

Survey shows farmers turn to colleagues for soil assistance

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When farmers want to keep precious soil on their fields, not floating down the nearest creek or drifting aloft on the next gust of wind, they seek out other farmers for advice, not the government agencies put in place to help them, according to a statewide study.

Nearly one out of two of the 1,941 Iowa farmers surveyed turn to chemical and fertilizer dealers.

Less than one in three would call on experts in the area Extension offices.

Last fall the Iowa Association of Soil and Water Conservation District Commissioners and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service conducted a statewide survey on soil conservation practices. They found that the federal and state agencies are the last places farmers turn to for information on changing planting and plowing practices to reduce soil erosion.

Only 34 percent said they would be very likely to ask the Soil Conservation Service, the government agency that sets up and checks soil conservation plans, about complying with those plans.

Curt Hollis, who started a soil conservation program on his Waterloo area farm in 1983, said he wasn't surprised by the survey results. Of course farmers will turn to other farmers for information on plowing and planting practices, he said.

"All these systems originated with farmers, were perfected and adapted by farmers and spread by farmers," he said. "Only when they are relatively widespread in the area do Extension people take notice and start researching it."

"I think it goes back to 'I'm from the government, I'm here to help you,'" said Mike Webster, director of the Soil Conservation Service in Black Hawk County.

Webster said he will get out the word on no-till and ridge-till methods any way he can. He's forming phone lists of area farmers who don't till their fields in the fall, setting up informational meetings, sitting down face-to-face with every farmer in the county who farms highly erodible land, and sharing the latest regulation wrinkle with chemical and fertilizer dealers.

Only 27 percent of the 1,941 farmers across the state questioned in the survey said they would be "very likely" to consult with Extension service

SURVEY FACTS

For information on reducing soil erosion and changing plowing practices, farmers first turn to:

Experienced farmers, 66 percent of the time

Chemical, fertilizer dealers, 46 percent

SCS staff, 34 percent

Equipment dealers, 34 percent

Extension staff, 27 percent

On compliance with federal regulations on soil conservation:

58 percent say they support compliance

26 percent oppose it

16 percent aren't sure

On compliance plans:

93 percent have a conservation plan

64 percent say they fully understood their plan

34 percent say they partially understand their plan

48 percent will complete their plans before the January 1995 deadline

29 percent have not looked at their plans since they were laid out

Source: 1991 Conservation Survey by the Iowa Association of Soil and Water Conservation District Commissioners and the USDA Soil Conservation Service (SCS).

staffers about changing their plowing practices.

Most of them, 66 percent, said they would be most likely to ask other experienced farmers about their plowing practices; whether they run their plows over fields three or four times during the year to grind the soil into sand-like particles or leave the dead corn and bean stalks on the ground through the winter to deaden the effect of the wind and rain.

At issue is a piece of the 1985 farm bill that ordered farmers who are working highly erodible land to have a plan by 1990 to reduce soil erosion on their fields. The plans are tailor-made for each field and approved by the Soil Conservation Service.

About 8.5 percent of the estimated 260,000 crop acres in Black Hawk County is considered highly erodible and required to have a conservation plan, Webster said.

The bill gave farmers until Jan. 1, 1995, to put terraces into their fields, create ponds or change their planting and tilling patterns to comply with the tailor-made plans. Farmers who don't comply will be locked out of all federal money programs, from price supports to low-cost loans.

"So it's in their best interest to have a plan and comply with it," Webster said.

Planting alternate strips of crops reduces water erosion. Farmers who don't plow their fields in the fall leave a residue of dead corn and bean stalks to decay into the ground throughout the winter. The stalks prevent the wind from carrying away huge quantities of soil and also lessen the impact of the rain.

More than 90 percent of the farmers contacted by the survey said they had a soil conservation plan, but 34 percent said they didn't fully understand those plans. Twenty-nine percent of the respondents said they had not reviewed their plan since it was made.

Almost half, 46 percent, of the farmers surveyed said they would ask their chemical and fertilizer dealers how to comply with the conservation regulations.

SCS and Extension staff may have been so low on the farmers' source list because there are so few of them, said Bruce Clark, a sales representative for chemical manufacturer CIBA-Geigy. Clark works with suppliers in Black Hawk, Bremer, Butler and Grundy counties.

"There's only one Extension office in a county while there can be six dealerships in the town," Clark said. But he agreed that a more intensive education program aimed at dealers is needed.

"Farmers are usually in contact with their dealers on a daily or at least a weekly basis to get feed and supplies," he said. Dealerships also run their own programs on the latest seed, fertilizer and chemical systems during the winter.

Phone lists and field demonstrations topped the list of what farmers want to see in the educational arena. Thirty-seven percent of the farmers listed field demonstrations as something that would encourage farmers to quit plowing in the fall. Thirty-four percent thought contact lists would be a major benefit.

"I think farmers are eager to look at what farmers in their area are doing and apply their ideas to their own farm," Clark said.