

Angry Iowans confront soil conservation chief

By DAN LOOKER

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Wilson Scaling, chief of the nation's Soil Conservation Service, got an earful Tuesday from angry conservation groups and farmers in Des Moines. Along with Iowa's governor and secretary of agriculture, they urged the agency not to weaken soil conservation rules.

Last month, after learning that the SCS had eased rules on soil erosion, state conservation officials and farmers complained to the U.S. Department of Agriculture that they had been ignored. In late April, the SCS rescinded all "conservation compliance" rules and said it would seek public opinion on the rules by holding meetings in every Iowa county.

"It is not in the best interest of Iowans, and future generations of Iowans, to change the conservation compliance standard," Gov. Terry Branstad said in a statement read at a meeting with Scaling on Tuesday. "We need the level of erosion control that the current standard provides. Similarly, we do not need the county meetings you have proposed. In all likelihood, they would only be divisive and confrontational."

Leaders of Agriculture

For more than two hours, Scaling met with leaders of Iowa's agricultural establishment — directors of commodity groups, bureaucrats who run federal farm programs, legislators, and farmers elected to run state and federal conservation programs — ostensibly to plan for county meetings in June.

Instead, it turned into a review of SCS administration of the rules, which have already been weakened several times. The conservation compliance portion of the 1985 Farm Act required farmers to have a plan for lowering soil erosion by the beginning of this year, or face losing crop subsidies, crop insurance and other benefits available from the USDA. Farmers must finish putting their plans into effect by 1995.

One farmer, John Miller of Cedar Falls, asked Scaling to resign.

"You have demonstrated to the public and Congress that the SCS can't be trusted to implement the law," Miller said.

If the SCS, a USDA agency, can't enforce the rules, farmers may eventually be regulated by a less sympathetic Environmental Protection Agency, said Miller, who belongs to soybean and corn commodity groups and serves on the state soil conservation committee and the board of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. Miller said he was speaking for himself, not any group.

Political Process

Duane Sand of the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation said the recent SCS move is "really telling farmers

to invest in the political process instead of investing in soil conservation."

The change in rules came after an SCS official met with farmers at a meeting in Scott County in March.

Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Dale Cochran urged Scaling to stick with regulations as they stood before that March meeting and not to hold more county meetings.

"I believe your action has effectively undermined the credibility of Iowa (conservation) districts and the state and federal employees who serve them," Cochran said.

Larry Wilson, head of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, said sediment from farmland is the biggest cause of stream pollution in Iowa. SCS consideration of weaker rules runs counter to trends in state government to encourage conservation, he said.

Merlin Plagge, president of the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, favored holding a few meetings around the state to work with farmers who haven't been able to come up with conservation plans acceptable to the agency.

Most Farm Bureau members seem to support the existing conservation rules and don't want them relaxed, Plagge said. The Farm Bureau has opposed efforts to extend the deadline for complying with the rules. "The bottom line is, let's get the job done," Plagge said.

Supports Meetings

Wapello farmer Jack Parsons, past president of the National Corn Growers Association, was one of the few who supported holding more meetings on the conservation rules.

"The state of Iowa does require us to have stricter compliance than bordering states," he said.

Soil Conservation Service rules may be obsolete for modern farming methods, he said.

At the end of the meeting, Scaling said he didn't know if the agency will go ahead with its plans for local meetings on soil conservation rules.

"I want to hear what people have to say, the rank and file people," he said.

Scaling said his own mail suggests that farmers are more divided over the conservation rules than the nearly unanimous support shown at Tuesday's meeting.

J. Michael Nethery, state conservationist for the SCS, said he still plans to hold some meetings on the rules, unless Scaling calls them off.

State Rep. David Osterberg, D-Mount Vernon, head of the House Agriculture Committee, expressed doubt that the SCS will ultimately reinstate rules in effect before March. "We may have just had our meeting," he said.