Madigan unveils U.S. wetlands reserve

Agriculture Secretary Edward Madigan last week unveiled a pilot Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) in eight states, including Iowa.

"Wetlands are critical for the protection and enhancement of habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife, improving the hydrology of our nation's water supplies, and storing flood waters," Madigan said. "It is more important now than ever that our wetlands be preserved for future generations."

Producers in California, Iowa, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, New York and North Carolina may enroll up to a total of 50,000 acres in the WRP during fiscal year 1992, which ends Sept. 30.

The wetlands reserve, funded at $46.4 million this year, was one of the landmark environmental steps in the 1990 farm bill. The administration wants to increase funding for this program to $160.9 million for the 1993 fiscal year.

Under the WRP, the agriculture department's Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service can spend funds to purchase easements from eligible owners who agree to restore farmed and converted wetlands with some adjacent lands dependent upon wetlands.

The goal of the WRP is to enroll 1 million acres by 1995 through the purchase of permanent and long-term easements. The Soil Conservation Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service will assist in determining the eligibility of acres offered.

A sign-up period will be offered this spring.

Farm groups oppose 'means test' for farmers

Farm Bureau and 12 other agricultural and commodity groups are opposing the administration's plan to include a means test for farm program eligibility.

President Bush's proposed budget would exclude individuals from federal commodity programs if their off-farm income exceeds $100,000.

In a letter to members of the Senate and House agriculture committees, the groups pointed out that such a provision would diminish the effectiveness of farm programs "as an instrument for providing stability for agricultural production, price and income."

The groups noted that past attempts to impose means tests, including one during the 1990 farm bill debate, were "resoundingly defeated" by the House and Senate.

"Agricultural programs have consistently contributed more than their proportional share of budget reduction since 1985," the letter said.

"The 15 percent unpaid base acreage provision of the 1990 agricultural sector currently in a state of transition."

In the letter, the groups said that instead of maintaining the historical objective of assuring agricultural stability, the farm program would exclude from eligibility producers "deemed to be insufficiently needy."

Reducing program participation will increase the burden on small- and medium-sized farms that remain in the program because acreage reduction requirements will be increased to offset the additional production from ineligible producers, the groups said.

Proponents of the income cite a desire to eliminate the passive, off-farm investor from benefitting from the farm program. The amendments to farm program eligibility criteria included in the 1987 budget reconciliation act, however, have already done that, the groups pointed out.

They pointed out that sharerent tenants would be one of the hardest hit groups, since many landlords receive off-farm in-