

Ex-official says no-till can fend off regulations

By **BILL SLAKEY**
Courier Staff Writer

AMES — When farmers check out the benefits of no-till agriculture, they should start thinking of politics along with soil conservation and contributions to the bottom line, according to the former head of the U.S. Soil Conservation Service.

In a time of growing concern over water pollution, farmers can use the successes of no-till to ward off strict, detailed and costly environmental regulations, according to Bill Richards, head of the SCS under President George Bush.

"What's at stake is our whole voluntary approach to agriculture," Richards told an audience of approximately 1,100 farmers at the 1993 Iowa No-till Conference on Tuesday.

"We need to get our brand of conservation on the public's agenda," he said.

Richards said farmers will soon face the regulation of non-point source water pollution — the pollution that flows off fields and parking lots rather than from the end of a pipe. Some experts believe that agriculture is responsible for 60 percent of the country's non-point source pollution, he said.

The question for farmers is whether the regulations will dictate standards or set voluntary goals for them to follow, according to Richards.

"An incentive-based, voluntary approach equals an investment in our future," he said. "A regulatory program will be a lien on our future."

The success of current mandatory plans for soil conservation should help farmers make their case as responsible professionals who care about the environment, Richards said.

"If we really are successful in compliance, it's going to be unreal the improvement in water quality and the lack of siltation in our

streams," he said.

In fact, speaking as a farmer — not as a soil conservation official — Richards said he would almost welcome a new comprehensive conservation plan covering herbicides, erosion, buffer zones around streams "and really all the environmental concerns that the public and we as farmers have."

Such a plan could protect a farmer from complaints about pollution if a river became contaminated, he said.

"If a farmer or a land user has that kind of plan in place ... then we wouldn't look to that farmer, we'd look somewhere else," Richards said.

Other no-till experts at the conference echoed Richards' concerns about environmental regulation and the ability of the public to dictate it.

"There's only 2 percent of us in agriculture and the other 98 percent can outvote us any time," said Jim Kinsella, an Illinois farmer who helped pioneer the no-till movement 15 years ago.

"Our Achilles' heel in agriculture right now is water quality," he said.

Kinsella was one of many farmers at the conference giving practical "farmer to farmer" advice to beginning no-tillers. The conference was sponsored by the Iowa Soybean Board, Monsanto Agricultural Products Co. and Pioneer Hi-Bred International Inc.

While no-till is still an untested tool for most farmers, it has already shown its promise, according to Doral Kemper, a member of the national program staff for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agriculture Research Service.

"No-till is emerging as the greatest agricultural advance of the century in terms of conservation, the environment and productivity," Kemper said. "If we can do it right it can be the biggest advance since man began husbanding soil."