

The Cedar Rapids Gazette

Editorial Page

Tuesday, June 1, 1976

Soil-aid image soiled

State soil conservation officials yielded a bumper crop of excuses when this newspaper began probing reports of favoritism in the channeling of government soil aid matching funds to Iowans.

Why do administrators not find it disturbing that nearly 10 percent of the federal longterm soil conservation funds allocated in Iowa last year went to those associated with the programs as employees or county committeemen? For one thing, the practice is "perfectly legal"; for another, such funds are not gobbled up at the expense of low-income farmers; marginal operators do not ordinarily apply for soil aid.

If taxpayers deemed those answers acceptable, it is doubtful that the next round of soil-aid queries and responses will evoke similar satisfaction. The main question today — following Farm

into more criticism from some who say that soil commissioners don't do enough conservation. If we who are commissioners don't apply for these funds, people won't believe in the program."

The situation, as explained there, is a classic Hobson's choice: Though at liberty to join or not to join government-backed soil conservation efforts, the commissioner has felt compelled to use his own property to demonstrate his support of the program.

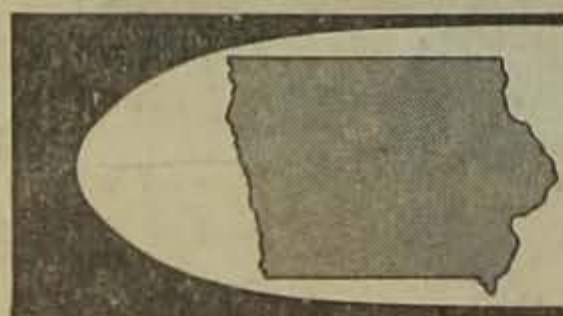
The fact remains, however, that Hobson and fellow state commissioners Thomas Kenny of Akron and Donald Johnson of Fairfield received state aid during a period when federal soil cost-sharing funds were scarce. Indeed, the state program was innovated because of interruptions in federal participation.

As stressed in this space May 9, soil conservation officials should be concerned with how things look as well as with legality and handbook procedures. How the federal and state soil cost-sharing setup appears under the commissioner-eligible format is startlingly wide-open to favoritism.

The thing has a seedy political complexion, too. The three state soil conservation commission members who received state aid all were appointed by Governor Ray, a Republican. Democrat Neel Hill of Webster City, the soil conservation supervisor who first complained of apparent favoritism, has seen his region of responsibility shrink from 11 counties to four (a move his superiors say is coincidental).

Criticism of soil-aid distribution procedures seem certain to increase apace with publicity given them. Imagine, for example, the reaction of Winneshiek county farmers to The Gazette's revelation that of the \$60,000 allocated for longterm soil conservation in the last two years, not a penny went to a fulltime farmer. A teacher, a banker, a county official and a lawyer's wife were the beneficiaries there.

How to insure against possible misuse of soil conservation grants? Fear of dropouts among able commissioners notwithstanding, funds ought not be made available to those connected with allocations. Pay them a fee, plus mileage, for services and restore the program's look of propriety.



Editor Swegle's two-part look into state-financed soil cost-sharing — is: Should members of the state conservation commission be eligible for dollar-for-dollar matching soil conservation funds?

Here again, explanations are plentiful. Take the \$3,063 grant received in 1974-75 by Carroll Hobson, state commissioner and chairman of the Hardin county soil conservation district commission. (In the last three years, two other state commissioners have received grants totaling nearly \$7,000.) By Hobson's reckoning, any of the five "independent-minded" county commissioners would have rejected his application for state funds had they seen anything wrong with it.

Backing Hobson is Gaylord Thayer, Hardin county director of the federal soil program, who said Hobson's sloping land is a "high priority" area for conservation. William Greiner, Iowa soil conservation executive director, chips in with this support: It "would be difficult to recruit highly qualified soil commissioners if commissioners were barred from participating in state or federal soil cost-sharing programs."

Now back to Hobson for further enlightenment: "... We run