

Conservation Activity Plans: An Opportunity for IPM

July 30, 2009

Executive Summary

Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is one of twelve Conservation Activity Plan (CAP) options available to farmers under a new program from USDA NRCS through the 2008 Farm Bill. CAPs are detailed, specialized plans created by private-sector, NRCS-certified Technical Service Providers (TSPs), designed to improve resource management around specific concerns on farms. To maximize participation and benefits from IPM CAPs, we need to increase farmer and consultant awareness of the opportunity, recruit and train many more IPM-qualified TSPs, establish realistic cost-share rates and develop support tools including model plans and plan templates to make the process as efficient as possible. Our goal is to form a new national working group to provide input as we work to meet these objectives. The working group will be composed of representatives from public and private sector including Extension, IPM Centers, NRCS, SARE, US EPA Strategic Ag Initiative, state lead agencies, conservation districts, IPM3 Training Consortium, Certified Crop Advisor, National Alliance of Independent Crop Consultants and CSREES, and coordinated by IPM Institute staff.

Work plan

NRCS has launched a Conservation Activity Plan (CAP) pilot program for FY 2009. The plan provides a 75% cost-share to producers for preparation of conservation plans by qualified, pre-approved, private-sector Technical Service Providers (TSPs). A 90% cost-share is available to historically underserved producers.

CAPs are designed to identify and detail conservation treatment needs for eligible land. CAPs are one year plans; growers cannot implement two CAPs on the same acreage at one time. Goals include increasing the number of plans and private-sector planners beyond those currently developed under EQIP and other programs. Approximately \$750 million is available for CAP through FY 2013 through financial assistance funds. In the past, cost-share dollars for private-sector plan development were provided from technical assistance funds, which have been more limited. Use of technical assistance dollars for private sector plans reduced funds available for NRCS staff. Financial assistance funds do not have this constraint.

Cost share for CAPs is not limited to producers with EQIP contracts. Currently, any producer with qualifying acreage in a participating state could apply. At least initially, producers will not be competing with other producers to earn the cost share.

Integrated Pest Management is one of twelve plan types included in the pilot. Just as 595 Pest Management plans have been required for EQIP incentives, CAPs may be required for access to NRCS technical assistance and cost-share programs in the future. Other CAPs include:

- Comprehensive Nutrient Management

- Forest Management
- Grazing Management
- Irrigation Water Management
- Agricultural Energy Management
- Comprehensive Air Quality Management
- Drainage Water Management
- Conservation Plan Supporting Transition from Irrigation to Dry-land Farming
- Conservation Plan Supporting Organic Transition
- Fish and Wildlife Habitat Management
- Pollination Habitat

Historically, less than 2% of EQIP funds have been used to support improvements in pest management. Over the past several years, a number of states have made significant progress in connecting NRCS and IPM professionals, improving mutual understanding of IPM and NRCS programs, developing tools and increasing grower access to and participation in NRCS programs for IPM. Recently, a large national team was recognized by an international IPM awards program for their efforts in this arena. We have much to gain by taking advantage of this new opportunity to increase the number of growers participating in IPM planning and implementation.

An emerging scenario for CAPs, and one we are experiencing this year, is one where a grower/packer supplier to WalMart anticipates a request from this major buyer to document pesticide use and risk reduction. The grower/packer has more than 20 grower suppliers, only a few of which have an IPM program. The grower/packer would like all of its growers to have a professionally prepared plan that identifies opportunities to reduce pesticide use and to transition to products that minimize impacts on resource concerns. Prior to CAP, it might take several years before all growers might secure an EQIP contract including cost-share for plan development and implementation. With CAP, all of these growers might have an opportunity to have a plan prepared prior to the 2010 season. These plans can include sprayer calibration, record keeping, scouting and monitoring schedule, thresholds for pesticide applications, a list of pesticide options pre-screened for potential impacts on a site-specific basis, mitigation measures to reduce impacts of specific pesticide uses and potential funding sources for cost share or other incentives for implementation.

The following states have elected to offer IPM plan opportunities during the pilot: CA, ME, RI, and WV; however, our goal is to provide training for TSPs in all 50 states to increase the current lack of certified TSPs that threaten the number of states that will sign up for IPM CAP in FY 2010. We face significant challenges to ensure success of the pilot as a learning opportunity to facilitate broad, effective participation in 2010 and beyond including:

- Identify opportunity for Extension involvement. Currently Extension staff in several states provides IPM technical assistance to growers under formal or informal

agreements with NRCS. NRCS makes the cost-share payment to the producer who contracts with a third-party service provider (potentially an Extension office).

- Establish relationships between IPM Institute and other IPM Centers to develop training curriculum and with other potential funding, act as instructors during training workshops in their region. IPM Centers may also serve during the evaluation process by reporting and publicizing success stories in their region.
- Develop realistic estimates for cost-share for specific crops to provide adequate incentives for private-sector TSPs. Attractive payment rates will be critically important to attract private-sector participation.
- Develop web-based and “hands-on” training curriculum to help TSPs/potential TSPs meet the revised TSP qualifications to develop IPM CAPs. The University of Minnesota is willing to offer a specialty training module specifically for IPM CAP writing through the current IPM³ online training program.
- Develop model IPM CAPs and an outreach plan including materials to increase awareness and explain benefits to TSPs, potential TSPs and producers.
- Identify and recruit private-sector consultants to qualify as TSPs and producers to participate in the pilot. There is current interest from consultants in CA and UT to become trained to write IPM CAPs. A current training initiative in WI has shown a broad interest from the private-sector to become certified to write CAPs.
- Evaluate training curriculum by trained TSPs and NRCS TSP team under MOU with NRCS. The TSP team identifies whether or not the IPM Institute has a program in place to train, test and evaluate candidates for competency to provide specific categories of technical services. The technical specialists evaluates and determines if the training program can satisfy knowledge and skills required to plan and/or install conservation practices that comprise those categories.

The following initial outline work plan is proposed for June 2009 through March 2010:

June

1. Develop base funding for and hire a FTE to coordinate the CAPs working group and expenses for conference calls and materials.
2. Identify state NRCS staff responsible for CAPs, recruit to the CAPs working group.
3. Recruit IPM coordinators or their designees from all states that have selected IPM CAPs; invite participation from all states.
4. Recruit producers and TSPs/potential TSPs for the CAPs working group and to participate in the pilot.
5. Recruit representatives from SARE, US EPA Strategic Ag Initiative, state lead agencies, conservation districts, Certified Crop Advisor, National Alliance of Independent Crop Consultants, representatives from each IPM Center and others with an interest to benefit.
6. First monthly CAPs working group teleconference.

July

1. Develop realistic cost estimates for private-sector-developed IPM CAPs based on the work plans. Currently rates for IPM CAPs range from \$1500 to \$3000 per plan vs. up to \$16,000 for Comprehensive Nutrient Management CAPs.
2. Draft training curricula for qualifying for TSP status and for developing IPM CAPs, circulate for review/comment.
3. Training curriculum subcommittee teleconference call.
4. Initiate MOU development with NRCS to provide training.
5. Evaluation of training curriculum.
6. Monthly CAPs working group teleconference.

August

1. Identify opportunity for cooperative extension involvement with IPM CAPs.
2. Cooperative extension subcommittee teleconference call.
3. Draft sample outline work plans for IPM CAP preparation following the NRCS criteria.
4. Cost share evaluation subcommittee teleconference call.
5. Develop best practice guides for state resource conservationists to use when establishing cost share rates; get input from state agribusiness associations.
6. Evaluate IPM_One_2009.xl TSP Payment Rate spreadsheet to compute a TSP Payment Rate for the IPM CAP.
7. Refine and finalize training curricula via iterative drafts.
8. Training curriculum subcommittee teleconference call.
9. Draft sample CAP templates for fruit, vegetable and field crops following the NRCS criteria for the IPM CAP.
10. Organize a multiple day meeting between NRCS representatives and IPM representatives to identify goals, objectives and problems with IPM CAP implementation.
11. Establish NRCS funding opportunities for IPM CAP TSP training.
12. The current IPM CAP project assistant will reduce hours to part time and additional PTE will be hired to provide support with IPM CAP work load.
13. Monthly CAPs working group teleconference.

September

1. Conduct IPM CAP meeting retreat with NRCS and IPM representatives.
2. Training curriculum subcommittee teleconference call.
3. Establish TSP IPM CAP hands-on training locations and trainers.
4. Establish TSP IPM CAP online curriculum location.
5. Cost share evaluation subcommittee teleconference call.
6. Submit best practice guides for establishing TSP IPM CAP cost share rates to state resource conservationists.
7. Cooperative extension subcommittee teleconference call.
8. Develop MOU with NRCS to provide training.
9. Draft and refine outreach plan, circulate iterative drafts for review and comment.
10. Monthly CAPs working group teleconference.

October-November

1. Develop and provide IPM CAP TSP training events.
2. Provide technical assistance to TSPs and producers who are completing plans.
3. Deliver completed plans to participating producers.
4. Develop and implement online training curriculum through IPM³.
5. Finalize outreach plan.
6. Monthly CAPs working group teleconference.

December

1. Monthly CAPs working group teleconference.

January

1. Present IPM CAP information at National Alliance of Independent Crop Consultants meeting; January 20th-22nd, 2010.
2. Monthly CAPs working group teleconference.

February

1. Monthly CAPs working group teleconference.

March

1. Evaluate and report results.
2. Monthly CAPs working group teleconference.