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Farmers reap the green for Earth-saving work

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It's Earth Day. Notice anything different?

Urban earth lovers are out in force this morning. They're roaming ditches for loose trash, collecting cans and bottles, bundling newspapers for a trip to the recycling center.

Meanwhile, some Earth Day 1990 organizers openly have wondered whether these "instant environmentalists" will still be as active when Earth Day ends.

But even if the short-term ecologists are missing in action on Monday, a loyal group of conservation-minded farmers still will be around.

And — with the help of taxpayers — so will their Earth Day projects, some of which have been in force for years.

"Some of these conservation programs for farmers have been around since 1935," said Mike Craft, director of the Black Hawk County Agriculture Stabilization and Conservation Service.

Since the first piece of farm legislation was crafted, farmers have been helped with the cost of planting windbreaks, constructing terraces, forming filter strips and shielding wildlife habitats.

Some are still at it, either to stay in compliance with federal price support

1990 ACP practices	Cost share rate, by percentage*
Planting trees	65
Improving a stand of forest trees	65
Forest tree plantations	75
Forest tree stand improvement	75
Permanent vegetative cover establishment	50
Permanent vegetative cover on critical areas	75
Vegetative row barriers	75
Contour farming	\$6/acre
No-till systems	\$10/acre
Permanent vegetative cover improvement	50
Stripcropping system	\$6/acre
Terrace systems	75
Diversions	60
Windbreak restoration/establishment	50
Farmstead and feedlot windbreak	50
Water impoundment reservoirs	60
Permanent wildlife habitat	65
Shallow water area for wild waterfowl	75
Sediment retention or water control structure	60
Stream protection	50
Sod waterways	60

*Of total cost, paid by ASCS

Source: Black Hawk County ASCS Office

programs, or simply because they're tired of seeing their land get washed and blown away.

Either way, such long-term approaches to land stewardship won't be noticeable tomorrow, when the

Earth Day hype dies and people go back to tossing candy wrappers out the car window.

Craft and other local agriculture and conservation officials say that by properly controlling the face of the country

side, farmers are in a unique position to keep the "earth" in Earth Day for generations to come.

They know, however, that just as farmers can't afford to be one-shot caretakers of the land, neither can they foot the entire bill for large conservation projects, especially in the face of drought and poor market prices.

That's why federal and state money is being freed up to offset the expense.

"We're getting more and more money all the time to share costs with farmers," said Carol DeWolf of the Black Hawk County Soil Conservation Service.

She said \$400,000 in federal funds was made available to states this year to help landowners pay for "forestry improvement" — basically, planting more trees and leaving alone the ones still standing.

"That money was scarfed up before a lot of us even had a chance to get an application filled out," DeWolf said.

The state followed up with another \$13,000 through the Resource Enhancement and Protection program, which has funneled money to local farmers for tree planting and timber preservation.

DeWolf says a quarter of that money is gone. "We haven't exactly been swamped, but there seems to be more interest than in any other program like

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that we've had before."

Craft said more than 50 applicants have showed up at his office to get a piece of the \$40,000 in cost-sharing funds available for various conservation projects.

"We ended up giving about \$10,000 of that back last year because we didn't use it," he said. "It doesn't look like that'll be the case this year."

DeWolf says the Black Hawk County Conservation Service will pick up the tab for 75 percent, or up to \$700, for the planting of windbreaks, as well as \$15 per acre for contouring.

Craft said the ASCS will give each farmer up to \$3,500 for contouring, terracing, stream protection and other permanent conservation measures.

"No one has ever sat down and figured out what the average cost of these things are," he said. "The cost of contouring and terracing is tough. Some of the big jobs will take all of that (\$3,500 limit)."

Farmers with the urge to switch to no-till methods can get \$10 per acre to make the transition smoother, he said.

"That's better than nothing. Besides, no-till actually will save them money in the long run."

Those savings, like long-term conservation projects, aren't immediately visible.

But by keeping soil from heading downstream or blowing into the next state, farmers will be saving more than money.

After all, without the earth, today is just another day.