December 2014 Newsletter

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Conservation Stewardship Program Needs Your Help: Act Now!

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is accepting public comments on the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) interim final rule through January 20, 2015. This is the last chance for NRCS to make changes before the rule becomes the permanent final rule that will govern the program for years to come. We have this one chance to make a good program even better, but they need to hear from you! And as the USDA is contemplating making changes to the program that may be less than desirable for supporting conservation innovation, your comments are especially important!

NRCS will accept comments submitted online or through the mail. You can use the sample materials below to get started! It is important to personalize your comment - NRCS will read every single submission, and unique comments from informed organizations have the most impact.

Step 1 - Get informed - Read this article to learn what may change about CSP under the new rules, how these changes could impact farmers' participation in the Conservation Stewardship Program, where NRCS could be doing more to help CSP reach its full potential, and why it matters for your farm or organization.

Step 2 - Customize a comment form. There are links to two different comment forms below, each with guiding questions to help you tell your story effectively to NRCS. Feel free to pick and choose among the questions in order to include in your comment letter whichever issues are most important to you.

Comment form for farmers, conservationists, and concerned citizens

Comment form for organizations

Step 3 - Submit your comment online at http://bit.ly/csp15 or by mail. The mailing address can be found at the same link.

State and Federal: Conservation Cuts Keep Coming

Des Moines, Iowa- Congress has adjourned for the year, but not before approving a giant spending bill last week that includes cuts to conservation, cuts that will have an impact on Iowa. Farmer John Gilbert of Iowa Falls says efforts to protect the land and preserve water quality are working and growing in popularity in the state, but that didn’t stop lawmakers in D.C. from making funding cutbacks.

"When those last-minute deals get done, it's hard telling just why what ends up on the floor ends up on the cutting-room floor," says Gilbert. "But if you've been around politics very long you know that 'if you're not at the table, you're probably on the menu' is probably a good description of what happened."
One of many impacts of the so-called ‘Cromnibus’ bill, the legislation will shrink the Conservation Stewardship Program by nearly a quarter of its current acreage. These federal cuts follow another setback earlier this year, when Gov. Terry Branstad vetoed $20 million of support to voluntary conservation programs in Iowa.

Read More

Life on Mud Prairie Farm:
Solar Inputs, Diversity, and Energy Conservation

By: Woody Woodruff

As a farmer, I am well aware of the fact that input costs are a key factor in making a loss or profit from year to year. One thing’s for certain, those input costs are rarely ever decreasing over time. The fact is, in the last four decades inputs on the farm have increased by almost 700%. One reason for this increase is the lack of an abundant supply or location of these resources. Energy is a prime example of an input that’s raising the cost in the production of food on a farm. We have energy costs in the form of fuel for tractors, combines, trucks, and all those tools that run off a combustion engine. We have propane inputs in drying grain or heating buildings. Farmers also have electric costs in lighting, heating, or running electrical tools. Unfortunately, in that same four decades crop prices have fluctuated from no change to a 300% increase. That is less than half in comparison to gains in input costs. Efficiency has become paramount to staying in business for farmers. These imbalances in inputs have forced most farmers to make changes to their operations over the past four decades. My farm was no different.
One of the first widespread things to vanish were small livestock operations. Input costs simply overwhelmed what the traditional markets were willing to pay. I had a small swine operation on this farm. After several years of losses, the last hogs were shipped to market at a sizable loss. I used a small 20 foot by 40 foot farrowing building with a 6 foot concrete pit under it to capture the manure from the nursery pigs. After the pigs were gone I wasn’t sure what to do with the building and it sat idle for several years, mainly due to the energy cost of using the building. This was a time in agriculture that most farmers found it hard to find answers to what types of changes were needed to stay in farming. Most chose to expand the size of their operations in order to expand their bottom line. I decided to expand my mind instead. I call this my Agro-Ecology years. After taking classes in Agro-Ecology, Field Ecology, Local Flora, Aquatic Ecosystems, and Botany, I wanted to apply what I was learning to my farm. I found inspiration from reading authors like Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson of the Land Institute. This time of reflection gave me a better understanding of the healthy living systems that need to exist to be able to minimize the dependency on these rising inputs. What has been sacrificed in most of our farm operations, mainly in lieu of short term survival, was diversity.

**Read More**

**Featured Cover Crop: Hairy Vetch**

Hairy Vetch is a winter annual or summer annual legume. Its main roles including acting as a nitrogen source, weed suppressor, topsoil conditioner, and erosion reducer. Hairy vetch mixes well with small grains, field peas, and crimson clover. This cover crop grows slowly in fall, but root development continues over winter. Growth quickens in spring when hairy vetch becomes a sprawling vine up to 12 feet long. Field height rarely exceeds 3 feet unless the vetch is supported by another crop. Its abundant, viney biomass can be a benefit and a challenge. The stand smothers spring weeds; however, late spring termination can tie up nitrogen during early germination but also replace all or most nitrogen fertilizer needs for late-planted crops. As hairy vetch breaks down it delivers heavy contributions of mineralized nitrogen. The plant is also a good phosphorus scavenger as well. Hairy vetch can improve root zone water recharge over winter by reducing runoff and allowing more water to penetrate the soil profile through macropores created by the crop residue. The vigorous spring growth of fall-seeded hairy vetch out-competes weeds. For greater control of winter annual weeds and longer-lasting residue, mix hairy vetch with winter cereal grains such as rye or oats. As a cover crop, hairy vetch’s high nitrogen production, vigorous growth, tolerance of diverse soil
conditions, low fertility needs, and winter hardiness make it the most widely used of winter annual legumes.

**Effects of Crop Rotation on Weeds**

*By: Woody Woodruff*

Whether you are a specialty crop farmer, grain farmer, health-minded conventional farmer, or fully committed organic farmer, weed infestations are a negative consequence of human intervention during crop production. While weather conditions might affect the growth of the problem, it is our farming systems that most affects our types of weed species and the level of nuisance they become. Competition for space, nutrients, water, and light, or hindering planting or harvesting are where plants become unwanted weeds. Keeping the advantage to the crops and not the weeds is part of making good crop management choices. In preventative weed management, like so many other aspects of farming, diversity is key. And crop rotation is how you reach this higher level of diversity. The principle is to produce an ever-changing environment that keeps weeds from getting established long enough to spread. This ever changing environment needs a crop rotation that includes different crop types with different lengths during the growing seasons. A diverse crop rotation should include annuals, biennials, and perennials. The cropping types are from open row grain crops like corn, to leaf-canopy crops like turnips, to competitive drilled cereals like oats or winter rye, and add longer term legumes like clovers, which all together help to diversify a crop rotation. Adding beneficial plant types during different seasons, such as summer, fall, or spring planted cover crops to cover the bare soil between food crops, adds diversity to weed management. Not giving the weed seeds a chance to establish is just one benefit of many that cover crops give to a rotation. Having land that can be planted to a nutrient building ley, like a pasture or soil building mix for more than one year, flushes out those harder weed problem areas using a longer period of time to deplete the seed bank. You need to plan out a long term crop rotation that fits your type of farming system. Be flexible to changing the plan to fix parameters like sustaining an income, following supply and demand, minimizing inputs, preserving or improving soil health, and preventing environmental issues.

**Conservation Cropping Seminars**
Managing your inputs for healthy soils...

Curious about Cover Crops? Want to learn more about soil health? Mark your calendars for three new Conservation Cropping Seminars:

January 27th, Sycamore, IL
February 4th, Macomb, IL
February 18th, Mattoon, IL

Don't miss out on these great opportunities to learn more about cover crop best practices and implementation. Hear from local Ag producers and resource experts who will share information and insights on soil health improvements, cover crop success, and wise nutrient management. Learn More.

Illinois NRCS Announces EQIP Application Deadlines
announced that November 21, 2014 and January 16, 2015 will be the two Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) application deadlines. "Producers can sign-up for EQIP at any time throughout the year, but to compete for the upcoming funding periods, I encourage producers with resource concerns to submit an application by one of the application deadlines." Dozier explains.

Many applicants have shown interest in the funding pool to address soil erosion and water quality issues on cropland. "There are also funding pools for grazing land operations, confined livestock operations, organic producers, and wildlife habitat improvement, just to name a few," Dozier said.

In addition to conservation practices, EQIP provides funding for the development of plans, such as Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans (CNMP), Grazing Plans, Drainage Water Management Plans, and others.

Producers interested in EQIP should submit a signed application (NRCS-CPA-1200 form) to the local NRCS field office. Applications that are submitted by November 21, 2014 and January 16, 2015 will be evaluated by NRCS staff. The staff will work with producers to complete worksheets and rankings in order to compete for funding.

For more information on EQIP, contact the local NRCS field office or visit: www.il.nrcs.usda.gov

**Upcoming Events!**

**1/3 - Eat Local Buy Illinois Products Day**

**1/5 - Hosting Safe, Legally Secure Farm Events Webinar**
Farm Commons is committed to a great, farmer-centered educational experience. This winter, we are hosting an incredible line up of 14 webinars. Each webinar will provide lots of time for questions, input from farmers themselves, and true stories about folks who have been there. Learn More

**1/6 - Adding Value Without Adding Legal Liability To Farm Products Webinar**
Farm Commons is committed to a great, farmer-centered educational experience. This winter, we are hosting an incredible line up of 14 webinars. Each webinar will provide lots of time for questions, input from farmers themselves, and true stories about folks who have been there. Learn More

**1/7 - 1/9 Illinois Specialty Crops, Agritourism, and Organic Conference and Trade Show - Crown Plaza, Springfield**
Breakout sessions on fruit, vegetables, herbs, organic production, agritourism and marketing will be available as well as 70 exhibitors showcasing their businesses in the trade show. Other highlights include the annual cider contest and evening banquet. Networking opportunities abound at this annual event, and we hope to see you there. Information can be found on the Illinois Specialty Growers Assn. website, www.specialtygrowers.org or call 309-557-2107

**1/15 - No-Till Culture for Peppers and Tomatoes Webinar**
The University of Illinois Extension presents a weekly educational series for the small farm community, providing practical knowledge on emerging topics which advance local food production in Illinois. Webinars will be held from 1:00 - 2:30 pm on Thursdays and are free. Learn More

**1/19 - Farmland Leases Built to Last: Content and Legal Context Webinar**
Farm Commons is committed to a great, farmer-centered educational experience. This winter, we are hosting an incredible line up of 14 webinars. Each webinar will provide lots of time for questions, input from farmers themselves, and true stories about folks who have been there. Learn More

**1/21 - Urbana's Market at the Square CSA Fair - Urbana Civic Center-3-6pm**
At the First Annual Market at the Square CSA Fair, you'll be able to learn about farmers and their farms, their products and programs, and select a CSA share or club that best meets your needs! Why is it happening in the middle of winter? For farmers, this is the time when they're deep into planning and right before they begin their planting. Some farms accept new members throughout the course of the year, as well. We encourage consumers to connect with farmers directly to learn about their specific parameters around sign-up. There will also be educational information about local food, free samples and recipes, a Sprouts at the Market activity table, music, and more. Learn More

1/22 - Growing Hops for Market
The University of Illinois Extension presents a weekly educational series for the small farm community, providing practical knowledge on emerging topics which advance local food production in Illinois. Webinars will be held from 1:00 - 2:30 pm on Thursdays and are free. Learn More

1/24 - 7th Annual Slow Food Springfield Film Festival - Foundation Hall at the Old State Capitol (Level 2) - 2-8:30pm
The festival will feature two films, Flow: For Love of Water and Growing Cities: A Film About Urban Farming in America as well as the Top 10 Finalist Shorts from the 2014 Real Food Media Contest. A brief discussion will follow each of the films. Admission is $7.00 per person ($5.00 for Slow Food Springfield members). Students with a student ID are free. Refreshments and dinner will be provided by Bear Creek Farm & Ranch for purchase. For more information contact Deborah Cavanaugh-Grant, Extension Educator, Local Foods System and Small Farms at 217-782-4617, cvnghgrn@illinois.edu

1/27 - Conservation Cropping Seminar - Sycamore - 8:30am-5pm
Curious about Cover Crops? Want to learn more about soil health? Mark your calendars for three new Conservation Cropping Seminars coming to your area and don't miss out on these great opportunities to learn more about cover crop best practices and implementation. Hear from local Ag producers and resource experts who will share information and insights on soil health improvements, cover crop success, and wise nutrient management. Learn More

1/27 - Raising Backyard Chickens Right –Springfield -6-8pm
Whether motivated by extremely local food, or simply having a showy pet to decorate the yard, there are a number of things you need to know about raising chickens so that your family and your birds can live happy and healthy together. The program fee is $5 and will be held at the U of I Extension office in Springfield. Call 217-782-4617 or Learn More

1/29 –Potato Production
The University of Illinois Extension presents a weekly educational series for the small farm community, providing practical knowledge on emerging topics which advance local food production in Illinois. Webinars will be held from 1:00 - 2:30 pm on Thursdays and are free. Learn More

For a complete listing of upcoming events, please checkout our Events Calendar on the ISA website.

Have an event that should be included in our line-up? Email Molly at molly@ilstewards.org

Get Involved

Donate
ISA is a non-profit organization. Your donations help us to

Become a Member
Be part of an Alliance of consumers, farmers and other

Spread the word!
When you send this email to a friend, like us on Facebook,
continue our work in promoting local foods, fair policies, and conservation agriculture.

Donate Now

local food system stakeholders working to increase production and consumption of local foods in Illinois

Learn More

follow us on Twitter, or connect with us on LinkedIn, you are helping to increase awareness about local food causes in your community. Be a part of the movement and spread the word!

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