

Topsoil disappearing act continues 10/25/89

DNR officials say conservation efforts slowing rate

By LARRY BALLARD
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Northeast Iowa farmers will lose about 6.5 tons of precious topsoil from every acre of land they devoted to corn and soybean production this year.

The problem is erosion. And with harvest 1989 all but in the bag, many of them are looking ahead to next year, and wondering how long they'll be able hold on to what's left.

So why are soil conservationists smiling?

BECAUSE UNTIL recently, farmland was eroding at a much faster pace.

Iowa Department of Natural Resources experts say that in 1983, an estimated 9.4 tons of topsoil disappeared annually from every acre of tilled farmland.

The DNR says the volume of shifting soil has been reduced because Iowa farmers are recognizing the environmental and economic costs of topsoil erosion, and are finally doing something about it.

"Some of the concern was brought about by the 1985 Farm Bill," Ron Williams, a U.S. Department of Agriculture conservationist for Northeast Iowa, said. "[It] required farmers whose fields are one-third highly erodible to file a

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conservation plan by Dec. 31, 1989."

Williams said the Food and Security Act of 1985 makes the filing of such a plan necessary if farmers want to remain eligible for federal price supports and crop insurance. Close to 90 percent of them have complied.

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Dave McConnell is a Winneshiek County farmer who didn't need prodding from Washington, D.C., to implement a plan of attack.

Three years ago, after spending

about \$25,000 installing a system of terraces on his rolling, erosion-susceptible cropland near Decorah, McConnell volunteered to test various conservation tilling techniques for the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation.

"I've always done a lot of experimenting (with erosion control)," McConnell said. "Though sometimes it can dig hard into your pocket."

McConnell says that for reducing erosion, the best way to till land is to not till it at all.

"No-till has been a very effective way of stopping erosion," he said. "But there are some trade-offs involved."

MCCONNELL SAID he has a difficult time maintaining strong yields on his non-tilled fields. Weeds have flourished, requiring a heavier reliance on herbicides.

"It (conservation tillage) can put you between a rock and a hard spot," he said. "Farming is just like any other business; guys look at the bottom line."

But McConnell agrees that not all profits and losses show up in a ledger.

"We have a life-long lease on this land, then we'll turn it over to our children or someone else," he said. "We have a responsibility to maintain it the best we can."