

Lag in flood aid spurs Branstad to use profanity during meeting

'Is it the policy of the federal government to make the whole goddamn upper Midwest a wetland?' Branstad fumes.

By JONATHAN ROOS
REGISTER STAFF WRITER

Gov. Terry Branstad rarely uses profanity in public. But Thursday the governor swore during a moment of anger at a meeting of state and federal officials to discuss flood-relief efforts in Iowa.

"Is it the policy of the federal government to make the whole goddamn upper Midwest a wetland?" the governor asked no one in particular

after hearing that federal money for repairs to flood-damaged levees was being held up in Washington, D.C.

Later in the meeting, after representatives of the U.S. Soil Conservation Service clarified the situation, Branstad simmered down.

"Maybe I jumped a little bit to a conclusion based on my past experience with OMB," said Branstad, referring to the Office of Management and Budget, an agency that keeps an eye on the federal purse strings for the president.

Nine States

The OMB has not yet released \$25 million to the SCS for levee reconstruction and other flood repairs in nine Midwestern states, including Iowa.

In addition, officials in Washing-

ton are examining the definition of just what a levee is. They want to clarify the difference between flood-control and water drainage, officials said.

Branstad looked puzzled. His top aide, David Roederer, cracked open a dictionary. But by the end of the meeting, cooperation had replaced consternation.

The governor agreed to send a letter to Washington to urge release of the \$25 million, and SCS officials said that would be helpful.

Eroded Banks

The additional money would be available not only for levee repairs in rural areas but also to stabilize eroded stream banks, protect roads

BRANSTAD Please turn to Page 6A

Branstad loses his temper in flood talks

BRANSTAD

Continued from Page 1A

and bridges along stream banks, clean drainage ditches and remove flood debris.

The SCS already has been authorized to spend \$6.3 million, and officials said an additional \$3 million or more would be given the agency next week.

"The money hasn't dried up yet. We'll get additional money," said Jeff Vonk, state conservationist for the conservation service.

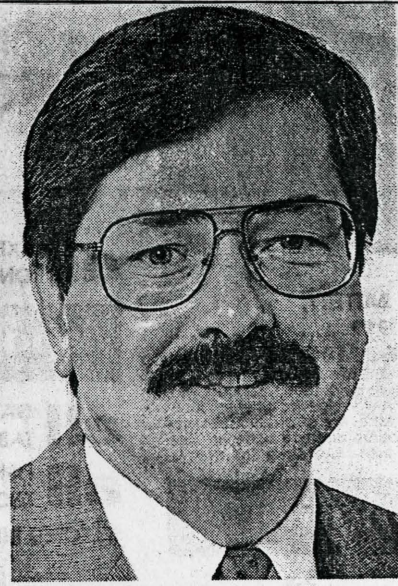
However, Vonk and other officials said that the total amount of federal aid would fall short of covering all the damage that has been reported.

One option is to ask Congress to appropriate more money for flood relief.

Damage Reports

The SCS in Iowa has received 895 flood damage reports, which list damages totaling \$27.6 million. Damage to levees alone is about \$8 million, although not all of that damage will be eligible for compensation.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Emergency Management Agency also are paying for repairs to damaged levees, which exceed 100 in Iowa. The Corps is primarily responsible for repairs to



Gov. Terry Branstad
Will send letter

public levees along major rivers.

Branstad said it is critical that levee repairs be made in preparation for potentially serious flooding next spring.

Federal officials said levees that protect the public infrastructure or the health and safety of people will receive the highest priority. Levees that protect farmland only are a lower priority.

Congress and the Clinton administration are reviewing flood-control strategies, including alternatives to the rebuilding of levees in rural areas. One approach would be to allow some farmland in flood-prone areas to revert to wetlands.

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