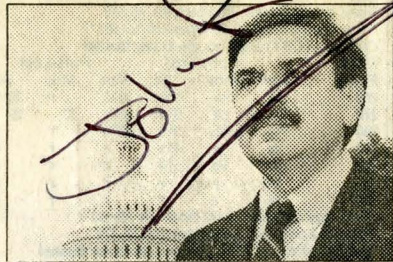


FARM & COUNTRY

Iowans ready for wetlands battle



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Coalition eyes federal policies

Washington, D.C. — Agribusiness and the food industry have launched an

'Some of the proposals are absolutely unworkable and will create a firestorm,' says one Iowa farmer angered by the plans.

By **JERRY PERKINS**
REGISTER FARM EDITOR

Nevada, Ia. — State and federal officials are girding for battle as they unveil wetland designations in 48 Iowa counties in 1995.

They'd better be ready.

Last week, Story County farmer David Frandson unloaded on the federal and state bureaucrats who are making the call on

what Iowa farmland will be classified as wetlands.

Owners of designated wetlands will be restricted in how they farm them. They could lose farm program benefits or be subject to civil and criminal penalties.

"Some of the (wetlands) proposals are absolutely unworkable and will create a firestorm," Frandson said last week at a meeting here. "It isn't funny."

Frandson, who has served for six years on the Story County Soil and Water Conservation District, was grumpy because he hadn't had breakfast. But there was more to his anger than an empty stomach.

Shut Out

Soil and Water Conservation District commissioners — mostly local farmers who

oversee soil conservation work in their counties — have been shut out as federal and state agencies plotted strategy to review the state's topography for wetlands designation, Frandson said.

"As a commissioner, I feel my power has been usurped," Frandson said. "You're toying with people's abilities to earn a living."

Frandson, who farms 700 acres of row crops in Story County, isn't alone in his criticism.

Steven King, owner of King Construction in Odebolt and chairman of the board of the Iowa Land Improvement Contractors Association, said the wetlands designation process has changed the very nature of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, formerly known as the Soil Conservation Service (SCS).

"SCS has become the police force for agriculture," King said after the often-heated, three-hour meeting. "I like these guys (from SCS), but they've gone from having an agricultural focus to being taken over by the (U.S.) Fish and Wildlife Service and the (U.S. Army) Corps of Engineers."

Harmful to Production?

Ralph Christensen, a farmer from Fonda who is president of the Iowa Drainage District Association, said the designation process will harm farmers' ability to produce.

"It's going to take part of our potential income away from us," Christensen said. "It's going to cause lots of problems. People are

Fight over nation's wetlands heats up

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going to be very upset."

James Frevert, president of Hertz Farm Management here and immediate past president of the American Society of Farm Managers and Rural Appraisers, said his company and organization both support the goal of preserving and enhancing wetlands, but feel the designation process is unworkable.

"The District conservationists (in each Iowa county) ... know it's not workable, but they can't do anything about it," he said.

Will Things Die Down?

State Conservationist Leroy Brown, who has been in that position since Sept. 1, anticipates an uproar but said he believes the issue will die down.

"It's a very controversial issue, and I won't say we won't have some resistance, but once we explain it to folks and once people understand it, there'll be less resistance," he said.

The four federal agencies involved in designating wetlands are the Natural Resources Conservation Service, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture; the Environmental Protection Agency; the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and the Corps of Engineers.

The previous designation process was halted about a year ago, Brown said, when the four agencies found

they had different interpretations of what constituted a wetland.

The four agencies spent much of this year negotiating the qualifications for designation and creating a division of responsibility. An agreement was signed by the agencies in August.

Last week, the agencies and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources explained how wetlands qualifications will be determined.

Using aerial photographs taken in five different years, a nine-member "wetlands inventory team" will work to spot wetlands on farm fields.

Brown said that when the county maps are completed, they will be sent to the respective district conservationist in the county for review.

Story County is the only county where mapping is complete, but 47 other counties are scheduled for completion in 1995.

Review, Appeal

District conservationists will review their county's maps and can change wetlands designations before landowners are notified whether they have wetlands on their properties.

If landowners do not agree with the designations, they can appeal to the state Natural Resources Conservation Service and an inspection will be conducted.

Brown said the national appeal process is being worked out.

Farmers can plant on a wetland if it had crops on it before 1985, but

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— Leroy Brown
state conservationist

they can't install new drainage tile or enlarge or improve an existing system running through the wetland.

If the wetland had not been planted before 1985, farmers can't farm it or they will lose government benefits such as deficiency payments, Conservation Reserve Program payments, Farmers Home loans or federal crop insurance.

Farmers also could face civil or criminal charges if they farm a wetland because they would be violating the Clean Water Act.

"I want to be as friendly to the farmer as possible, but I want to be as friendly to the environment as well," said Brown. "We've been given the job of protecting wetlands. ... They are a natural resource in the state for wildlife and water quality."

Brown said it's a common misconception among farmers that they won't be able to farm wetlands if they've been farming them before 1985.

"But you can't go in and drain that area by tiling it and maintain your USDA benefits," Brown said.

Part of the problem farmers are having comes from confusing jargon.

"So many of those terms are so foreign that we need to do a better job explaining them to the individual," Brown said. "The more landowners know about the process and how it is being carried out, the less resistance there will be. Our local people need to get out with the public and explain this to them."

There will be local meetings set up in each county as the wetland designations are completed, Brown said.

Here is a list of Iowa counties where officials hope to complete wetland inventories this year. Counties are listed in the order in which determinations will be made. Greene, Pocahontas, Kossuth and Webster counties expect to have photo maps completed within the first three months of 1995 and will be moved to the top of the list at that time.

1. Story, 2. Hancock, 3. Polk, 4. Hamilton, 5. Hardin, 6. Franklin, 7. Wright, 8. Winnebago, 9. Jasper, 10. Poweshiek, 11. Warren, 12. Marion, 13. Mahaska, 14. Marshall, 15. Tama, 16. Grundy, 17. Black Hawk, 18. Butler, 19. Bremer, 20. Cerro Gordo, 21. Worth, 22. Floyd, 23. Chickasaw, 24. Mitchell, 25. Howard, 26. Lucas, 27. Monroe, 28. Wapello, 29. Wayne, 30. Appanoose, 31. Davis, 32. Dallas, 33. Guthrie, 34. Boone, 35. Greene, 36. Carroll, 37. Sac, 38. Calhoun, 39. Webster, 40. Humboldt, 41. Pocahontas, 42. Buena Vista, 43. Clay, 44. Palo Alto, 45. Kossuth, 46. Emmet, 47. Dickinson, 48. Osceola.

Officials say the remaining 51 Iowa counties will be mapped in 1996 or later.