

## AGRICULTURE'S BIG TEST

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## Critics: Many farmers still let soil slip away

**It's a fierce debate:** Some say agriculture does a good job of conserving the land; others sharply disagree.

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**New Hampton, Ia.** — On Jasper Avenue in rural Chickasaw County, water nearly black with precious Iowa topsoil poured in torrents off several fields into a roadside ditch during a heavy spring rain.

But the relatively little water that ran from fields operated by Tom Frantzen was almost clear.

Frantzen has voluntarily implemented a series of soil-saving measures on his 320-acre grain and hog operation, even though officials of

the U.S. Soil Conservation Service say he has no highly erodible land and thus is not subject to rules that require compliance with conservation measures.

The law requires farmers to comply with soil-erosion standards in order to be eligible for billions of dollars in federal loans, disaster payments and cash subsidies.

"First, to say that I have no highly erodible land is a big joke," said Frantzen, noting the moderate slopes throughout his farm.

And, pointing to the soil washing off a neighboring field, he questions whether even those listed as having erodible land are complying with the law, noting that private surveys indicate up to almost half of farmers aren't complying with erosion stan-

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## Critics: Soil still slips away on many farms

## SOIL

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dards. And in many cases, he said, the standards are "a farce."

"Agriculture has a choice," Frantzen said, "but I'm afraid we're headed in the wrong direction. We're telling the American people, 'Bring on your controls.'"

## Heart of Dispute

Frantzen's concerns go to the heart of a dispute between conservationists on one side, and the Agriculture Department and some major farm organizations on the other.

Is conservation compliance, a policy initiated in 1985 and reaffirmed by Congress in the 1990 Farm Act, being faithfully executed by the USDA and by agriculture? Are 140 million acres of fragile land being protected, as Congress directed?

And if not, will powerful congressmen carry through with their warning to "use the stick," a threat some interpret as sweeping new regulations on the way farmers operate?

The USDA's Soil Conservation Service says farmers are doing a good job of conserving soil. The SCS has issued statistics showing that 97 percent of farmers are "making good progress" in applying federally approved soil-conservation plans.

And some 50 percent have complied fully with the requirements three years before the deadline, states the SCS.

In Iowa, the SCS reported earlier this year, conservation measures are being "actively applied" on 99.4 percent of tracts involved.

## Service's role: Enforce laws of conservation

From its birth in 1935 under the legendary Hugh Hammond Bennett, the U.S. Soil Conservation Service has viewed itself as a service organization, and farmers as the "clients we serve."

Now, however, Congress has directed the conservation service, or SCS, not only to continue fulfilling its traditional role of helping farmers, but also to enforce conservation laws, which, if violated, could cost producers thousands of dollars in federal subsidies.

"SCS for years had been the guys in the white hats," said Max Schnepf, an official of the Soil and Water Conservation Society at Ankeny. "Now, in being enforcers, are they seen as wearing black hats?"

The burden of continuing traditional programs while administering new conservation compliance laws falls in Iowa on the 470 conservation service employees. Many of them, especially the older ones, "have had a major adjustment to make," said state conservationist Jeffrey Vonk.

"Our field people are still struggling with the regulatory role. But we're coming to grips with our responsibility," he said.

Many SCS officials believe the agency's resources should have been roughly doubled by Congress, but spending has increased only from \$620 million in 1985 to \$762 million last year.

Vonk says SCS was ordered by Congress to develop and put into effect 1.3 million conservation plans (126,700 in Iowa). Full compliance is due by Jan. 1, 1995.

Much initial opposition, Vonk says, came from farmers themselves, many of whom "were telling us that we were being unfair, too hard on farmers. Now, a fair number of our farmers are starting to invest in getting themselves into compliance. They won't be happy watching their neighbors get away with anything."

Vonk asks critics of SCS "to step back and give the process a chance to work. We may have been slow on regulation. But look at what we're asking of agriculture — a major change in philosophy and practice."

— George Anthan

But reports by private experts and from within the USDA, plus the views of some respected professionals, raise questions over the level of farmer compliance — and of government enforcement. Among the evidence:

- A report by the USDA's Office of Inspector General found that the SCS review process to determine farmer compliance with conservation rules was riddled with so many mistakes and inconsistencies that it's impossible to determine whether farmers indeed are complying.

- The Soil and Water Conservation Society, a private group of professional conservationists and farmers, reported this spring that intensive on-farm surveys showed that up to 48 percent of farmers aren't complying.

- The SCS, in an internal report issued in May, warned of "potential fraud" because its field staff had been making "questionable" determinations on farmer compliance. This memorandum cites as evidence the "very low numbers" of farmers SCS employees determined were not "actively applying" the standards.

In 1991 in Iowa, for example, SCS field workers in 70 counties determined that the number of farmers "not actively applying" soil standards was "zero."

But data from the Soil and Water Conservation Society's study indicate that as many as 61,000 Iowa soil conservation plans (some farms have more than one plan) aren't being applied.

Internal SCS documents note that a policy initiated in 1990 by former SCS Chief Wilson Scaling, a political appointee with close ties to conservation opponents in the Texas cotton industry, allowed farmers who simply revised their conservation plans — often delaying implementation — to be considered "actively applying" them.

## Shelby County Farm

When an official of the USDA inspector general's office showed up at a Shelby County farm in June 1990, he found that grass strips at the bottom of sloping fields had not been planted, as required by the farmer's plan.

The plan had been revised to delay implementation, and the SCS listed the farmer as "actively applying" the standards.

In fact, the investigator found that four of 10 Shelby County conservation plans he reviewed were not being applied, even though local SCS officials had listed them as up-to-date.

The Soil and Water Conservation Society, based in Ankeny, studied 320 farmer conservation plans in 15 counties across the country, including two counties in Iowa.

Despite the potential violation rate of 48 percent, none of the farmers involved in these studies had been denied federal benefits.

Nationally during 1991, according to USDA records, 242 producers were denied federal benefits valued at \$1.2 million for violating their soil conservation plans. The average benefit loss was \$9,739. The SCS said that in 21 states, no farmers were in violation of their plans.

In Iowa, four producers were denied a total of \$4,000.

SCS Chief William Richards, in a speech earlier this year to the Alabama Farmers Federation, noted the low violation rate is "not sitting very well with some of the more extreme environmental groups. . . . My answer is that I don't measure our success or how many people are out of compliance."

Kenneth Cook of the Center for Resource Economics, an architect of the 1985 conservation compliance legislation, said, "This is a program where failure to enforce means taxpayers are subsidizing something everyone has agreed should not be subsidized: improper farming practices. So every time they look the other way, that means by definition we are subsidizing soil loss."

**TUESDAY:** How environmental groups are tightening standards.