

Wao
Courier

Uncle Sam sets sights on 50,000 acres of wetlands

By CATHY CUMMINS
Courier Staff Writer

5/24/92

Got a few acres of wet, marshy ground that take forever to dry out before planting?

If so, Uncle Sam wants to talk to you.

The federal government, as part of the 1990 Farm Bill, wants to increase the number of wetlands throughout the United States. And it's willing to pay for it.

But there's a catch. Once you sign on the dotted line and have that cash in hand, the land cannot be farmed ever again.

"It's going to be permanent," said Mike Craft, director of the Agriculture Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) office in Black Hawk County. "It's not going to be 5 years (or) 10 years. It's going to be permanent. If they sell that farm, if the sons or daughters inherit it, (the wetlands) are going to be there."

"Permanently" and "forever" also caught the attention of the government officials as pens dug into paper at the Waterloo Ramada Inn Wednesday. Officials from the Northeast Iowa offices of the ASCS and the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) came to Waterloo to bone up on the details of the program, which will be piloted in Iowa.

Eight states have been chosen to pilot the program, and Iowa is among the first of those, according to Bob Furleigh, state executive director of the ASCS.

The Wetland Reserve Program, which the government hopes will return 50,000 acres of cropland to wetland status at a cost of \$46 million, covers Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Mississippi, New York, California, North Carolina and Louisiana. Wisconsin is still angling to be included in the program.

■ USDA considers allowing drainage of wetlands. — B6

The target is 50,000 acres, but no one really knows how many acres of wetlands will be enrolled in the program this year, according to Furleigh.

"We don't know," he said. "We're just going to do the best job we can in explaining the program and getting people interested in returning the wetlands."

Previously, the very mention of wetlands in Iowa would spark a "range war," Furleigh said. A war "ranging from those who feel that it's a plot by the government to get control of their land to those who feel that it's a necessary thing in Iowa."

Some area farmers have expressed interest in enrolling low-lying, marshy areas of their property in the program, according

to Craft.

And some pioneer farmers probably are rolling over in their graves, he said.

"There aren't that many wetlands here now, but there used to be a lot of them," Craft said. "And when the pioneers came they just kept draining them and cropping them."

Now the government is trying to turn back the clock. Although the dates haven't been set yet, land owners should be able to sign up for the program in mid-June. Land deeds will be required.

From that date, the ASCS, the SCS and the Fish and Wildlife Service will have four months to look over the property for acceptability and determine the cost of returning the crop land to marshland.

Land considered eligible for the program includes land planted with a commodity crop between

1986 and 1990, buffer areas next to existing wetlands, non-cropped natural wetlands (so-called prairie potholes) and Conservation Reserve Program land enrolled before November 1990.

The government will pay 75 percent of the restoration costs.

Once the costs are determined, land owners will submit bids to the government for their property.

If the bids and attendant program costs exceed the \$46 million allotted to the Wetland Reserve Program, bids will be ranked according to suitability and location. "We want to get the biggest bang for the buck environmentally," Furleigh told the group Wednesday.

Accepted bids can be paid in a lump-sum cash sale or spread over 10 years. Land owners can withdraw from the program at any time up until the permanent easement of the land is filed.