

Farmers getting thanks for conservation efforts

Program will show Iowans appreciate work done to improve environment.

By BILL SLAKEY
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Farmers often get credit for easy things to notice, the mountains of grain outside elevators this fall, for example.

For the first time this year, Iowa agriculture officials and interests plan a statewide celebration to recognize the things that might not get noticed but still help the environment.

For every grass strip along a stream, every no-tilled field and every small wood lot that provides wildlife cover, Iowa officials want to say thanks.

"Part of this whole program is to make urban people aware that there are a lot of people out there helping the environment," said L. Jeanette Winegarden, chairwoman of the Black Hawk County Soil and Water Conservation District board. "There's a general feeling that those people who are putting conservation practices on the land need to be recognized."

The program is Conservation Farmer Appreciation Week, which will be celebrated with open houses at soil and water conservation districts and farm organizations in 80 counties across the state.

"This is a one-time, one-of-a-kind effort to show conservation farmers the work they are doing to improve our natural resources is appreciated," said Glenn Buresh, president of the Iowa Association of Soil and Water Conservation District Commissioners and a farmer from Ely.

In Grundy County, the local Natural Resources Conservation (formerly the Soil Conservation Service) is sponsoring a breakfast for some 200 farmers Monday.

Grundy County District Conservationist Marcia Roll said it is a good

time to celebrate because farmers have made measurable progress in conservation in recent years.

"Since the '80s and on up to the '90s there's been a significant improvement and we've learned a lot," she said.

The most common conservation practices in Grundy County include reducing tillage and leaving soil-conserving crop residue in the fields, planting grass waterways and contour plowing, she said.

Across Iowa, farmers have made significant strides in conservation, according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Agency figures show soil erosion has been cut by 35 percent in the past 10 years. More than nine of 10 Iowa farmers are in compliance with federal soil conservation and wetlands preservation regulations.

Iowa farmers have put 2.1 million acres of the most highly eroding land to grass. They have actually increased forestlands by 10 percent since 1982. Farmers' participation in wetlands restoration programs will result in about 33,000 acres restored, according to the NRCS.

Other accomplishments include a drop in nitrogen usage from an average of 90 pounds an acre on row crops in 1985 to 77 pounds an acre in 1993, significant increases in wildlife habitat, and participation in dozens of voluntary water quality improvement programs across the state, according to NRCS figures.

In Black Hawk County, NRCS officials will celebrate the week with an open house from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thursday at the NRCS offices, 3216 Thistledown Drive.

A variety of businesses and organizations, ranging from the Iowa Corn Growers to Zeneca Ag Products to McDonalds will help sponsor the farmer appreciation events. Farmers honored for conservation efforts will receive a pewter medallion Christmas tree ornament.