step is to reach out to your local NRCS office. And right now they're doing most of their business over the phone due to COVID. So just give them a call. If you don't know their number, you can Google, 'USDA Service Center Locator,' and there's a tool that should pop right up that can help you find the number. And I want to note that the February 19th deadline is just for some sort of basic paperwork that you

have to get in that establishes that you want to apply for the program. And the rest of those steps kind of come later in the process. So this first step is only a few pages. And it's sort of a relatively painless form that just kind of gets the ball rolling on your application. And sort of through the whole process, NRCS staff are able to guide you that they have the resources necessary to help you understand what you're signing up for, the conservation practices, and they're kind of guiding you the whole way through.



Olivia Hanlon 07:47

So folks don't necessarily have to have already met with a NRCS staff to make their plan before the application closing date in Iowa, or they do?



Kate Hansen 07:56

I would say it's still best practice to reach out to NRCS as soon as possible. But that 19th deadline is for the initial paperwork, and then they would do the farm visit after that. And then if you get accepted, that's when you would get into the sort of nitty gritty of what are you doing when you're doing it. All of that.



Olivia Hanlon 08:14

Okay, thank you for that clarification. Is there anything that we missed today that you'd like to add?



Kate Hansen 08:20

I think that about covers it, the only thing I'd add is that if you're not sure if you're eligible, or not, just reach out to your local NRCS and ask. If you're not, they might be able to direct you towards programs that you are eligible for. And also, it's just a great idea to get to know the folks in your local NRCS office if you don't already. They're really knowledgeable and can kind of keep your operation in mind for future opportunities, programs, things like that. And just once again, the deadline to apply in Iowa for CSP is February 19th. So it's it's fast approaching. And if you are interested, I would give them a call as soon as you can.



Olivia Hanlon 08:55

Yeah, of course, Kate, you shared with me before this podcast, a website where you had posted some success stories. Do you mind sharing a little bit about that site with us?



Kate Hansen 09:04

Yeah, I'd love to that is what's called a Story Map that we've put together. And it features stories of farmers in a number of Midwestern states and ranchers who have used CSP and details maybe what practices they did or their story with the program. And it just kind of puts a face to you know, what is this program actually accomplishing on the ground? Who's using it? And perhaps if you're a farmer, or rancher, how might it look for your operation? So that's available on our website, if you're, you know, going to drop the link anywhere, but it's a great way to maybe familiarize yourself with the program and actually see some names and faces that have used it and have some pretty great stories.



Olivia Hanlon 09:43

Okay, I will put that link in the show notes below. If there's nothing else you have for us today. Kate, thank you for joining us yet again. It's great to have you back on and hopefully we can do some more in the future.



Kate Hansen 09:55

Yeah, thank you so much for having me.



Olivia Hanlon 09:56

The success stories mentioned at the end of this episode can be found at <https://www.cfra.org/blog/conservation-stewardship-program-success-stories>.



09:58

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