

The bad: Violators go free

Anti-erosion rules aren't well enforced by ASCS.

As a condition for taking part in any federal farm program, farmers who grow crops on "highly erodible" land must agree to fight soil erosion. They are to follow a conservation plan approved by the U.S. Soil Conservation Service. If they don't, they could lose federal supports.

How many Iowa farmers faced penalties last year for failing to live up to their soil-conservation commitments?

It seemed a logical question. But the U.S. Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, which has the answer, thinks otherwise.

The SCS — staffed by soil conservation professionals, not to be confused with the ASCS — visits a sample of farms to see that the operators are on schedule, following practices that will enable them to meet the Jan. 1, 1995, deadline for completion of their conservation plans.

The farm-program laws hold that if the SCS finds non-compliance, it is to notify the ASCS, which can cut off federal payments.

Last year, the SCS checked 7,097 farms in Iowa containing land judged to be highly erodible. In all, 1,190 — more than one in six — were not in compliance. But the SCS officials decided that operators of 667 of that total were close to following the rules; in many cases, the weather had intervened, SCS decided. They were excused. The bulk of the work involved in most plans is to be done in 1993 and 1994 anyway. Another 481 hadn't complied because they said they didn't understand their programs — although they had devised the programs, often with SCS help, and signed them. They were excused. That left 42, whose names were reported to the ASCS.

How many of those were found in viola-

tion of the rules?

ASCS won't say.

Why?

Submit the question in writing, an ASCS spokesperson said, and ASCS would reply in 10 days.

But it's a simple question, whose answer is a simple number — 42 or less.

Nope.

A persistent Ken Cook, vice president of the Center for Resource Economics in Washington, D.C., followed the Mickey Mouse procedure through for every state. His organization found that after SCS had cut the list of violations in Iowa from 1,190 to 42, the ASCS narrowed the list from 42 to 1.

That's one violator, from a list of more than 100,000 Iowa operators farming 11,750,000 highly erodible acres.

The ASCS's performance is even worse elsewhere. Officially there were no violations in the farming of 7 million highly erodible acres of North Dakota; none involving 9.7 million acres in Nebraska; none on 12 million acres in Texas; none on 13 million acres in Montana.

The vast majority of farmers, in Iowa and elsewhere, are conscientious stewards of their land, treating their soil with the respect it deserves. The law was written to corral the abusers. But the law is abused with impunity.

In short, while checking out compliance with conservation plans has been the full-time job of thousands of SCS workers at a cost of millions of dollars for several years, compliance is a joke.

Meanwhile, the public pays the salaries, and the public subsidizes soil erosion.

The joke is less than funny.