



## **CSP FARMER PROFILE: ROBERT MOUNT** **Southern Illinois Farmer Rewarded for Good Stewardship**

Southern Illinois is known for its beautiful, rolling hills, down-to-earth people and agricultural history. Because of its varied topography, climate and economy, Southern Illinois agriculture tends to be a bit more diversified than other parts of the state. Within a given area, one can find vineyards, pastures, row crops, orchards, hay land and vegetable farms, to name a few.

Robert Mount has been farming the slopes and valleys of Johnson County in Southern Illinois for more than 40 years. He carries the torch for 4 generations that have carved out a farming existence in this rugged, yet productive, land. He farms over 1000 acres and manages over 500 acres of forest.

Like most of his farming neighbors, Robert has his eggs spread among as many baskets as possible, in order to utilize the unique physical features of his land and capitalize on ever-changing markets. In this regard, he is truly a farmer-entrepreneur—always willing to adapt his farming system to improve his economic opportunities and manage his land more effectively. He currently grows alfalfa, fescue seed, corn, soybeans, wheat and mixed-grass hay.

Managing his natural resources has always been a top priority for Robert. Most of his arable acres are classified as HEL (Highly Erodible Land), so he doesn't take his precious topsoil for granted. He practices conservation tillage and adheres to a strict crop rotation schedule in order to keep his soil where it belongs-- in the fields. He has also installed numerous grassed waterways and dry dams—the purpose of which is to slow water down and therefore reduce the potential for erosion on his steep slopes.

Not only does Robert endorse crop diversity on his land, but he is a strong advocate for biological diversity. He manages over 50 acres of native grass prairie that are teeming with quail. He has also constructed a 10-acre wetland area for waterfowl and other wildlife, and is in the process of developing pollinator habitat borders around his fields.

Knowing Robert's long history of land stewardship, Keith Bell, District Conservationist with USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Johnson County, knew that he would be an ideal candidate for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) in 2009. According to Bell, "Bob Mount is the perfect farmer for CSP. It rewards farmers for the good conservation they have done and are currently doing, and it pays them to develop new practices they want to do, but need help with."

CSP is not like other NRCS programs.

According to Troy Daniell, NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Southern Illinois, “Most NRCS administered programs primarily assist farmers developing new practices, such as wetlands, grasslands, erosion-control structures, riparian buffers, and the like, but CSP is the only one that rewards farmers for their past and current land stewardship.”

Robert received a CSP contract in early 2010. He holds two contracts, one for his cropland and one for his forest land.

“The sign-up went pretty smooth,” Robert said of the registration process. “As long as you keep good crop history, pictures, and nutrient management records, it is straightforward.”

Even though Robert has many conservation practices in place, he was able to choose from hundreds of enhancements to expand on his current conservation efforts.

“CSP has allowed me to manage my nutrients better through Variable Rate Technology (VRT). It uses soil testing and Global Positioning Systems (GPS) to determine exactly where and how much nitrogen and phosphorus I need to add my fields. This saves me money and reduces nutrient run-off into my creeks.” Another new CSP enhancement for Robert was switching to low-drift nozzles when applying herbicides and pesticides.

In 2009, Illinois CSP payments for each year of the contract averaged \$24 per acre for cropland and \$11 per acre for forest land. With Robert Mount having 1000 acres of cropland and 500 acres of forest, it is definitely “worth the hassle.” Producers who get in to the program receive a 5-year contract with a payment cap of \$200,000. In 2009, Illinois had 175,298 acres enrolled in CSP, which totaled over \$4 million in payments to farmers, ranchers and forest owners.

CSP is a voluntary program that is available for all working agricultural land, whether it's cropland (corn, soybeans, small grains, hay, fruits and vegetables), pasture, rangeland or managed woodlot. Both owned and rented land is eligible for the program. The sign-up for CSP is continuous, but there are periodic cut-offs in order to rank applicants. The next ranking cut-off is June 25, 2010 - so get you application in soon!

If you or a farmer you know is a good steward, CSP might be good fit. For more information visit [http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/new\\_csp/csp.html](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/new_csp/csp.html), call your local NRCS office, or contact Devin Brown, Conservation Policy Advocate, at 618-771-0237 or [devin@ilstewards.org](mailto:devin@ilstewards.org).