

Survey finds support for soil-loss sanctions

Crop subsidies could be withheld if conservation practices are ignored.

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Washington, D.C. — A new national survey indicates that most American farmers intend to observe rules linking federal subsidies to soil conservation practices, and one-third of them believe stemming erosion on their farms will increase their incomes.

Most farmers surveyed by American Farmland Trust expect those who don't follow required soil conservation practices by the Jan. 1, 1995, deadline will be caught by the Agriculture Department and will suffer cash subsidy losses.

The survey of 1,000 farmers in 100 counties in 32 states is an attempt to determine the success of using federal farm-program benefits in pushing farmers to use soil-saving practices.

There have been strong indications in recent years that many farmers were ignoring the rules.

There also have been accusations that USDA officials appointed by the Reagan and Bush administrations bowed to farmer opposition to tougher erosion control measures

and tried to water down soil conservation rules.

Random inspections by the Soil and Water Conservation Society and the Center for Resource Economics, among others, indicate that up to half of all farmers are not complying fully with conservation plans drawn up for their operations by USDA's Soil Conservation Service. At the same time, the USDA was saying 1.6 percent of farmers weren't complying.

Many conservation activists say agriculture's compliance with the soil-saving rules will help to determine whether they'll push to bring farmers under more severe environmental restrictions when Congress reauthorizes the Clean Water Act this year or in 1994.

The latest survey was conducted by researchers at Northern Illinois University and Southern Illinois University. Among those contacted in telephone interviews were farmers in Appanoose, Cedar, Decatur, Hardin, Johnson, Mahaska, Plymouth, Shelby and Washington counties in Iowa.

The researchers said the survey "provided little support for the policy position that conservation compliance should be eliminated or watered down because of the strong producer opposition to it."

The study indicates that most individual conservation plans tend to be complex, in many cases requiring in-

stallation of grassed waterways, terraces, crop rotations and the use of crop residues as ways to slow erosion.

But 71 percent of farmers told American Farmland Trust they don't want to change their plans, and most said the compliance program, enacted in the 1985 Farm Act, will cut soil

loss in their counties.

Ralph Grossi, president of American Farmland Trust, a national farmland conservation group, said the survey results "demonstrate that the idea of conservation compliance has been broadly accepted in the farming community."

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