

AGRIBUSINESS

Farmers have faith in wetlands program

It has been popular in Iowa because farmers are interested in the environmental benefits of restoring marshes.

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REGISTER BUSINESS WRITER

It's hit hard times in Washington, but the federal government's ambitious program to restore wetlands is still a big hit with Iowa farmers.

Far more Iowa farmers have signed intentions to participate in the pilot for the Wetlands Reserve program than in any of the other eight states involved. And — despite the fact that Congress recently eliminated the money needed to take the program beyond this year's pilot stage — Iowans are still interested, state conservation officials said.

"A few are dropping out, but I'd say 90 percent or more are still in," said Duane Miller, resource conservationist at the Iowa Soil Conservation Service.

Lee Roudybush, a Louisa County farmer, said the Wetlands Reserve program is popular because "it gives farmers a choice about wet-

lands and it's fair."

The program is designed to pay farmers "fair market value" to quit farming and to restore marshes on acres that have been drained to create crop land. A farmer in the program would still own the land and would control access to it, but the government would buy an easement to ensure it remains a wetland. Federal officials have said preference will be given to farmers who agree to restore the wetland permanently.

The congressional setback — the proposal to finance the program in fiscal 1993 died in a House-Senate conference committee — angered Iowa conservation groups.

"My impression is that it is one of the most shocking failures of Congress in recent history," said Ann Robinson of Decorah, an agriculture specialist for the Izaak Walton League. "This is a big loss for both farmers and conservationists."

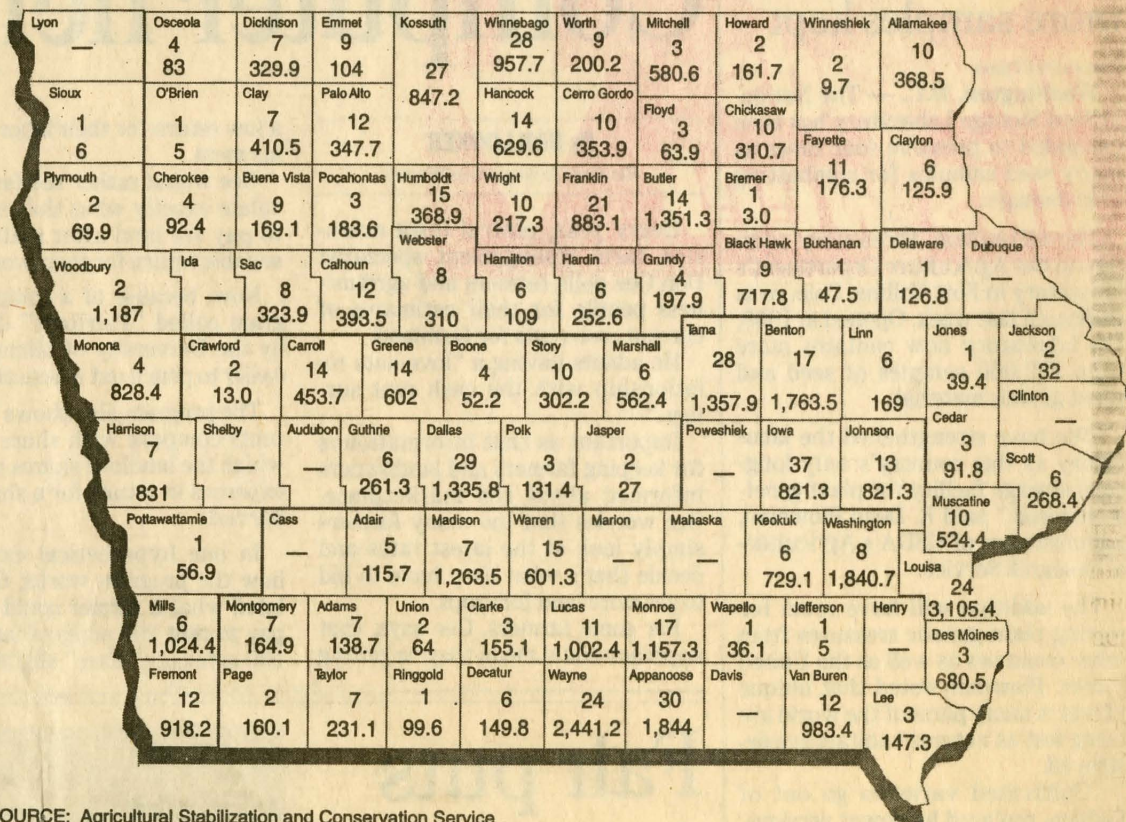
"We were kind of appalled. It seemed like the perfect program," said Ben van Gundy of the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation.

Improving Water Quality

The Wetlands Reserve program can be a valuable tool in efforts to improve surface water quality in

WETLAND RESERVE PROGRAM

HERE IS A LOOK at Iowa farmers' intentions. The top figure represents the number of farmers. The bottom figure represents the number of acres in the program.



SOURCE: Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service

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