

Farmers envision tougher land rules

An Iowa farm leader says an effort will be made to extend environmental laws to agriculture.

By GEORGE ANTHAN

THE REGISTER'S WASHINGTON BUREAU CHIEF

Washington, D.C. — Dean Kleckner of Rudd, Ia., and Robert Warrick of Meadow Grove, Neb., two grain and hog farmers whose views on U.S. agriculture's impact on the environment differ widely, agree on one thing: Government regulations loom.

Kleckner is president of the American Farm Bureau Federation, the largest, most powerful and most conservative farm organization. Warrick heads the agriculture committee of the Sierra Club, a leading national environmental group.

Kleckner expects a major challenge for U.S. agriculture in the 1990s will be to stave off efforts by government to constrain private-property rights. He especially fears "how-to-farm" regulations aimed at cutting soil erosion and water pollution.

He sees little hope that agriculture can find common ground with "radical" environmentalists whose demands he believes will force family farms to give way to large operations that "can afford lawyers and accountants" needed to challenge federal rules.

Warrick contends agriculture's responsibility to preserve the nation's natural resources and to minimize harmful pollution is no less than any other industry. He says farmers must stop viewing environmental and conservation activists as the enemy. Both groups must join and search for practical ways to produce food and fiber efficiently while preserving the vital natural-resource base, he says.

Extend Laws

Kleckner says despite the major advances farmers have made in reducing soil losses, he believes "a very serious effort" will be made during this decade to extend environmental laws to agriculture.

"There is a strong environmental feeling in the country," he concedes, "even with a Republican administration. They want the country to be pure and pristine, as when Columbus discovered America."

Kleckner and the Farm Bureau have begun fighting a sort of property-rights holding action, making a major issue of federal rules limiting

AGRICULTURE'S BIG TEST

Farmers expect new regulation

SOIL

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conversion of wetlands to agricultural or other commercial uses.

Kleckner fears there will be attempts by an increasingly urban-oriented Congress in the middle and late 1990s to enact a "super land-use control plan" modeled on an existing law: the Coastal Zone Act. That legislation requires 24 states bordering U.S. coastal waters to establish controls on pollution from soil erosion, hog, cattle, poultry and dairy operations, and from use of farm chemicals and fertilizer.

The wetlands situation is closely tied to the issue of expansion of the

One in a series

Coastal Zone Act to cover the entire country, Kleckner says. "They are both property-rights issues."

"Government just continues to assault private property."

Besides, says Kleckner, "we're getting better" on environmental protection. "Farmers are reducing soil erosion, reducing fertilizers, reducing pesticides."

Kleckner travels the country telling farmers to "speak up for your industry."

"Farmers and ranchers must do a better job explaining our efforts to protect the environment," he says. "We are farming better and cheaper."

Warrick was a leader in a successful 1985 battle on the House floor to amend the Farm Act to include a requirement that farmers adhere to soil-conservation standards to qualify for federal subsidies.

"The Farm Bureau was going door-to-door in the House office buildings fighting conservation compliance," said Warrick. "Now, they have exploited the wetlands issue, telling farmers they'd be denied certain practices, which is a bunch of crap."

Warrick said the Farm Bureau "takes an issue and blows it up out of context and inflames it. Then, the public gets mad because they think farmers are getting away with stuff."

Public anger over agricultural practices, Warrick believes, is only just below the surface and could erupt in the form of congressional action if conservation compliance is seen as not working.

"Agriculture has no less responsibility than any other business insofar as pollution is concerned," he says, "especially since it's a business that uses basic resources."

"Instead of being defensive, we should work with people and find solutions."

Kleckner and the Farm Bureau agree with the USDA that more than 99 percent of farmers are making reasonable progress in cutting ero-



Kleckner
Rudd farmer



Warrick
Nebraskan

sion under the conservation compliance program. Kleckner says farmers "are willing to pursue excellence in conservation."

Warrick believes the statistics from some private studies that indicate almost half of farmers are failing to meet erosion standards established under their USDA-approved conservation plans.

Diverse voices speak out on regulation of farming

Washington, D.C. — Throughout American agriculture, respected voices are being heard on the issue of regulation of environmentally sensitive farming practices.

Here are some of those often diverse views:

• Norm Berg, last professional chief of the USDA's Soil Conservation Service: "If the conservation compliance program (in which farmers must adhere to erosion standards to be eligible for federal subsidies) doesn't work, there will be a more regulatory approach. If it does work, we will have saved more soil than ever in history."

• John Block, former secretary of agriculture: "I think agriculture is being extremely responsible on conservation compliance, which I put into motion. My staff would tell me not to even bring it up because it was not popular in farm country, but I always felt that if farmers receive government payments, they should meet some minimum conservation standards."

"But you can't satisfy (environmentalists). Some farmers may be slow to comply, sure. But, hell, some farmers are slow to get the corn planted in the spring. I don't think agriculture deserves the criticism environmentalists are leveling. This program was not shoved down our throats, and the environmentalists know that. We opened the door and said this is the right thing to do. I've always been a little annoyed at their arrogance."

• John Pesek, Iowa State University agronomist who headed the National Academy of Sciences task force on sustainable agriculture: "Congress will tell agriculture, 'If you don't do it, we'll do it for you.'"

"You're dealing with a lot of farmers who've never practiced conservation and who dislike practicing conservation. I don't know why they have that mindset."

He said large operations are especially abusive toward the land. "They look at agriculture as another type of business. They're very, very much less romantic about it than many members of the public."

But Kleckner says, "We who own the land and earn our living from the land... do love the land. We want to leave the land improved for the next generation, preferably our own offspring who have been raised on the property."

WEDNESDAY: How farm groups react to the prospect of regulation. Also, the views of some respected leaders in agriculture and conservation on the possibility of environmental rules.

They could write the rules, telling a farmer, "That's all you're going to plant, period."

• Richard Gady, a vice president of ConAgra Inc.: "Environmental issues are huge... That train has left. We might as well jump on it and try to steer it."

• Rusty Areias, dairy farmer and chairman of the California State Assembly Committee on Agriculture: "The regulatory picture is grim... I believe that it will be a long and painful decade for farmers... unless our industry takes charge of its future."

• Ralph Grossi, president of American Farmland Trust: "Many farm groups aren't coming forth with positive programs. What are the alternatives to regulation? Put them forward. There is a reservoir of good will for farmers among members of the public, but it's shrinking. We've got to stand up and say, 'Yes, we have a problem.'"

• Rep. Thomas Ewing, R-Ill.: "We want administration of this law (conservation compliance) to be farmer-friendly."

• Duane Sand, Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation: "In my opinion, it (congressional efforts to impose environmental regulation of farm practices) is a given... and it won't be acceptable to agriculture. The potential is for all-out regulation."

• William Richards, political appointee who serves as chief of the Soil Conservation Service: "Conservation compliance is for real. We will be sensitive to economic realities as well as environmental responsibilities. This can be a win-win situation for farmers and for society."

— George Anthan