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Questions continue in conservation funding picture

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Farmers already concerned about the weather-related late planting starts, increasing input costs and periodic consumer finger-pointing over rising food costs can add yet another concern to their list — the fate of valuable conservation programs facing pending USDA program budget cuts.

Plymouth County producers, with a long history of responding to the need to conserve valuable soil and water resources, will likely feel the impact of such cuts should they be approved, along with other farmers across Iowa and the nation.

Mark Brown, of Le Mars, chairman of the Plymouth County Soil and Water Conservation District, agrees the issue is of concern locally.

"We need only to look back to what has already occurred in earlier funding limitations as an example of what could happen," he said.

For example, Brown pointed to a possible \$1.9 million drop in Natural Resource and Conservation Service dollars previously available for programs provided through the multi-county Sioux Rivers Resource Conservation and Development Council serving Plymouth, Woodbury, Monona, Cherokee, Ida, Sioux and Lyon counties.

Money from the agency has been instrumental in extensive work on grass protection for ground wells in the Little Sioux Watershed and a canoe trail near Akron, Brown said.

Plymouth County's producers are likely to see significant impact when it comes to assistance to help with additional

terraces for their farm ground as a result of various cutbacks in several federal conservation efforts, Brown added.

In some instances this assistance was at the 75 percent level, he said.

"Plymouth County, for example,

program has offered help for producers with incentive payments to implement terraces, waterways and brush management for invasive spe-

ago are, most of them, broad-based terraces," he said. "These terraces tend to wear down quicker than a narrow-based terrace. Then they really aren't adaptable to our big equipment used today. Producers want to come back

agement or improved energy efficiency.

Brown said other conservation concerns are associated with the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), a voluntary program for landowners wanting to develop and improve wildlife habitat on agricultural land, non-industrial private forest or tribal lands.

Added buffer strips for reduced erosion along river areas in the county are among the benefits resulting through this program.

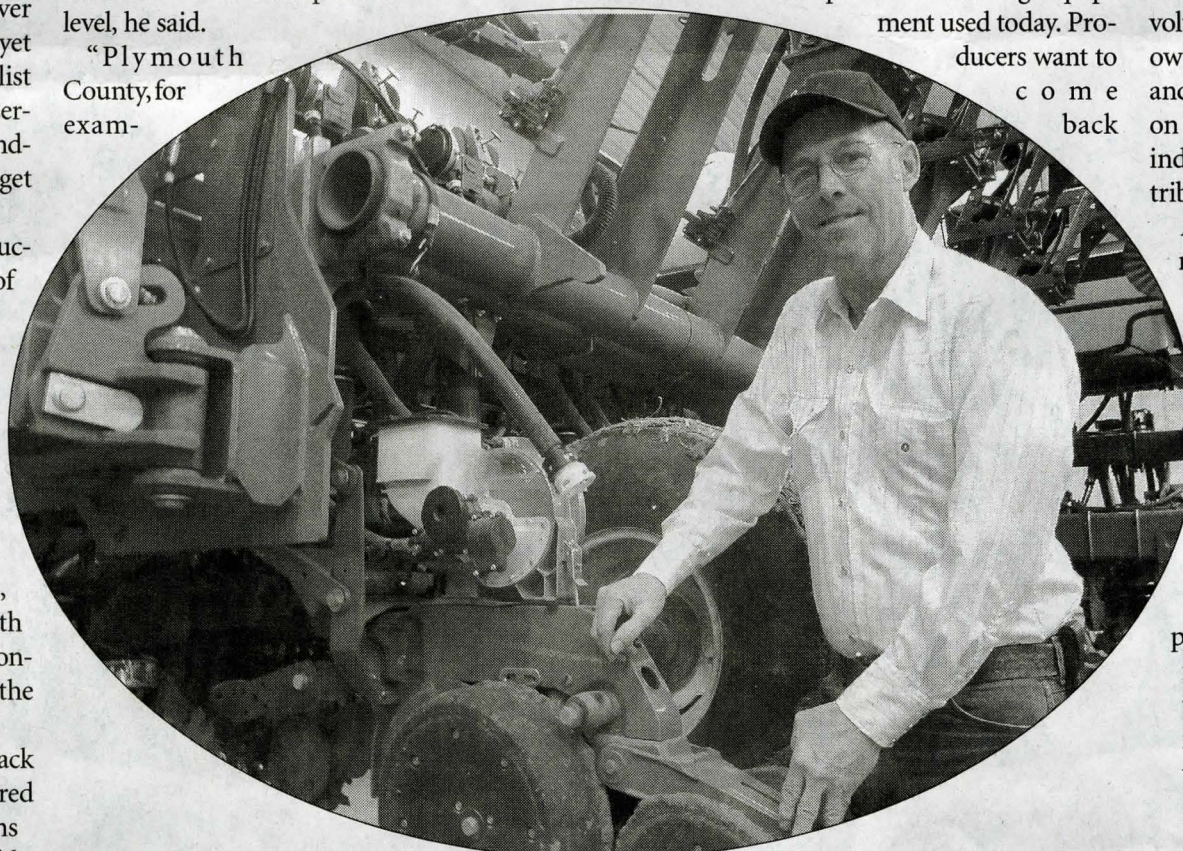
Brown said earlier possible future cutbacks on staffing within state and area conservation agencies serving local farmers also are part of the picture on what lies ahead for the county's conservation-minded farmers dedicated to proper soil and water conservation management.

Despite the concern on what lies ahead for conservation as we know it today, Brown remains optimistic.

"Farmers in Plymouth County have been very cognizant of conservation through the years," he said.

A lot of producers have been active in conservation on their farms, he said.

"We've been lucky because we've been, as I see it, pretty aggressive in the percentage of land we've covered with terraces and for our increase in no-till in our farming operations to prevent soil and nutrient loss," Brown said. "I think we'll see this interest continuing."



(SENTINEL PHOTO BY JOLENE STEVENS)

Mark Brown, chairman of Plymouth County Soil and Water Conservation District, sees possible federal/state conservation spending cuts a matter of concern. He also says he expects Plymouth County producers with their ongoing dedication to soil and water conservation efforts to remain committed to these practices.

ple, had four projects with contracts signed for this year for terrace work, and the money was called back," Brown said. "The work had been assigned for this spring and the producers were told not to start the project."

Projects dependent on the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQUIP) have also been targeted, he said.

"We previously had five or six different projects in gear for work in this area," Brown said. "Now we're down to one or two as the result of earlier funding cuts."

The popular EQUIP pro-

grams like cedar and sumac, he explained. It is frequently used to clean up pastures for increased productivity.

"It's considered a big one for us here in Plymouth County," Brown said, adding that another of the program's benefits is improving water facilities and fencing for livestock production facilities, important in a livestock-heavy area such as Plymouth County.

Several factors are driving the strong interest in new or additional terraces in the county, Brown said.

"One reason is that terraces constructed 30 to 40 years

and construct a narrow-based terrace."

Brown said another area where possible cuts are looming is with programs paid for through the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

The program offers producers assistance for a wide range of enhancements to address a number of proper soil and water conservation considerations for improved conservation management.

Practices to be improved based on farm inventories by conservation specialists include resource-conserving crop rotations, brush man-