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State, federal programs support soil conservation

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the last in a four-part series)

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(IDPA)—Two government cost-sharing programs, which absorb 50 per cent of the landowner's initial expenses of using conservation practices, operate to help prevent topsoil erosion in Iowa.

But at the present rate of funding, it will take more than 100 years to adequately protect the soil, said William Brune, state conservationist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service.

Iowa was the first state to initiate its own cost-sharing program to assist the state's landowners.

The Iowa Soil Conservation Service program—recommended by Gov. Robert Ray and funded by the Iowa Legislature—began in 1973 with a budget of \$1.5 million and has increased to \$4 million in the current fiscal year.

The federal government also distributes cost-sharing funds through the Agricultural Conservation Program (formerly known as the Rural Environmental Assistance Program and Rural Environmental Conservation Program), but despite spiraling conservation costs, Iowa's portion today is \$2 million less than the 1960 allocation of cost-sharing funds. In that year, \$9,680,000 was distributed among Iowa farmers while the 1977 program year (Oct. 1976-Dec. 1977) total is \$7,489,000.

The amount of federal cost-sharing monies given Iowa is determined by the secretary of agriculture after the national budget has been approved by Congress. The state's ACP then distributes various sums to the counties, according to individual county needs and severity of its erosion problems.

"For example, the need is greater in those counties where the terrain is much rougher," said Bill White ACP specialist. "More money is distributed to those counties such as Woodbury, Clayton and Allamakee."

ACP has earmarked \$96,000 of its 1977 funds for erosion-plagued Woodbury County and \$100,000 each for Jasper, Ringgold and Wayne counties. Pottawattamie County, the only county divided into two sections for cost-sharing distribution, will receive \$110,000—the largest total one county will get this year. East Pottawattamie will receive \$57,000 and the western section \$53,000.

The counties then award these cost-sharing monies to farmers who have applied for assistance in implementing permanent conservation programs. A local board of elected citizens decided which landowners would best benefit from

the funding.

Farmer Vincent Willey of Onawa said the method by which the money is allocated to the landowners is a good one.

"We're the ones (county citizens) who determine how that money is used," Willey said. "The federal government doesn't say where the money must go, but rather the local people do it."

But Willey said the current funds are not sufficient, a common view voiced by farmers and conservation officials.

"We always feel we need more money, because of increased costs of conservation," said White. "There still is a lot of land that needs treatment."

Only one-third of Iowa's land is considered adequately protected against erosion, and Brune estimated that a total of \$2 billion is needed to protect the rest of Iowa's land from the soil loss.

"Cost-sharing programs on the federal level must be continued and strengthened," said William Greiner, director of Iowa's Soil Conservation Service. "Serious problems have resulted in the past due to the instability of funding of the federal cost-share program."

Several conservation officials said recent administrations have tried to drastically reduce cost-sharing monies available to farmers.

Richard Nixon terminated the funding when he impounded the monies in December 1972 (when the program was known as the Rural Environmental Assistance Program), but a United States District Court reinstated the program the following February. President Ford also tried to end cost-sharing appropriations in December 1974, when the program was labeled the Rural Environmental Conservation Program.

"There has been a constant battle between the President and Congress on conservation funds," said Gene Maahs of Iowa Farm Bureau.

"The administration keeps trying to cut cost-sharing money, but Congress prevents it," said Brune.

Iowa's congressional members are included among those leaders who annually override the administration's recommended cuts in the cost-sharing budget.

The most recent heavy cut in Iowa's federal cost-sharing monies was in the 1976 program year when \$6,915,000 was allotted the state by the Ford administration. That was a cut from \$8,215,815 in 1975.

Throughout his campaign, President-elect Jimmy Carter was critical of Ford's conservation policies, but Carter has not revealed what steps he will take concerning the federal cost-sharing program.

Most conservation officials feel the federal program, to be effective, must be stabilized with increased funds.

"It has been an off-again, on-again program," said Greiner. "No one is ever certain if there will be a program a year from now, or if there is, what amount of funds will be available."

"Largely due to the instability of federal cost-share funds, Iowa developed its own cost-share program with state funds in 1973," Greiner added.

The state money is distributed in much the same way as the federal funds. The locally elected county officials decide which farmers should be granted the monies, with \$2,500 the maximum one landowner can receive annually.

The Iowa Soil Conservation Service has grown, mainly because of support from Governor Ray and bipartisan members of the Iowa Legislature, said Greiner.

But even with additional state monies, almost 40 per cent of those farmers applying for state aid have been denied funds.

"More than 10,000 landowners requested financial assistance from the state during July 1, 1973, and December 31, 1975, but only 6,115 were appropriated cost-sharing monies," said Greiner. "The rest were not approved due to lack of funds."

Verle Hardy, a Wapello County farmer, said: "Both the state and federal government will have to take a closer look at the (conservation) problems. If production stays up and we continue to use the export of grain as a major tool with other countries... more money will need to be appropriated to preserve the soil."

A major cause of increased erosion on Iowa's land in recent years relates to the federal government's demand for all-out production of soybeans and corn, said Brune. Farmers now are row-cropping lands they formerly rotated with plantings of grass, oats, alfalfa, hay or legumes. These crops "rest" the soil, prevent erosion and allow the topsoil to replenish itself with nitrogen and other valuable minerals and nutrients.

"Fence-row to fence-row farming, as it's been called, can be extremely damaging to the soil resource if it's not protected," Brune said.

"We've lost 122 million acres of hayland since 1960 and we've lost 2.4 million acres of oats. Both oats and hay, of course, protect the soil," said Brune. "In the past 15 years in Iowa we've had a 30 per cent increase in rowcropping. Most of this is soybean land, which is quite susceptible to both wind and water erosion."

Conservation officials and farmers feel a boost in cost-sharing funds would secure more conservation practices among landowners.

"I'm sure anytime cost-sharing funds are available, people are more apt to do things," said farmer Donald Hood of Bode. "More money available would put more conservation into effect."

"Increases in the federal cost-sharing program would be a real incentive," added Min Amemiya, Iowa State University extension agronomist.

While many are pleased with the state program, they feel the federal government is placing too much responsibility on Iowa and its farmers. The federal government's funds are just twice as the state's cost-sharing budget.

"The base of it has to be federally financed," said Elmer (Dutch) Vermeer, administrative assistant to Governor Ray.

Willey, the Onawa farmer, said funding was one of the biggest problems hampering further development of conservation.

"The obligation is beyond the farmer himself," he said. "It is part of society's problem."