

Farm

Conservation becomes key word to Iowa, U.S. farmers

By MARY THOMPSON
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Congress has passed legislation providing the strongest incentives and creating the greatest potential to date for protecting highly erodible farmland.

Under provisions of the Food Security Act of 1985, farmers will lose eligibility for numerous federal farm programs — many of which are currently their major source of revenue — if they do not take steps to protect highly erodible land to cropland.

Meeting the requirements of the farm bill places the burden on the producer to initiate the action and on the staff of the Soil Conservation Service to provide the necessary technical assistance.

"I DEFINITELY think the conservation provisions that are in place put the conservation movement at a crossroads. The implications are numerous for soil and water conservation programs," said Walter Peechatka, executive vice president of the Soil Conservation Society of America, a private organization of conservation proponents.

The conservation measures reflect concern for saving both monetary and natural resources. "Farmers have to look at the economic impact and right now that's foremost in their minds," Peechatka said.

"The (Conservation Reserve Program) entirely implemented is going to idle a lot of our highly erodible land and is going to result in far less erosion and improved water quality. It will also help on the crop surplus side," he said.

The Food Security Act of 1985 includes the following provisions:

- Cross compliance: Anyone producing crops on highly erodible land must have formulated and begin applying an approved conservation plan by Jan. 1, 1990. Failure to comply will make the producer ineligible for certain USDA programs.

- Sodbuster: Anyone converting highly erodible grassland or woodland to cropland after Dec. 23, 1985, without an approved conservation plan will be ineligible for USDA programs.

- Swampbuster: Producers converting wetlands to croplands after Dec. 23, 1985, will be disqualified from receiving certain USDA program benefits.

IF ANY parcel of land is found to be in violation of these provisions, the producer's entire operation is ineligible for benefits.

Compliance is required for producers to be eligible for price and income supports, disaster payments, crop insurance, Farmers Home Administration loans, Commodity Credit Corp. storage payments, farm storage facility loans, and "other programs under which the USDA makes commodity-related payments, including annual payments for the Conservation Reserve Program."

A field is considered highly erodible if more than one-third of it has highly erodible soil map units or the highly erodible area is larger than 50 acres.

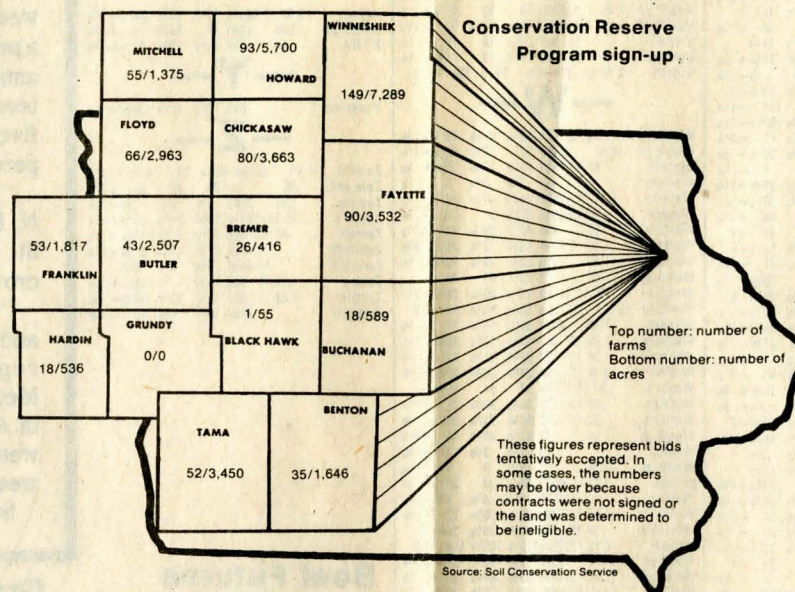
Soil maps are units representing soil type, slope and erodibility. If a soil map is not available or there are questions concerning the status of land, verification will be made by the Soil Conservation Service staff.

An erodibility index will be used to determine the classification of land. Under rules as now proposed, land qualifies as highly erodible if it has an erodibility index of eight or more.

THE ERODIBILITY index reflects the basic characteristics of the parcel of land and the potential for soil loss, regardless of current management practices or actual soil loss.

The erodibility index is more definitive, and "eliminates the management variable," explained Roy Campbell, Black Hawk County district conservationist.

- Nationally, 118 million acres of



land fall into that category, with most having an erosion level of more than two tons per acre per year. An estimated 60 million acres have erosion levels over three tons per acre.

In Iowa, 8.2 million acres of cropland have been identified as highly erodible, one of the highest totals in the country. Kansas has 10.6 million acres and Montana 9.6 million acres.

Black Hawk County has 695 acres classified as highly erodible, with 120,395 acres potentially highly erodible and 226,500 acres not highly erodible land.

The potential exists for more land to be moved from the potentially highly erodible to the highly erodible category, if a site inspection determines specific characteristics warrant the change, Campbell said.

CREATING AND applying a conservation plan is "an opportunity to retain eligibility" for federal programs, he said.

While plans are only required for the highly erodible acres, Campbell sees this as an opportunity for producers to complete conservation

plans for their entire farms.

"It would be nice to tie everything together. ... This is the thing we've always wanted to do," he said, noting the agency's guidelines and policies are directed toward "total farm planning, meeting the objectives of the total farming operation."

The conservation plan will have options and alternatives for controlling soil losses, including use of contours, conservation tillage, no till or terraces.

Another option, Campbell noted, is enrolling in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), "which complements this program nicely."

"It doesn't make economic sense to farm highly erodible acres when they can put it in the CRP," he said.

UNDER THE CRP, farmers submit bids for annual payments to be made for 10 years in return for taking highly erodible land out of production. The program includes penalties for converting the parcel to cropland after the 10-year period is concluded.

The goal is to enroll up to 45 million acres of highly erodible land. The next sign-up period is tentatively scheduled for February 1987.

In Iowa, 5,303 operators have enrolled 358,553 acres. This represents the third highest number of operators behind Minnesota and Kansas, and the sixth highest total acreage.

The maximum accepted bid in Benton, Black Hawk, Bremer, Buchanan, Chickasaw, Fayette, Grundy, Howard, Tama and Winneshiek counties is \$85 per acre. In Hardin, Franklin, Butler, Floyd and Mitchell counties, the maximum is \$90 per acre.

Presently, highly erodible land is defined for the CRP as having an actual soil loss of 15 tons of soil per acre per year, or a loss of 10 tons per acre annually with serious gully erosion.

"SOME FIELDS may not qualify for this because of good conservation management practices by the farmer," Campbell noted.

However, under the new program, the erodibility index would be used to determine eligibility, he said.

Qualifying on actual soil loss is a disincentive for the farmer already practicing good conservation measures to enroll in the CRP, Campbell noted. "The erodibility index takes that out. It lets the conservation-minded farmer with potential erosion get into the program."

Activating the new program will mandate many hours of work by SCS staff, a staff that just six months ago was being considered for reductions because of budget limitations.

Time is required not only to prepare the conservation plan but to monitor its use and update it as management practices or crop rotation mandates.

"A lot of conservation plans will be developed this year. But most will need updating every three to five years," said Roger Mussetter, resource conservationist with the Iowa office of the SCS.

CONSERVATION plans completed in the past may contain useful information. However, "the farming

operation and the way the guy manages it has changed dramatically," Mussetter said.

"It will take a lot of manpower to work with all the farmers," he said. "The demand is going to be tremendous if things stay the way they are and the law remains as is."

Bill Gardner, director of budget and analysis for the SCS in Washington D.C., said some increases in staffing have been provided "in the areas needed to service the Farm Bill."

"The workload will be very significant, of course. One of the key problems in it is how quickly the farmers and individual producers come to us and ask us to make the determination on where their highly erodible land or wetlands are," Gardner said.

"We're launching a major information-education effort now to let producers know what requirements are and what choices are, what do to protect their USDA farm benefits."

Staff will be strengthened "to the extent our budget will permit it," Gardner said, with specific emphasis on additional staff for county level offices.

"We're looking at a very substantial increase in workload," he said, adding staff may be redirected to problem areas or private consultants may be certified to assist.

HE NOTED there have been no staff reductions because of changes in the national budget, but a hiring freeze is in place.

While a final determination has not been made, Iowa expects to receive about \$500,000 for overtime pay and to hire part-time help, according to state conservationist Michael Nethery.

State and federal budget cuts forced the layoff of 20 people from the Iowa SCS staff last spring. Nethery said the agency intends to contact those people to see if they would be interested in any of the work that may be available.