

BUSINESS

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Inside on Page 7S

MORE THAN ANY OTHER STATE

750 Iowa farmers sign up in wetlands program

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A federal program that will pay farmers to restore wetlands on their fields appears to be a hit in Iowa.

A report released Tuesday by the U.S. Department of Agriculture said 750 Iowa farmers have indicated they want to participate in the Wetlands Reserve Program, designed to pay farmers "fair market value" for land restored to a marsh. The number of farmers in

Iowa was far higher than in any of the other eight states in the federal government's pilot program.

However, farmers in three other states — Louisiana, Mississippi and California — indicated they wanted to enroll more land than Iowa's 45,000-acre total. Louisiana had the largest number of acres signed into the program, with 119,000.

In all, farmers in the nine test states signed intentions to enter 466,000 acres in the government's wetland restoration program. But only about a-tenth of that total,

50,000 acres, will actually be entered into the program this year, with the \$46.6 million available to operate the pilot program, the USDA said. The government will choose the land entered into the Wetlands Reserve by accepting bids from farmers as it does in the Conservation Reserve Program.

'93 Financing in Doubt

The department plans to operate the pilot wetlands program this year even though the next fiscal year's financing for the Wetlands Reserve is in doubt. The House of

Representatives last month axed the financing for fiscal 1993, but Agriculture Secretary Edward Madigan said he plans to push the Senate to restore financing.

The wetland program's popularity among Iowa farmers was cheered by environmental and agricultural leaders Tuesday. "It's much higher than I would have expected. I'm pleasantly surprised," said Ben Van Gundy, wetlands program director at the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation.

"It's an indication that there is a great deal of interest in this wet-

lands program," said Merlin Plagge, president of the Iowa Farm Bureau. The program is popular because it's a way for farmers to deal with pieces of land that are difficult to farm, he said.

Under the Wetlands Reserve, farmers would still own the land entered into the program and control access to it. But the government would buy an easement to ensure the land would remain a wetland. Priority will be given to

WETLAND Please turn to Page 7S

750 Iowans sign up land for wetlands

WETLAND

Continued from Page 8S

farmers who agree to restore wetlands on their farms forever.

So far, farmers have simply signaled their intentions to enter the Wetlands Reserve. Conservation agencies will work with those farmers to develop wetland restoration plans and farmers will use those plans to make their bids. However, the farmers who have signed into program have no obligation to make a bid.

If a farmer does make a bid and it is accepted, the government will pay 75 percent of the cost of restoring the wetland.

Interest in the program appeared to be spread across Iowa, with the largest sign-ups in southern and east-central counties, according to figures by the Iowa Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service. However, the program does not appear to have been popular in several north-central counties, where environmentalists had hoped to restore a large wetlands area that was drained decades ago.

Wayne County, on the Missouri border, had the highest total of acres signed into the program, at 2,441. It was followed by Iowa, Appanoose, Washington and Benton counties. Iowa County had the largest number of farmers signed into the program, with 37.