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BUSINESS

Conservation Service won't ease erosion limits

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The U.S. Soil Conservation Service has decided not to ease erosion standards in Iowa and, for at least three months, won't hold county-by-county public meetings on the rules.

J. Michael Nethery, state conservationist for the federal agency in Des Moines, said Wednesday that the agency has postponed the county meetings, which were opposed by farmers elected to oversee conservation programs and by Gov. Terry Branstad and Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Dale Cochran.

Even after a three-month delay, any "county-by-county meetings are quite unlikely, as public hearings," he said. Later the agency might hold meetings to explain rules for meeting "conservation compliance" requirements of the 1985 Farm Bill.

Farmers were required to have plans for cutting erosion on steep cropland by this year or face losing federal farm program benefits.

This spring, after a group of Scott County farmers complained that enforcement of the standards could lower their corn yields, the SCS weakened them. The rule change, in effect, would have boosted the maximum allowable erosion on steep fields from

20 tons an acre to 40 tons or more.

After state conservation officials denounced the change, the SCS withdrew the weaker standard in late April and began planning county hearings in Iowa on soil loss rules. That, too, drew criticism when SCS Chief Wilson Scaling met with Iowa agricultural leaders in Des Moines in mid-May. Most said the hearings weren't needed and that SCS should stick to the rules that limited soil loss to no more than 20 tons per acre.

Nethery said Iowa SCS officials will meet with conservation officials from the state agriculture department, representatives of Farm Bureau and other farm groups "to essentially see what needs to be done from their viewpoint to resolve the issues that have been raised."

Nethery said the SCS will work with farmers having difficulty meeting conservation rules.

In Decorah, Ann Robinson, agricultural specialist for the Izaak Walton League of America, said she was pleased that the SCS won't weaken soil loss limits statewide. "I would certainly hope they don't intend to go any further. They're already weaker than they should be," she said.