

Farmers have another shot at CRP sign-up

■ Second round of program enrollment begins Wednesday.

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WATERLOO

Farmers who didn't enroll land in the spring sign-up for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Conservation Reserve Program have another opportunity.

Local Farm Service Agency officials announced the second round of sign-ups will begin Wednesday and run through Nov. 14.

The voluntary program pays farmers who plant with trees or grasses to reduce erosion.

"It's an excellent opportunity to enroll environmentally sensitive

land into the program," said conservationist Mike Webster.

In Black Hawk County about 1,000 acres are up for renewal, he said.

"We didn't have that many compared to other counties," Webster said. "We just want to make sure everyone's aware there is a sign-up."

Mike Musel of the Iowa FSA in Des Moines said landowners should be looking down the road with this sign-up.

"This contract is really key for contracts that expire Sept. 30, 1998," he said. "Farmers are going to have to look a year out."

Musel said it is uncertain if there will be an CRP sign-ups next year.

"It actually gives the farmer plenty of time to plan ahead," he said.

For farmers, the program provides

income from land susceptible to erosion that's not well-suited for crop production.

Payments are based on average rental rates and adjusted for productivity.

Producers also put in a bid for their land.

Contracts for this round of sign-ups last a minimum 10 years with producers receiving up to 50 percent of the costs of setting up approved conservation measures.

But when farmers sign up for CRP there is no guarantee their land, which is ranked on several environmental factors, will be covered.

Webster said the program is very competitive. Landowners who did not make the last cut in March discuss ways to get a better ranking during this sign-up, he added.

"The higher the score is, the better

their chance is of getting accepted," Webster said. "There is a lot of competition out there and they really need to think about things to improve their score."

Planting trees is one method farmers can use to bump up their scores, Webster noted.

More emphasis is being placed on improving wildlife habitats and increasing the cost competitiveness of CRP during this sign-up.

With a litany of eligibility guidelines, the best way for producers to determine which land can be put into the program is to visit their local FSA office.