# Vermont Payment for Ecosystem Services and Soil Health Working Group

DRAFT Summary of Meeting #15: October 19, 2021

More detailed information, including presentation slides and the meeting recording can be found at <https://agriculture.vermont.gov/pes>

## Introduction

The Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) and Soil Health Working Group held its fifteenth meeting on October 19, 2021. The objectives of the meeting were for the group to hear an update on work from the technical service provider to the Working Group and give input to inform some of their preliminary research tasks, and to hear about a proposal for a CSP+ (Conservation Stewardship Program “Plus”) program in Vermont.

## Summary of discussion

### Discussion on CSP and CSP+ proposal

Brandon Carpenter, Acting Assistant State Conservationist for Programs of Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Vermont, shared a brief overview of the [Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/csp/). CSP helps agricultural producers maintain and improve their existing conservation systems and adopt additional conservation activities to address priority resources concerns. Participants earn CSP payments for conservation performance—the higher the performance, the higher the payment. Other key facts:

* Largest conservation program in the United States
* Most producers have already implemented conservation practices
* Requires a five-year commitment, with the opportunity to renew
* Contract payments are based on two components:
  + Payments to maintain the existing level of conservation based on  
    the land uses included in the contract and NRCS assessment of existing stewardship at the time of enrollment
  + Payments to implement additional conservation activities

Collaborators on a “CSP+” proposal then shared an overview of the concept to the Working Group. The presenters were Jennifer Byrne, District Manager of the White River Conversation District, Christopher Bonasia, a research collaborator, and Guy Choiniere of Choiniere Family Farm. The purpose of the proposal is to offer a concept and open discussions among stakeholders to consider how the State of Vermont can supplement and build on existing programs to serve farmers. The proposal aims to make qualifying for payments simple and accessible for farms of all sizes. It emphasizes support for planning and access to technical assistance, as well as aims to facilitate access to other programs. It creates incentives for practices as well as performance and provides a base payment and then provides a tiered payment system depending on the type of practices undertaken and outcomes achieved on a farm. (The draft proposal is linked at the site above.)

### Program structure development considerations Jon Winsten, Economist and PES Expert, Conservation Performance LLC, and contractor on the technical services contract to the WG, provided an overview of Task 8: Provide clarity and recommendations on PES program design options. The approach to the task will involve iterative engagement and discussions with the WG to present information and options and elicit guidance from the WG. Key program design issues that the task will address include:

### Farmer eligibility

### Performance measures

### Baselines and additionality

### Payment structure

### Monitoring, reporting and verification

On each issue, the contract team will assess and:

* Identify choices
* Describe pros and cons
* Lead discussion(s) with PES WG
* Use input to develop recommendations where appropriate
* Create final presentation and report to PES WG

### Update and request for input from technical service provider

Alissa White, Gund Postdoctoral Fellow and Project Coordinator for the technical services contract, provided an update on two tasks: the development of a refined soil health matrix and development of associated soil health “scenarios,” and the exploration and review of various program types and examples to inform the development of a PES program in Vermont. The soil health matrix is being revised and will be submitted to the Working Group in November. Alissa provided a survey to Working Group members and other attendees to provide input on the types of soil health scenarios that the team should model and to provide examples of PES programs that would be useful for the WG to learn about – either because they provide useful models for a program in Vermont or because they highlight issues the WG should be aware of.

## Public Comment

Caroline Gordon, Rural Vermont, commented on the CSP+ proposal, emphasizing that it is connected to the program design options and considerations that Jon Winsten raised and that it is tied to the WG’s legislative charge to advance farm viability and to work on existing financial incentives. She referenced a recent report by the State Auditor on current financial incentives and commented that any legislative proposal will be weighed against existing expenditures in agriculture and that bureaucratic burdens on farmers will be examined.

She also commented that the Agency of Agriculture strategic plan called for more investment in technical assistance in agriculture and in food systems more broadly and she called for the WG to consider embedding components on CSP+ proposal, such as the payment rates outlined, in a program framework. She encouraged the work on Task 8 on Program Design to consider the CSP+ proposal.

The meeting was adjourned at 2 PM.