

A dirty deal at the SCS

Wilson Scaling, who has muddied the image of the U.S. Soil Conservation Service which he heads, came to Iowa Tuesday for advice from the grassroots. He got plenty: 1. Quit weakening soil-conservation rules; 2. Don't hold any more meetings to revise them, and 3. Resign.

About 100 persons, mostly farmers and conservationists, responded to a call for help in planning county meetings to rewrite the rules intended to halt erosion. Any thoughts on planning were quickly cast aside. Speakers ranging from Iowa Agriculture Secretary Dale Cochran to a spokesman for Gov. Terry Branstad took the microphone to oppose any meetings or rewriting. John Miller of Cedar Falls, a farmer, member of several commodity groups and a county soil conservation commissioner, accused Scaling of stabbing SCS field agents in the back, and asked him to resign.

The 1985 farm bill provided that farmers receiving crop subsidies must have an erosion-control plan approved by the SCS — a step in keeping with the Iowa goal of reducing erosion loss to the replacement level, meaning no greater loss of topsoil than could be recouped from the subsoil. Roy Gray, Scaling's director of strategic planning, met with Farm Bureau spokesmen and Scott County

farmers this spring and changed the rules to allow a doubling of the soil loss rather than reducing it. The resulting furor caused Scaling to call for more hearings.

That would be a waste of time, duplicating the hearings held when the rules were formulated.

"Let's not clutter up our time going to meetings," said Ollie Emerson, chairman of the state soil conservation committee, who farms in Allamakee County. "Let's get the job done."

The most vociferous defense of relaxing the rules came from Dave Garst of the Garst seed empire in Coon Rapids. It's a waste of resources, he said, not to farm all available land — a strange logic that assumes plowing up a hillside acre to grow a couple of tons of surplus corn justifies losing 100 tons of soil down the river from the same acre.

The entire brouhaha need never have occurred, should not have and would not have, if positions of leadership in the SCS were granted on the basis of proven professional service and ability rather than handed out as political favors. The quick and easy backroom fix engineered by Scaling's department proved the SCS lacks responsible leadership, and that those higher up in the administration fail to understand its importance.