

CONSERVATIONISTS UPSET 9/28/94

Soil erosion programs take severe cuts

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Washington, D.C. — When President Clinton's budget came out in January with massive cuts proposed for soil erosion programs, many conservationists shrugged it off as just another presidential offering that would be "dead on arrival" in Congress.

It wasn't.

Congress has shocked the conservation movement by ratifying Clinton's plan to cut funding for the Agriculture Department's venerable Soil Conservation Service almost in half — from \$1.235 billion currently to \$697.6 million in the next fiscal year.

SCS Chief Paul Johnson, a Decorah, Ia., farmer, agrees that his programs "took a pretty heavy hit."

Johnson said the agency saw "hard times" coming and offered an employee buyout this year, which cut personnel by about 1,000 to 13,000.

"We wish we were on a rising tide," said Johnson. "There's an awful lot of work to do on the land. Everywhere I go I see the fantastic

Soil erosion programs hit hard by Clinton budget

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work by SCS people, exciting things being done on the land."

Norman Berg, former SCS chief and now a representative for the Soil and Water Conservation Society, agreed, saying, "This is a wake-up call for people concerned with the future of soil and water conservation."

He said the cuts come as Congress has increased the agency's responsibilities, especially in policing farmer compliance with erosion programs and moving to reduce agriculture's impact on water pollution.

The situation is the latest in a series of actions agricultural interests call bad omens as Congress and the administration prepare to renew overall farm legislation that expires at the end of 1995.

ASCS Programs

Conservation programs operated by SCS and by the USDA's Agriculture Stabilization and Conservation Service were protected for decades by Rep. Jamie Whitten, D-Miss., who has been in Congress 54 years and who was known as the "permanent secretary of agriculture" when he headed both the House Appropriations Committee and its agriculture subcommittee.

Whitten became ill and left both posts two years ago, although he continues to serve in Congress.

His subcommittee job was assumed by Rep. Richard Durbin, D-

Ill., who was faced with strict budget limits. The choices are limited because the \$20 billion for farm income and price supports and the \$40 billion for food stamps and other feeding programs are entitlements, over which the appropriations committee has little control.

Thus, the cuts fall heavily on "discretionary" programs, including soil conservation, farm and rural housing loans and export promotion and market development.

"When Clinton came out with his budget," said Gerald Talbert, an official with the National Association of Conservation Districts, "everyone in conservation thought Congress would restore the cuts. But Congress is different now."

"And even scarier, the prediction is that it will get worse."

Small Watersheds

The conservation area that took the largest hit is the 40-year-old Small Watersheds Program, which went from \$267 million to \$70 million.

Berg said this is the only program in the USDA's inventory that seeks to control erosion and water quality problems beyond the borders of individual farms.

Some environmentalists have been less than enthusiastic with the watershed program, contending it has been used to straighten streams and to install holding ponds and dams, although Talbert said its focus shifted in recent years toward environmentally "friendly" projects such as preserving wetlands.