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Money to help ag conservation

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WASHINGTON

A Clinton administration proposal to provide almost \$1.3 billion in new spending for agricultural conservation programs is drawing praise from some sectors, but Iowa's Republican senator says it doesn't address the real needs of small farmers.

John Schuler, a Black Hawk County district conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service, a division of the Agriculture Department, said the money would give more local farmers the opportunity to participate in environmental protection programs, such as establishing buffer strips to improve water quality and building waterways to slow soil erosion.

"We always have more applications than we have money for," Schuler said, noting that 120 producers and 900 acres of farmland had enrolled in a buffer strip program since July 1998. Buffer strips help improve water quality by filtering out chemical runoff.

While any willing farmer may sign up for a buffer strip program, other services, like waterways and terraces, which also prevent soil erosion, are competitive programs. The added funding could allow more farmers to participate, he said.

Vice President Al Gore announced the proposal Friday, and Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman predicted farm income would drop \$7.6 billion this year without more federal aid. If passed by the Republican-controlled Congress, the money would be available in fiscal year 2001, which begins in October 2000.

The plan's largest component is a

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new \$600 million program to provide more funds for farmers who voluntarily adopt plans to curb erosion and protect water supplies from chemical runoff. Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, introduced that plan in Congress last year.

Another \$550 million will be distributed among other programs designed to protect wildlife and wetlands and to educate farmers on implementing conservation practices on their farms. The final \$125 million would be given to produc-

ers in a continuous sign-up program, which lets producers enroll "high priority" practices any time during the year. Grassed waterways and filter strips are considered high priority.

Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, criticized the proposal as another way for the Clinton administration to drag its feet on providing comprehensive disaster relief for farmers.

"For the sake of Iowa farmers, I hope Secretary Glickman's comments do not signal a reversal of statement made last year when he promised that the United States has no intention of going back to the days of intrusive government programs or telling farmers what to plant," Grassley said. "We have made the commitment to a market-based system for agriculture, and we will stay with it."

Aaron Putze, director of public relations for the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, said it was too early to determine whether the program would be successful, but it could give farmers an additional financial incentive to promote sound environmental practices.

"It's a program that could be a good starting point," Putze said. "It's a way to reward farmers for what they're already doing."

President Clinton will submit the budget to Congress on Feb. 7.