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Growing with conservation: Orchardist reaps CSP rewards

Jesus Limón knew that his efforts to improve his nutrient, pest and irrigation water management would – one day – pay dividends. Today, one of those dividends arrived from USDA.

In a signing ceremony in Orondo, Washington – attended by local growers, conservation officials, and associates from the Center for Agricultural Partnerships – the 47-year-old orchardist joined more than 250 agricultural producers in Washington who have qualified for the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s Conservation Security Program this year. The program, which provides producers with annual contract payments, is designed to reward producers for historic stewardship activities on working lands and to provide enhancement payments for producers who agree to implement additional conservation measures.

As a result of his conservation management and practices on some 40 acres of orchard, Mr. Limón will receive an annual financial reward from the NRCS. Because he has addressed three resource concerns on his 40-acre operation, Mr. Limón has qualified as a Tier II participant, and will receive approximately \$2,000 annually for his conservation activities and enhancements.

Increasing competition, low apple prices, and increasing production and labor costs are squeezing many local producers who are struggling to stay in business. As a result, the CSP payment is a welcomed one, Mr. Limón said. “CSP is the best news in the apple business in a long time,” he said.

NRCS Resource Conservationist Mark Bareither said that under CSP, Mr. Limón currently has 8.5 acres meeting the state organic crop certification requirements, and will add to that in future years. He is also applying integrated pest management on 37 acres.

“Perhaps more importantly,” Bareither said, “by getting into the program this year, Mr. Limón can perform additional conservation enhancements and could qualify as a Tier III participant, which would likely increase his annual payment.”

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Growing with conservation ... *continued*

CSP represents the latest chapter in conservation programs for Mr. Limón, who began farming in 1988. In 2004, a cost-share agreement through the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program helped him convert 31 acres of his orchard from an impact sprinkler to a micro irrigation system.

Mr. Limón says the system has resulted in a more even distribution of water to his trees – resulting in a more consistent crop and even tree growth throughout the orchard.

In addition, Mr. Limón is saving time and money as a result of the system installation. “Before, I had to buy extra water, which could cost up to \$500 a year,” he said. “Now, I won’t need that water, and the irrigation system is a lot easier to use,” Mr. Limón said.

A husband, and father of four, Mr. Limón has managed to make time to be an active participant in a Hispanic growers’ education effort, sponsored by the Center for Agricultural Partnerships. His farm has been the site of several nutrient management and irrigation water management workshops, which are tailored to address the needs of the producers within the Hispanic community.

“Mr. Limón is an innovative producer,” NRCS’ Bareither said. “And when CSP was offered in the Upper Columbia-Entiat watershed, I knew it would be a good fit for him,” he said.