

Photo by LARRY MAY



Cal Cox, Pottawatomie County conservationist, looks at terrace construction near Underwood. Terraces are the dark soil in the background.

Conservation key word for '80s

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This could be the year the Iowa Legislature puts its foot down on the soil conservation issue.

The situation looks bad: Iowa farms are losing, on average, about 10 tons of soil per acre each year, or about twice what can be replenished naturally. Over the last 100 years, half of the state's 16-inch layer of rich topsoil has eroded away. And only about a third of the state's 22 million acres of cropland is adequately protected against further losses to wind, water and intensive farming practices.

The sobering facts seem finally to have hit home, and soil conservation seems destined to be a major Iowa issue in the coming decade.

"I'm walking on air," said state

Senator Forrest "Frosty" Schwengels, a Fairfield Republican and the driving force behind a tough new conservation measure that will come before the 1980 General Assembly. "I had no idea that we would get this much support in the hearings" held around the state last fall, in which the public was invited to comment on suggestions to better preserve the soil.

Even Schwengels' Senate rival on some of the harsher points of his program, Senator Elizabeth Miller, a Marshalltown Republican, admits something has to be done.

"We're at the place where if we think about our future generations, we have to think about conserving the soil," Miller said recently. She insists

that farmers are becoming increasingly aware of their soil losses and how to curb them. "Everyone's talking about it," she said.

Even so, the approach recommended by a legislative panel that met during the interim session is sure to raise some red flags at the Statehouse soon.

The subcommittee wants to add up to 75 technical assistants to the state payroll over the next five years. The new employees would develop "conservation folders" for every farm in the state, including a soil map of the area, its soil losses and other relevant information.

Each farmer would then have five years to get his soil losses down to less than twice the amount Mother Nature can restore. If for three years in a row the area's soil conservation district commissioners find him exceeding that limit, the farmer would be ordered by the state to follow a program set out for him.

The way the proposed bill is now written, no such order could go out until 1993, or until at least five years after a conservation folder is developed for the farm in question.

It's a hard-nosed approach to an issue that has, until recently, been

handled in an easy-going fashion. Since 1973, adjoining property owners have been able to bring complaints against their neighbors if they thought their neighbor's sloppy cultivation habits were damaging their land.

Understandably, farmers have been reluctant to turn on their neighbors. Even so, the state has received more than 450 complaints as a result of the program.

The get-tough approach of the legislative subcommittee would give soil conservation district commissioners the authority to bring offenders into line with proper soil management practices. According to the panel's final report, the commissioners would need only "reasonable grounds to believe that excessive soil erosion is occurring on that land" before they could inspect, and cite the farm if their suspicions bore out.

The Iowa Farm Bureau is dead-set against aspects of the soil conservation bill that turn the state into a soil loss watchdog. Farm Bureau would like to see farmers informed of problems on their land and assistance made available in effecting a remedy. But the group is opposed to requiring farmers to take specific action by a certain date.

Others think it's already too late to arrest the suicidal depletion of some of the nation's — and world's — finest soils, and that stricter measures are necessary.

"There's an idea that runs rampant that if I have a deed to a piece of property, it's mine and mine alone," said Dale Cochran, a Democratic state representative from Eagle Grove. "Well, that's not true, because land is a God-given natural resource. It's there for the good of all, not the exploitation of the few."

Debate on the issue should be heated. There's a widespread belief that farmers, given the proper information and technical aid, will take steps to save their soil. After all, those people say, it's their livelihood they're protecting.

Skeptics argue that farmers have had 40 years or more to do something about soil losses, and erosion continues at an alarming rate.

Another sore point of the proposed legislation is the financial commitment it implies. The Soil Conservation Department estimates it could use about \$12 million next year to bring on staff 15 new technicians and to pay the state's share of the cost of constructing permanent conservation practices such as grass waterways and terraces, and other expenses. The \$12 million compares to a \$5 million conservation budget last year.

Even supporters of the program fear Gov. Robert Ray will balk at the more than two-fold budget increase.