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## **THE CSP APPLICATION EXPERIENCE**

### **Summary of Research Findings**

#### **One-on-One In-Depth Interviews**

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# THE CSP APPLICATION EXPERIENCE

## Summary of Research Findings

### RESEARCH OVERVIEW:

Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) wants to understand Iowa Farmers' experiences when applying for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). In particular, PFI wishes to uncover experiences in the application process, and the CSP experience in general, that may encourage or discourage farmers from applying for CSP in the future or encourage or discourage farmers from continuing existing sustainable practices or adopting new sustainable practices. The information gathered with this research will be used in conjunction with a regional group's information to inform NRCS at the US federal level about any issues or concerns related to the CSP application process. Ultimately, PFI would like to see wider acceptance of and participation in CSP.

Objective: To gather insights on the CSP application process from an applicant's perspective.

Wilbeck Consulting was contracted to conduct the research in the Spring of 2011.

### BACKGROUND – CSP APPLICATION PROCESS:

*Based on conversations with NRCS staff and information currently provided on the following websites: Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) [www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov), Iowa NRCS [www.ia.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.ia.nrcs.usda.gov), and the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition [www.sustainableagriculturecoalition.org](http://www.sustainableagriculturecoalition.org):*

#### 2011 CSP Application Process:

For Iowa applicants, NRCS has application information available on the Iowa NRCS website or at the NRCS county-level offices. Applicants are asked to complete a brief self-screening checklist to determine if they are likely to meet requirements for the program (applicant, land, and stewardship threshold requirements). If they do, participants are then asked to submit an application and set up an interview with their county NRCS office. The deadline to submit an application for 2011 signup was 1/21/11. Applications received after 1/21/11 would be considered for the next evaluation and ranking period.

During the NRCS interview, NRCS personnel ask the applicant a series of questions outlined in the Conservation Measurement Tool (CMT). This tool uses a points-based system for attributing environmental benefits to existing, as well as proposed additional farming activities (called enhancements). The tool generates performance points for determining stewardship thresholds met, conservation performance ranking scores and annual program payments awarded in a 5-yr contract. After completing the interview, applicants should know if they met threshold requirements. They will not know their final "ranking" among all applicants or their program payment and will not have a contract agreement, at that time. Applicants had until 3/9/11 to complete their interviews with NRCS.

After the ranking process was completed (March), applicants were notified if they were "tentatively

approved” and were told their program payment. NRCS then conducted on-farm verification visits (April) and completed conservation plans and contract development (May or later). The first CSP payments for contracts awarded in this process are expected to be made in October 2011.

*Note: The exact application process in years prior to 2011 was not confirmed, but was believed by PFI to be similar (only minimal differences) for applications occurring in 2008-2010.*

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

### Method:

**Face-to-face, one-on-one, in-depth interviews** were conducted by Wilbeck Consulting with **Iowa farmers** in their homes, to gather meaningful insights related to the CSP application process.

### Participants:

**PFI farmer members** were targeted for this research, because it was believed that they would be more willing than a non-member to participate in PFI-sponsored research. The PFI member base was also believed to be an excellent source to recruit CSP participants, given that approximately 27% of the PFI farmer-member base had self-reported in the 2010 PFI Annual Member Survey that they were currently involved in CSP (still in CSP contracts initiated prior to 2011) vs. PFI’s estimates that approximately only 1.6% of all Iowa farmers had received CSP contracts since 2007.

### CSP Application Period Explored:

Initially, PFI wished to speak with PFI farmer-members who had just gone through the 2011 CSP application sign-up, in an attempt to get the “freshest” recall possible of the experience.

However, based on a PFI March-April 2011 internet survey conducted among members to recap CSP participation by year - and a subsequent analysis of the PFI member database - it was believed that there was most likely only a small pool of PFI farmers who applied for CSP in 2011. Therefore, it was determined that the interviews would be conducted with PFI farmers who had applied between 2008 and 2010.

From the PFI March-April 2011 internet survey respondent base, there was a sufficient pool of farmers who indicated that they had applied for CSP between 2008 and 2010 (31 farmers). Of those farmers, 25 received contracts for CSP for the first-time. Of those 25, 20 could be matched back to their member data (to verify self-reported CSP participation) and had not participated in a recent PFI focus group.

From the base of 20 CSP-participating PFI farmers, 6 PFI farmer members had received contracts between 2008 and 2010 and were selected by PFI for an interview. **Of those, ALL 6 PFI farmer members had applied for the CSP program in the winter of 2009 or spring of 2010, with contracts starting in 2010.** These farmers were pre-screened by PFI and the Wilbeck Consulting prior to the interviews, to ensure that they were currently enrolled in the CSP program and had not mistakenly self-reported participation.

Three of the farmers interviewed were from Central Iowa (Eldora, Guthrie Center, Panora) and three from Northeast Iowa (Clarksville, Farmersburg, Giard). A short summary description of each farmer's farming operation is provided at the end of this report in **Appendix A: FARMER SUMMARY**.

*Note: Two of the farmers interviewed indicated that they had participated as members of organizations who worked with Iowa Senator Tom Harkin and his staff to spear-head the creation of the CSP program.*

#### Interviews:

The interviews were conducted between **5/17/11 - 5/27/11** and averaged **1.5 hours per interview** in length. The farmers interviewed received a \$50 incentive check from PFI for their participation.

The following topic areas were explored in the interviews:

1. Overall Satisfaction
2. Process Initiation
3. Interview Preparation
4. Overall Application Experience
5. Faring of Existing Practices
6. Selection of New Practices (Enhancements)
7. Understanding Scoring
8. Program Implementation
9. NRCS Interaction
10. Contract Satisfaction
11. Willingness to Re-Apply
12. Program's Value to Farming Community

A pre-approved Interviewer's Guide was used to provide structure and some consistency for interviewing. Given that the farmers had applied over a year ago and recall would be potentially eroded for specific details regarding the application experience, the guide was revised to gather insights to reflect more general impressions regarding their CSP application experience and the program. See **Appendix B: INTERVIEWER'S GUIDE** at the end of this report for the questions asked and areas probed.

#### **RESEARCH LIMITATIONS:**

One-on-one, in-depth interviews provide "qualitative" information that can be rich with meaning. However, findings should not be used to provide quantifiable projections. The insights obtained from this research are to be used only to explain possible positive or negative experiences in the CSP application process. Not all positive and negative experiences identified in this research will be representative of what every farmer experiences.

While it is believed that 6 interviews will be sufficient to uncover insights, it is still a relatively small number of farmers and care should be taken to not assume that these farmers represent all farmers or all farmers within their subset. Also, with a limited sample, not all positive and negative experiences can be identified. Only quantitative survey data can provide a higher degree of certainty.

However, even with these limitations, it is believed that this research provides sufficient insights that will provide an understanding of what some farmers experience when applying for CSP.

## **FINDINGS:**

Findings from this research are reported, below, by topic area explored, followed by a summary opinion.

### Overall Satisfaction:

The farmers were asked their overall satisfaction with the program. This question was asked first, to eliminate bias that could occur if the question was asked after the specific topic areas were discussed. The farmers were asked to rate their satisfaction on a scale, to gauge their feelings, not to produce quantifiable statistics. They were then asked to *briefly* explain their response.

*“Overall, how satisfied are you with the Conservation Stewardship Program, give your experience to date? On a 1 to 5 scale with 5 = very satisfied and 1 = very dissatisfied.”*

**The answers were split.** Three of the farmers were satisfied and three were neutral to dissatisfied.

The satisfied farmers liked the “idea” of the program, primarily because they were already practicing conservation. The neutral to dissatisfied farmers weren’t sure what would be expected, expected more of the program or more from the NRCS staff.

### Satisfied Quotes:

*“5 ... Getting paid to do what we were going to do and what we needed to do all along.”*

*“4.5-5 ... Nothing to be dissatisfied ... Haven’t had any trouble and we like the idea.”*

*“4... Very Satisfied. (why not a 5) Mainly because I couldn’t get into it sooner ... Paid for doing the right thing ... Finally getting recognized and not penalized (for doing the right thing).”*

### Dissatisfied Quotes:

*“2 ... Haven’t gotten any support from the (NRCS) office.”*

*“2.5 to 3 ... You don’t have flexibility. (He discussed his need to change buffer strip widths yearly to control water flow.) The CSP program doesn’t allow me to do that. Not without a lot of paperwork or going in to get permission.”*

*“3 ... Main thing is, it’s the only program of its type that rewards good practice rather than crop production ... We wanted most of the money to go towards people who had good practices in place. Now it’s paying for change. Too often you have people with poor conservation practices and then they make a change and get the most money. The people doing a good job all along – they either get nothing or less. Conservation plan shouldn’t be that way.”*

### Process Initiation:

When asked why they applied for CSP, ALL of the farmers mentioned that they had been **waiting to apply as soon as it was available to them**. It wasn't available, before, because it **wasn't previously offered in their watershed**. Two of the farmers were part of the group that worked with IA Senator Tom Harkin to create the program – and even they had been waiting to join as soon as it was available to them!

Primary reason the farmers applied:

- Already doing it could get paid for doing it
- Existing practices counted and didn't disqualify them
- Cost share for practices they were considering or experimenting with

*"You can already be doing conservation things ... you could still get paid for that and that seemed important and was one of the things that was attractive about it ... They didn't disqualify you because you were already doing it."*

*"Didn't have to really change anything I was doing to be eligible ... minor modifications .. It was finally giving someone a reward."*

*"We've experimented with different cover crops for years and it can be kind of expensive. It was strictly for money for trying to perfect the cover crop program."*

*"Extremely hard right now for a grass farmer to compete with row crop rental rates ... EQIP and CSP help make up the difference."*

How they learned about the program:

- Word of mouth – other farmers who were in the program
- At PFI events (meeting topic or personal conversation with other farmers)
- Reading NRCS letters, various magazines
- Discussions with NRCS staff
- Were involved in the creation of the program w/Harkin's staff (2 of the farmers)

*"One person in the county qualified because (he was) in the watershed. Started my interest - some of the things he was doing in reduced nitrogen applications."*

*"The most I got informed was when they there trying to figure out what was going to be in it at a PFI Session."*

*"Followed and read as much as I could in the first 3 years. I know people who were signed up and talked to them. At PFI field days and conferences, it was talked about."*

*“We were the first organization (a different org. than PFI) to lobby congress for a green payment ... (I was) heavily involved with Harkin and members of his staff visioning and legislating the program.”*

#### Interview Preparation:

Most of the farmers **proactively pursued applying for the program and came with ideas for what they wanted to do (enhancements).**

Much of their prep work was from reading and hearing about the program throughout the years. Then, once they heard the program was open to them, they'd go into the NRCS office to begin a discussion or get some specific information. Only one farmer said that the discussion was initiated by the NRCS staffer. Some were handed information to read (enhancement list, etc), while others proactively sought out information from magazines or from the NRCS website.

**Once they decided to apply, their prep work primarily seemed to be reviewing the enhancement list, since most sensed they were already well-informed about the program.** A couple of farmers mentioned they **spent some time going through their chemical records before the NRCS interview**, and that amount of time was dependent on how well they had recorded, organized or recalled (remembered mentally) their chemical applications. One farmer said that he spent a great deal of time reviewing the CSP information provided on the NRCS website.

#### Overall Application Experience:

The application experience was **highly dependent on the NRCS staff person's knowledge and desire to help.** It was described as “painless” to “painful,” based on how the NRCS staffer dealt with the process.

Those with “**painless**” experiences seemed to have a good working relationship with NRCS staffer through their involvement with other farm programs (handled through that office) and frequent visits to the NRCS office for other matters. **The staffer also seemed to be well-informed and engaged the farmer in the discussions.** Some farmers mentioned that the NRCS staffer was “good,” one farmer called the staffer a “coach,” and in some instances, a couple of farmers said they thought the NRCS staffer had already been promoted out of the position (confirming their belief that the staffer was good at his/her job). One farmer said he had a great working relationship with the NRCS staffer and so he just went in, sat down, and went through the application interview in one sitting. Another farmer said that the NRCS staffer actually came out to his farm to start the paperwork.

*“The NRCS person was good and made it very painless.”*

*“I had worked with her on EQIP and she (NRCS staffer) was excellent. She informed me that there were forms and we would sit at the computer and do a question and answer thing and that was what we did ... We rolled through the questions ...”*

*“He was our coach.”*

Those with “painful” experiences had to make several trips to the NRCS office. They talked to more than one person, felt the staff had little training or wasn’t informed, and felt their interview was parsed-out into too many visits. One farmer had a good experience in one county, but he and his father had a long, drawn-out experience in another county (Later, he learned that he didn’t have to apply in two different counties.). One farmer felt he had to spend a lot of time reading the details describing the enhancement, because he felt the program was very subjective and he wasn’t sure how it would be interpreted for his farm. One farmer felt “brushed off” – that the staff gave him just a little bit of information at a time to discourage him from applying.

*“First interview was a brief one – guy was retiring ... Didn’t know as much as I did. He went to one seminar ... Second interview – met with the interim guy. This guy did most of the work ... Finally met with the guy in charge. He basically did all the sign-up forms.”*

*“Just drug out, drug out. More questions. Instead of one sit down. A few questions and then they’d say “that takes care of it.” Then we’d come back another time when he found more questions ... It was ridiculous ... Always required a trip over. For me, (driving) 22 miles to do 10 to 15 minutes is silly.”*

*“Went through it here. Then back over there. We went through it twice over there ... Then it takes me a while to read into what he is saying. I have to determine how it fits into my program. So I worked on it very hard for a long time.”*

*“(first visit) Handed generic stuff .. like after I read (it) I’m probably not going to be interested .. It was nothing I haven’t read (before) .. (felt) kind of brushed off then.”*

**There was one farmer-specific instance that delayed sign-up, but the farmer felt it was easily resolved.**

After the CSP application was believed to be done, NRCS discovered that the land involved was under different ownership. Since the land was operated by the same family, the farmer completed FSA paperwork to put all of the land under one owner and re-applied with the same CSP paper work.

*“So we just went in and changed it. Took only about 10 minutes to sign the (FSA) paper ... So we didn’t have to re-apply (for CSP). We just changed it to one operation and re-did the paperwork. We didn’t have to go back in and sit down for 2 hours.”*

#### Faring of Existing Practices:

Farmers were asked how they thought their existing conservation practices fared in the application process. While some said they **really didn’t know how each practice fared**, there was a **general belief that their existing conservation practices helped and didn’t hurt them**. Those with organic practices seemed confident that **organic helped**.

*“I don’t know. I told him what I was doing. I wasn’t told whether the points were beneficial or not. I was under the impression that I told him what I was doing and that was all I could do.”*

*"I didn't pay enough attention, probably, to what things you get for the score. What things you get points for - just because we were already doing them ... You get a little bit for diversity ... And you have to have a little area for wildlife within a certain distance of each field ... I think terraces even count for a little bit. One of our properties has a one acre wetland. Another has a buffer strip and we don't mow it. And a windbreak. And the woods. That helped."*

*"I had a major waterway in place. I'm not positive that it helped me. But it sure didn't hurt me."*

*"Scored highly. Basically I was already using a large percentage of my farmland in part of the rotational grazing system and it ranked high in the evaluation score."*

*"(Organic) Helps, because (you're) not using chemicals and it improves your score."*

*"It was pretty much a shoo-in, really ... because the organic program requirements are very similar to that of CSP."*

Some farmers believed **that no-till is favored in the process** and not necessarily a good practice.

*"No-till comes out way ahead ... (but) I think I'm building organic matter faster than the no-till guy."*

*"Politically, to get the thing through - no till, all-chemical row crop (favored)."*

*"One guy in X county is 100% no-till and he goes to meetings and brags that he is 100% no-till ... and you talk to his neighbors and he literally has bulldozers coming in to straighten out his erosions, that upsets me ... I don't think whoever is monitoring the program is doing a good job. If no-till is no-till, even though it ain't working and it's in writing there (in CSP as an option), it's (appearing to be) ok."*

#### Selection of New Practices (Enhancements):

All of the farmers came to the NRCS application interview with **at least one primary practice they wanted to implement as a new practice or enhancement**. Generally, the practices were what they wanted to do anyway on their farms.

The **primary practices** the farmers selected to implement included:

- Cover crops
- Buffer strips (extended headlands)
- Grazing bundle
- Prairie restoration (as a part of a grazing system)
- Crop rotation change (excluded soybeans from the rotation)

*"My theory on developing soil and preventing soil loss was to have something growing on the field to prevent soil loss. We've been trying to get a **cover crop** program that was consistent, because we apply a lot of manure on it ... Already my interest. CSP gave me cash to develop my*

interest.”

*“(I was) Considering putting in some **buffer strips** and visited with the county CSP person and she thought there was a good chance. We did a slight review ... Then I said, yes, I’m going to do the buffer strips and the contour and the whole works. With her advice, it looked like it would work. Then, of course, I’m getting paid to do that versus just cropping that whole entire field.”*

*“Last summer I did research on rotational **grazing**. Several of the practices in the **bundle** I ended up doing were going to be things I was going to implement. In fact, it was quite timely.”*

The farmer who selected the **grazing bundle** said he looked into the details and felt it was right for him. He also felt that an enhancement bundle would most likely give him more points, based on his own reading and research. But, he said that while he didn’t feel that the NRCS staffer was discouraging him from implementing the bundle, the staffer never-the-less kept telling him that he “only needed to implement one new practice”.

The farmer who selected **prairie restoration** said that he was involved in the development of CSP and was the person who suggested that the practice become an enhancement (he worked with a different organization than PFI that worked with Harkin to develop the CSP program).

The farmer who selected a **crop rotation change**, which excluded soybeans from his rotation, had reviewed a lot of research on the subject and felt that it was better for his land and would be a significant conservation measure. However, he discovered through the scoring process that it actually *decreased* his score (to be explained more under **Scoring**).

**One or two additional practices were selected during the interview or recommended by the NRCS staffer.** These additional recommended practices were viewed by the farmers as **very easy to implement or minor conservation steps**. In some instances, the farmers mentioned that these easy practices were things that farmers should be doing already. One, recycling of engine/motor oil, seemed like a counter-intuitive conservation measure to one farmer.

The **additional practices** selected during the interview or recommended by the NRCS staffer:

- Mowing practices
- Nitrogen tests
- Recycle motor/engine oil
- Changing chemical sprayer tips
- Widen buffer strips

*“(mowing) I think we looked at a list and said we could do this easy. Once we saw the list, we looked up the detailed description (at the office). Yes. Very easy.”*

*“On the crop side - - changing the spray tips of the sprayer, chemical sprayer. That was an easy one to implement.”*

*“There were a ton of loopholes when I signed up. A practice - - you were going to take all the florescent light bulbs to the recycle center, they counted that. We don’t need to get paid for little piddly things that everybody should be doing anyway.”*

*“(recycle motor oil) They promoted it ... It was kind of like basket-making for a football player for a college requirement.”*

*“(recycle motor oil) Didn’t make sense ... (It) was taken to an implement dealer that was burning it. That was recycling. (Now) it had to be taken a long ways to a collection site - 40 miles. Then it’s just collected there. And then it’s hauled to refinery that’s 1000 miles away.”*

One farmer mentioned that he was already partially implementing a couple of practices that he chose to implement *officially* as enhancements: fertility management, integrated crop pest management.

When asked if there were **any practices they wanted to implement but didn’t**, one farmer said he wanted to do **brush management** but couldn’t, because the land was already covered under his EQIP contract. Another mentioned that he asked about the **Resource Conserving Crop Rotation** option, but said it wouldn’t work with his operation, because some of his renters were reluctant to sign the 5 year contract that would be required to implement it as he intended.

Most of the farmers did not recall any discussion during their interview regarding the **Resource Conserving Crop Rotation (RCCR)** and the **supplemental payment** (except the one farmer mentioned above). This may be due to recall erosion, since they applied over a year ago. When shown the written description of RCCR (printed from the NRCS website) at the end of the interview, they had some lingering questions about how it had to be implemented and how it would be paid-out, but most felt that it probably didn’t apply to what they were doing or could do.

#### Understanding Scoring:

**All of the farmers understood that they were getting points for their existing practices and the enhancements. They also understood that the points totaled to a score** (or “total points”) that would be used to determine whether they could get into the program and how much they would be paid.

However, **none of the farmers really knew how each practice scored or impacted their total score**. Some even mentioned that they didn’t think that the NRCS staffer knew or could even “see” how the practices were scored. Some also mentioned that they didn’t really care how each practice scored, as long as they received enough total points to get into the program.

The farmer who changed his rotation (took soybeans out) asked the staffer to run his application twice, once with and once without the rotation change, to see how his score was impacted. It was then that he saw that his score was lowered with the removal of soybeans in his rotation, which he felt was the opposite of what should have happened. (He strongly believed that removing soybeans from his long-term rotation was better for his land and should have given him more points.)

**Only one farmer had researched scoring by reviewing the CSP information on the NRCS website.** He recalled finding the formula that showed how the payments were calculated. He said that he was able to estimate his contract payment (after he knew his score) before he got his contract. He said that he would have liked to have been able to run the scoring program himself, to see how his score may have changed. **Other farmers reiterated that they would have liked to have had a way to review how practices would be scored.**

*“It’s probably out there, but I didn’t know where to look. There’s probably a way to review what practices would score better. If I knew a headland practice would score far better than a nitrate practice, then I probably would look at it a lot more. But I really didn’t know. Somebody must know.”*

*“Maybe I could have studied the conservation tool more. Maybe there could have been a way.”*

**Most didn’t recall any discussion pertaining to thresholds, resource concerns or priority resource concerns,** though this may be due to recall erosion.

**While responses were mixed regarding how well they think they scored** (some thought they scored high, some didn’t know, and some thought they scored low), **all farmers left the application interview thinking that they would get a CSP contract.**

#### Program Implementation:

All of the farmers had been in the program for less than a year and **didn’t feel they had a lot of experience with it yet.** When asked how the program was working for them, most farmers mentioned that they had **just started implementing some of the practices and some practices were not yet due for implementation.**

Those who implemented cover crops and buffers had seeded the crops once and talked about how well the crops did or didn’t do. One farmer was thankful he wasn’t penalized because his crop didn’t grow well. He said he didn’t think about whether it had to grow, when he applied. Another farmer mentioned that PFI had loaned him a special seeder to use to plant his cover crop. He thought the cost of equipment needed for enhancements should somehow be considered in the CSP payment plan.

Those who had selected nitrogen tests, oil recycling or changing chemical spray nozzles as enhancements had received reminder notices from NRCS to turn in their first year’s receipts. They all felt this was easy to do.

One farmer received his contract late (after planting season). He planted his enhancement in the spring before his CSP paperwork was finalized. He then had to get special approval from Des Moines to allow the practice to still count as an enhancement.

Two of the farmers mentioned that that they were adding ground to their operation and were **disappointed they couldn’t amend their contracts to include added land.** One was concerned and unclear as to how his actions on the new land would impact his contract.

#### NRCS Interaction:

The farmers had **fairly limited CSP interaction with NRCS after they applied for the program and signed their contracts.** Two of the farmers mentioned they had field verification visits prior to their contract signing. One of those farmers was upset because he wasn't given prior notice of the visit, as he wished he could have been present to provide explanations. **All of the farmers were paid in the fall of 2010,** before many of their enhancements were fully implemented.

**Most didn't really know what type of interaction they would have with NRCS going forward,** but expected that they may have at least one visit after the first year.

*"We are not even through our first year. I wouldn't expect them to be out here yet. I would expect them to check up with us to see if we got things done and how things are working. I would expect that somewhere down the line."*

*"I would expect her to come out once this year to make sure the buffers strips are there."*

**Many were unsure how and when NRCS would verify that they had implemented their enhancements.** Some speculated that the NRCS office may check – at any time, even when they weren't home and without prior notice - by driving by or looking at satellite or aerial photos. Those who selected nitrogen tests, oil recycling and chemical sprayer nozzle changes as enhancements assumed they would receive the same yearly reminder to turn in their receipts. The farmer who planted his enhancement early said the NRCS office had reviewed his FSA paperwork to see what had been planted and that is how they knew he planted early.

*"I don't know if I'm supposed to be keeping a log or how they know what I do. Maybe they can tell from aerial photos and they can see it is grass and not cropland."*

*"On 30% of the acres I have to withhold livestock during the prime nesting season. May, June, July or something like that. But how do I verify that? What do I need to do? ... I would think after the first of the year they would have said "this is the guideline" and this is what I need to do to fulfill this practice."*

*"I don't know what there would be to check. I guess they could check if we had cover crops somewhere. They'd probably tell us if they found something wrong ... (A) cover crop they could see down the road. That would be as easy as one of their people doing a survey and driving by a farm to see if they have a cover crop. "*

It was evident that the farmers **needed a clearer explanation from the NRCS office of what would be required of them to verify that they had implemented their enhancements.**

#### Contract Satisfaction:

All of the farmers were **fairly satisfied with their contracts.** Generally, it **seemed fair and reasonable given that they were getting paid to do conservation and some of the practices they wanted to implement anyway** and the **program paid for some of their costs** – although few had really calculated

their actual costs to implement the practice. However, some mentioned that CSP is **paying less than other government programs.**

*“(CSP) The only program of its type set-up for paying farmers for doing good conservation practices.”*

*“There is no other program that rewards me for what needs to be done on my farm.”*

*“Same as expected. They told us what we were going to get and that is what we got ... We were going to do it anyway.”*

*“This payment is going to help me do what I was going to do anyway.”*

*“The dollars I’m getting, I’m fairly satisfied with. You’d always like to have more ... The dollars I’m getting on the pasture acres will help me implement the rotational grazing I want to do.”*

*“I got enough money to cover my cover crops and that is all I was concerned about.”*

*“The fall nitrate test. That costs us roughly 200 dollars. For that, we’re getting paid very well.”*

*“Feel my out-of-pocket costs to making the change – it’s covering that, but my overall income from the farm would be less without the soybeans in rotation – I’m not making it up with that.”*

*“Prairie restoration ... CSP doesn’t pay for seed. It wouldn’t come close to paying the actual cost of it. So these things have to be something you want to do anyway. At the most, you’re going to get cost-sharing payments.”*

*“What I expected, I guess. (I’m) disappointed that I could be getting a lot more tax payers dollars, if I was no-till row-cropping the whole thing.”*

*“Not fair for what I’m doing. To what you compare too. Very low amount for what a continuous row-crop guys get.”*

*“(compared to CRP payments) No. Considerably less money. Twenty five dollars per acre versus a couple 100 dollars per acre.”*

Willingness to Re-Apply:

**Not surprising, most would re-apply, but they are unsure how the CSP program would be structured, how it would be funded, or even if it would be funded in the future.**

*“Yes. I still want to see the program going and I’d like to see it funded better than where it’s at right now.”*

*“Yes. It’s a good program, but it probably won’t be around for long ... It’s the best program they’ve come up with.”*

*“Yes. Again, now, they may change the rules, but if I can re-apply and still maintain practices that are going to save the land and get some kind of compensation for those practices - which in my opinion this is doing - then it’s a good thing.”*

*“I don’t know. I’m not afraid of it. But we’re going to have a new president, a new budget ... It’s all going to be dependent on what’s available at the time.”*

*“I have no doubt in my mind, unless there is a sea of change in congress, that CSP is finished. It doesn’t have the support of big agri-business. I’m going to be surprised if the existing contract gets honored.”*

A few barriers to re-application were mentioned: convincing renters to sign 5 year contracts; inability to add new ground to the contract.

#### Program’s Value to the Farming Community:

It was clear that **all the farmers believed in the merits of conservation and wanted to see CSP as an option for farmers to encourage good stewardship.**

*“Reward the best and inspire the rest.”*

*“Because it encourages conservation. Because you can’t be in it, if you aren’t doing any conservation. That’s what you’re getting paid for. In time, I think more and more farmers would realize it. (It is) going to encourage more and more farmers.”*

*“I think, for the American tax payer bang-for-the-buck, CSP is going to be far better than CRP. For every 10 thousand dollars, we’ll get far more waterways, headlands, practices like that done versus just going in and having one whole field put to rest. Very poorest ground is the only ground in CRP. If CSP can take that very good ground and put some erosion practices in place, I think that will be a better deal. Less money for more ground-saving practices.”*

However, its **value to the farming community was watered-down by what farmers thought were limitations in how the program was structured versus what it was intended to do.**

*“(encourages good stewardship?) Encourage it? I don’t think so. You’re just asked to implement one additional practice. What you’re doing is what you’re doing. I could have implemented one practice in the crop portion and probably got two thirds of the dollars ... In the pasture portion, somebody could be picking a simple one.”*

*“All the enhancements are individual things. They are not systems. It’s the systems that are going to cure the program. In order to get CSP payments, maybe we ought to say you have to have a 3 year rotation on slope x with cover crops. You’d got to have a system to make it work. The organic program says you have to have a soil building program. This (CSP) is not a soil building program, not a system.*

*“The conservation tool needs to be refined. They’ve had enough experience with the program. They should be able to fix it ... Well-trained people involved in conservation all their life – seems like they have to follow this computer program somebody far-off, that doesn’t know what’s happening in the local scene, made up.”*

*“Very disappointed in how the administration brought the program out. Different than the way it was visioned (in 2007). Administration seemed like they were doing it because they had to. (They) didn’t support NRCS with funding to carry it out with staff to make it work. Maybe it had to start slow because it was a revolutionary program. Seemed like they were discouraging farmers by making it a harder program. Didn’t give it a lot of publicity or provide staff. Carried over when I applied (2009). Staff seemed to be jaded by paperwork and piddly stuff.”*

*“We wanted most of the money to go towards people who had good practices in place. Now it’s paying for change. Too often you have people with poor conservation practices and then they make a change and get the most money. Then, people doing a good job all along - they either get nothing or less. Conservation plan shouldn’t be that way.” (This idea was expressed at the beginning of this farmer’s interview, when he was asked his satisfaction with the program.)*

Even with the limitations, **all still believed that PFI and other organizations should continue to lobby for CSP funding.** Many have been – and still are - personally lobbying their congressman to support it. Some would like to see the program **funded with cuts from other programs.** One farmer believed the **program supported alternative sustainable systems that may be needed as reference points and resources,** to resurrect any failing crop/farming systems. Some would also like to see the **program promoted** more than it is.

*“Oh yeah. If there’s not money for that (CSP), we’ll then cut the direct payment program so that there’s plenty of money left over for this. There would be more than enough. Direct payments – there’s so much more money spent on that than the conservation stuff .... I’m almost positive that if you ask people paying for the program what they’d want to do, I think people aren’t going to say direct payment.”*

*“I think it’s very important for continued support of alternative sustainable systems, because of the new controversy with the genetically modified issues with Round-up, for instance ... (May be) some tipping point and never come back. Important to keep reserves of soil ecology for reference points and we may need incubation for re-inoculating soils.”*

*“Making sure farmers know about it. And making sure it’s still available.”*

*“The majority of farmers aren’t the least bit familiar (with CSP).”*

#### **SUMMARY OPINION:**

All 6 of the PFI member Iowa farmers are supporters of the CSP program. They all had been waiting for the program to open up (beyond selected watersheds) and applied as soon as it was available to them. They felt they were finally rewarded - to some extent - for their conservation work and future

conservation plans. They were fairly happy that their contracts paid for some of the costs of their conservation efforts, although they conceded that they realized it was much less than what they would be paid with other government programs.

It was evident that their application experience was highly dependent on the NRCS staffer's knowledge and desire to help. Those farmers who made several trips to the office to complete the paperwork found the process "painful." This seems to be due to the staffer's inexperience, lack of knowledge, lack of time or an apparent practice of parsing the interview into several sessions. It is clear that this negative experience could be avoided, since those who had good experiences were able to complete their paperwork in fewer sessions.

All of the farmers said that they came to the CSP interviews with an idea of what they wanted to do as a new practice. Most had researched the enhancement list and had pre-selected the practice they wanted to implement. The NRCS staffers appear to have suggested additional enhancements, though those suggestions seemed to be either very easy to implement or minor conservation steps the farmers thought they should already be doing. In fact, those suggestions seemed less than inspiring. This may highlight an opportunity for the NRCS staffer to establish more of a "coaching" role in the process, if he/she is well-trained and able to spend the time to work with the farmer to create his conservation plan and recommend more substantial and worthy enhancements (worthy, as viewed by the farmer). However, it may also highlight some of the limitations in the structure of the program and structure of the enhancement list, as well as limitations in NRCS staff time and training. The NRCS staffer may not have been able to suggest any additional practices that would work for the farmer - beyond those already suggested - or may not have received sufficient training to act as a "coach" or advisor.

As far as understanding the conservation measurement tool (CMT) and the scoring process, the farmers really didn't know how their existing practices or selected enhancements fared in the process. While some of the farmers said they would have liked to have known how a different enhancement impacted their score, it is probably not likely that most farmers would need to see a lot of detail behind each practice's point value. If there was an easy way to run the scoring tool to generate revised scores by adding or removing practices, it seems as if some of the farmers would have appreciated the opportunity to compare practices and the resulting scores generated from the changes (particularly since one farmer asked the staffer to do this). This may be a way to encourage interest in practices that weren't previously considered and which may produce higher conservation benefits (and subsequently a higher point value). However, this is also dependent on whether the conservation benefits assigned to a practice are what a sustainable farmer sees as true benefits (i.e. some farmer's felt that no-till was currently favored in the process and it wasn't necessarily a good practice). Some farmers felt the scoring tool needed to be revised to reflect such benefits and CSP was not necessarily delivering the conservation results intended or expected when the program was initially conceived.

The farmers interviewed didn't have a full year's worth of experience under their belts, so they had little to say about how well the program was working for them. However, it was evident that the farmers needed a clearer explanation from NRCS of what would be required to verify that they implemented the enhancements as contracted. There was a lot of uncertainty and speculation surrounding how they

“thought” they’d be checked or their practices verified. Perhaps the NRCS staffers told them, but the farmers did not seem to recall how it all would “work.” A written explanation of what is needed to be recorded or shown as “proof,” how it would be verified and when it would be verified would be helpful, if not already available or provided, at contract signing.

It was not surprising that the farmers said they most likely would re-apply for CSP, once their contracts were up. However, they were unsure how the program would be structured, how it would be funded, or even if it would be funded in the future.

Ultimately, the farmers still believe in the merits of the program and CSP’s value to the farming community. Even after negative experiences when applying, uncertainty regarding how their new enhancements would be verified for compliance and perceived limitations in the way CSP is administered and structured -- they want it to continue and they wanted it to be funded. They all believe that PFI and other organizations should continue to lobby for the program.

END OF FINDINGS

## Appendix A: FARMER SUMMARY

Below is a short summary description of the farmer's farming operation, based on what was volunteered during interview. All of the farmer's practices most likely won't be listed, as the farmer may or may not have wished to disclose exact details or didn't feel that some of his practices were the primary or defining practices of his operation. However, all of the CSP enhancement practices are believed to be listed.

Farmer 1:

- 2000 acres of land; 600 acres in pasture for 250 cows
- Fertilizes with hog manure and composted cattle manure; contracts chicken manure
- Organic, except conventional hog confinement
- Crops: corn, soybean, wheat, hay, red clover, winter rye
- 3 or 5 year rotations; HEL ground
- **CSP enhancement practices:** cover crops

Farmer 2:

- Crops: corn, soybean, hay, alfalfa, small grain
- Broiler chickens, eggs
- 20' x 200' garden: sells some produce (sweet corn, asparagus)
- Markets locally: restaurants, individuals
- **CSP enhancement practices:** cover crops, mowing

Farmer 3:

- 142 acres in one county plus another 360 acres in another county
- 40 ewes, 9 cows
- Crops: corn, soybeans, buffer strips and grass waterways for forage
- 13 acres of CRP on one farm
- **CSP enhancement practices:** buffer strips (extended headlands), fertility management, integrated crop pest management, nitrogen test, recycle motor/engine oil

Farmer 4:

- 305 acres (HEL ground)
- Feeder cattle (doesn't graze)
- Crops: corn, barley, alfalfa
- Organic practices
- **CSP enhancement practices:** crop rotation change, recycle motor/engine oil, nitrogen test

Farmer 5:

- Grazing operation
- 170 head cattle on pasture; custom grazing for others
- Organic grass-fed beef
- Few crops grown to renovate pastures and for feed
- Does some corn breeding for research
- CSP enhancement practices: prairie restoration, mowing, recycle motor/engine oil

Farmer 6:

- 1000 acres (rented +owned)
- Small cow-calf heard (80 head); free-range
- Crops: mainly corn, soybeans
- CSP enhancement practices: grazing bundle, changing chemical sprayer tips, widen buffer strips

END OF FARMER SUMMARY

## **Appendix B: INTERVIEWER'S GUIDE (1.5 hours)**

*A interviewer's guide is an outline of the flow of the one-on-one discussion. It includes questions or stimulus that the interviewer will use to encourage open conversation among participants. The guide can be slightly modified, as the discussion unfolds, to ensure that meaningful insights are extracted, but the ultimate objective of the research should remain unchanged.*

Questions in quotes and italics will be asked as written. Lettered questions that follow are probing questions that may not be asked, or may not be asked in the same order or same wording.

### **1. Introduction (5 minutes)**

- a. Interviewer introduces self as non-PFI board member or staff, discusses how interview will work, asks for open & honest opinions, no opinion is wrong, interviewer will take notes, session will be tape-recorded for later review (for notes only), length of interview, etc.
- b. Participants will remain anonymous in reporting.
- c. Participant will be asked for a brief description of his/her farm, farming practices, the date the CSP contract started.

### **2. Overall Satisfaction with CSP (5 minutes)**

*"Overall, how satisfied are you with the Conservation Stewardship Program, given your experience to date? Please Explain." (On a 1 to 5 scale with 5 = very satisfied and 1 = very dissatisfied)*

### **3. Process Initiation (5 minutes)**

*"Why did you decide to apply for CSP?"*

- a. What was the primary reason you applied for CSP?
- b. How did you learn about the program?
- c. Have you applied for CSP in the past? Did you get a contract?

### **4. Interview Preparation (5 minutes)**

*"How did you prepare for your application/interview the NRCS?"*

- a. Did anyone help you prepare for your application/interview with the NRCS?

### **5. Application Experience (5 minutes)**

*"What do you recall about your CSP application experience –the process you went through to apply for CSP, including the interview with the NRCS?"*

- a. What do you recall as good or bad about the experience?
- b. Was this experience better or worse than you expected?
- c. What could have made it better?
- d. What would have been helpful to know prior to applying?

**6. Existing Practices (5 minutes)**

*“How did your existing conservation practices, those implemented prior to this contract, fare in the application process?”*

- a. Did you feel your existing practices were assessed favorably?
- b. Did the scoring seem fair/reasonable?

**7. New Practices (5 minutes)**

*“What new practices did you choose to implement for the program and why did you choose those practices?”*

- a. Did you decide which new practices you were interested in implementing prior to your interview or were they suggested to you during your interview?
- b. Were there other practices you would have preferred to implement, but didn't? Why?
- c. Was Resource Conserving Crop Rotation and the supplemental payment discussed?
- d. (If farm organic) Was the Organic Crosswalk discussed?

**8. Scoring (5 minutes)**

*“What do you recall about the scoring or ranking of your application?”*

- a. Did you understand it?
- b. Did scoring seem fair/reasonable?
- c. Were thresholds discussed?
- d. Were resource concerns and priority resource concerns discussed regarding thresholds?

**9. Program Implementation (15 minutes)**

*“How is the program working for you?”*

- a. What is working/not working?
- b. Is this what you expected from the program?
- c. What would make the program better for you?

**10. NRCS Interaction (5 minutes)**

*“Since your application interview, what type of interaction do you have with the NRCS office with the program?”*

- a. Is this what you expected?
- b. What type of interaction do you have annually?
- c. What type of interaction do you need?

**11. Contract Satisfaction (5 minutes)**

*“How satisfied are you with the contract received?”*

- a. What do you like/dislike about the contract?
- b. Do the payments seem fair/reasonable?

**12. Re-Application (5 minutes)**

*“When your contract is up, will you apply again?”*

- a. What will encourage or discourage you from applying again?

**13. Program’s Value (10 minutes)**

*“What is the program’s value to the farming community? To you?”*

- a. Does the program encourage good stewardship?
- b. Is the program worth lobbying for to get in the 2012 Farm Bill?

**14. Final Thoughts (5 minutes)**

*“Is there anything else you’d like to say about your CSP experience or the CSP program?”*

**15. Conclusion (5 minutes)**

- a. Interviewer thanks participant for his/her time and tells how information will be used.
- b. Participant receives \$50 PFI incentive check for his/her time and input.

END OF INTERVIEW GUIDE