

AGRICULTURE'S BIG TEST ^{9/6/92}

Farmers weigh impact of rules to conserve soil

Iowans say they do a good job preserving the land considering the economic pressures they face.

By **GEORGE ANTHAN**

THE REGISTER'S WASHINGTON BUREAU CHIEF

Tilden, Neb. — "We're not fools out here," said DeLayne Stone. "We know if we've lost the top inch of our soil down the creek, that's our most fertile ground. Why would we want to let it run down the creek, then turn around next year and buy more fertilizer to try to build it up?"

Stone, who operates a 750-acre grain and hog farm near here, and several of his neighbors gathered recently to discuss how farmers are coping with pressures to meet soil-erosion standards at a time when economic stress raises the specter of losing their livelihood.

Practices that destroy natural resources, they emphasize, are built into agriculture's economic structure as farmers are forced by government policies and by a relentless marketplace to produce more at ever-lower cost.

"The inability of farmers to get a fair price," said John Dittrich, "has a direct impact on how flexible they can be in trying different methods."

"Something New"

Larry Lindahl, who runs a 900-acre grain and hog farm, said, "You can try something new, but with the economic pressure on you, if it doesn't work, you're just out of luck."

Worse than that, the farm program not only doesn't allow you to produce using safer methods, but it swings you the other way because you must get the very maximum production," Lindahl said.

Farmers interviewed here and in

Iowa insist, though, that they have been good stewards of the land.

The abusers usually are other, often bigger, farmers, absentee landlords and corporate-owned operations, they say.

James Gulliford, director of the Iowa Division of Soil Conservation, a state agency, said farmers "believe there's a significant erosion problem but that 'my farm is fine.'"

React Negatively

Dave Haig, who farms near Decorah, Ia., and is president of the Winneshiek County Farm Bureau, said he and most farmers react negatively to any hint of coercion from the federal government, noting that "private property rights are guaranteed by the Constitution."

Haig, who rotates crops and keeps his hillsides planted to alfalfa to hold the soil — in keeping with the conservation measures installed decades ago by his father — says "the majority of farmers will try to comply. They will make an honest effort."

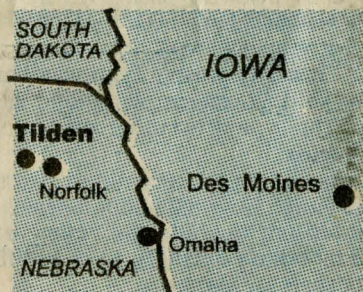
Yet, he agrees, "Some farmers aren't doing a good job. It makes my skin crawl when I drive around

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THE REGISTER

TILDEN

SEVERAL LOCAL FARMERS gathered at Tilden recently to discuss how they are coping with the pressures to meet soil-erosion standards.



Farmers weigh conservation rules

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and see steep hillsides with no grassy buffer strips" to keep soil from washing away.

Then, admits Haig, he takes delight in knowing some farmers might be forced to adopt conservation practices.

"It almost tickles my funny bone to see these guys scrambling to get their farm (conservation) plans approved."

In Tilden, Keith Dittrich said, "I would definitely say there are some farmers who deserve to have someone come along and say, 'This isn't right. You guys are doing things you shouldn't be doing, like plowing up hills and triple disking.'"

Arland Mozer, who runs a 750-acre diversified grain and livestock farm near Tilden, agreed. "I don't like my ground to blow," he said. "I would say I'm ahead of the conservation plan."

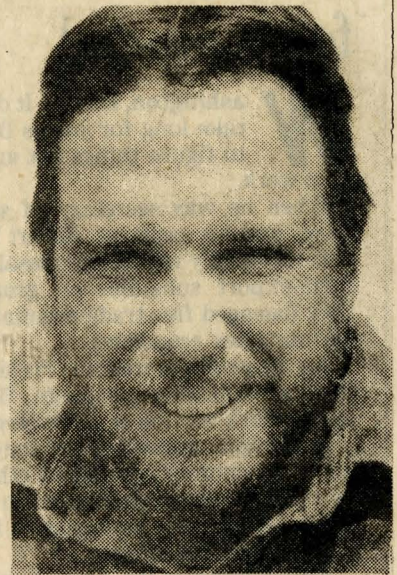
"Remove Farmers"

John Dittrich, who operates 1,000 acres of corn and soybeans, said, "Our government policies mean we continue to remove farmers, and as we remove farmers, we force the remaining ones to take up the slack with more 'efficient' methods."

"Congress is quite willing to regulate, regulate, regulate and crimp our ability to make a living while at the same time they are willing to lower our prices. Yet, I also feel conservation compliance now is economically mandatory" since federal farm-program payments are an important part of a farmer's income.

"The answer to our problems out here is to take a holistic view of farm policy, a view that includes economics and environment, and considers people as another of the resources."

"Everyone is concerned about the erosion of the land, but nobody seems concerned about the erosion of spirit and the erosion of population out here. And it is maddening to watch that, this lack of concern about the people," Dittrich added.



John Dittrich

"Take a holistic view"

Randy Nowotny, who farms near Victor, Ia., said, "I think most of us are very concerned about the environment. We have to live out here, and it's in our best interests not to stress the environment any more than it is."

"I do see abuses around, especially on larger farms. A pair of guys near here bought a piece of highly erodible land, including a steep hill, and they plowed it straight up and down. If I did that, all my dirt would be in my pond."

Tom Frantzen, who farms near Decorah, Ia. and is president of Practical Farmers of Iowa, a group that emphasizes using fewer chemicals and less fertilizer, said of conservation compliance: "I think most farmers who are going along are doing so because federal subsidies have been very lucrative and they don't want to lose future benefits."

Farmer Survey

A survey by the Soil and Water Conservation Society of Ankeny, Ia., indicates some 65 percent of farmers agree with conservation compliance. About 19 percent said they disagree with the policy, but 25 percent said their neighbors oppose it.

Frantzen agreed with some farmers who say conservation standards will be abandoned by many producers if the economic incentive — federal subsidies — continues to be reduced by a financially strapped government.

This, Frantzen said, represents "a horrible danger for agriculture. If I say I'm an environmentalist and I'm not, then I lose credibility. Agriculture had better shut up. Don't push one thing and do something else."

"It's crazy, impossible to believe that our general society won't have its say in these matters, and it's suicidal for agriculture politically to ig-