

Farmers get 2nd chance to join wetland program

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Some Iowa farmers will get another chance to enter the federal government's program to create permanent wetlands on crop acres, state conservation officials said Monday.

The U.S. Soil Conservation Service has revised the rules on its Emergency Wetlands Reserve Program, designed to create permanent marshes on land damaged by the floods of 1993. The revisions will open the program to many farmers who did not qualify earlier and could also allow in some land-

owners who were turned down for the normal Wetlands Reserve program, said Lynn Betts of the Iowa Soil Conservation Service.

"We're sending out letters to the 750 people turned down for the WRP and to determine whether they have bottomland that might qualify for the emergency program," Betts said.

Both of the government's wetland programs have been very popular in Iowa.

In each of the first two enrollment periods for the Wetlands Reserve Program, more Iowa farmers

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offered to enter land than those from any other state. So far, nearly 11,000 acres in the state have been enrolled in the program and are being restored to wetlands.

By the end of July, Iowa farmers had offered 14,676 acres for the Emergency Wetlands Reserve. Much of that land is in southeastern Iowa, where flooding was severe along the Iowa and Mississippi rivers.

After a farmer signed up for the program, the SCS determined whether repairing the levees and returning the land to production would be more costly than simply buying an easement on the land and restoring a wetland on it. If the restoration costs were higher than the established easement value, then the land was eligible.

Under the revised rules, the SCS plans to take into account the disaster and deficiency payments the government provides to farmers when it considers the cost of returning land to production. That should raise the restoration costs and give more landowners a shot at qualifying for the program, said Lyle Asell, assistant state conservationist at the Iowa SCS.

"Until now, the societal costs of leaving flood-prone land in croplands has been greatly underestimated," Asell said in a prepared release.

The SCS has paid easement values ranging from \$388 an acre in south-central Iowa to \$962 in northwest Iowa. But the costs for disaster and deficiency payments for an Iowa

acre have been estimated at \$761 for a 25-year period.

The sign-up deadline for the emergency wetland program is Dec. 30. Farmers who are interested in the program should contact their county SCS office.