

10/16/97 WCCO COURIER

Conservation program receives boost

By JONATHAN LIFLAND
Courier/Medill News Service

WASHINGTON

The cost of conservation is high in Iowa, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture is asking local landowners whether it is a price they're willing to pay.

"There's benefits other than crops," said Dan Jordan, owner of Jordan Nursery in Cedar Falls. He has 57 acres in the Conservation Reserve Program, a federal program that offers money to landowners willing to let nature take its course on their property.

Jordan and a handful of others applied for the program Tuesday in Waterloo, the day it was reopened for applications.

It was the first opening since March, when a record 250,000 people applied nationally over the four-week period, offering more than 23 million acres. A similar offer in 1996 resulted in a glut of applications, and 7.1 million acres were rejected.

"I could make more money putting

it back in crops," Jordan said. "(But) I guess I've got a thing about wildlife."

Jordan is one of 34,831 property owners who hold contracts in Iowa and keep "environmentally sensitive" land untilled and unplanted for 10- or 15-year terms. They get an average of a little more than \$80 per acre annually for 1.3 million acres in the state, based on the environmental usefulness and value of the land. The nationwide average is just over \$49 per acre, accounting for \$1.8 billion in payments last year.

Black Hawk County land is paid more than Iowa's average at \$95 an acre, with 66 acres registered in the conservation program, according to the department. Bremer County has 374 acres at \$90 an acre, while Fayette County has 1,550 acres worth \$100 each. Scott County gets Iowa's highest payment at \$110 annually per acre.

Up to 10 million acres will be accepted nationally in this 16th sign-up period, to meet the maximum of

36.4 million acres, the department said.

Ultimately the decision to enroll land is an economic one. Currently, corn growers can gross more than \$300 per acre, and for some the program offers an incentive to enroll their poorest land.

"If you have ground that doesn't produce," said Ed Wiederstein, president of the Iowa Farm Bureau and a farmer from Audubon, "that would be ground you'd want to apply with. Marginal ground, that's what (the program) is all about."

Many will choose not to enroll. "These last few years have been good for the farmer. If he'd be economically better by enrolling, he'll do it," Wiederstein said.

"Crop prices are fairly strong and people will want to take advantage by planting all their land," said Jim Peterson, an Agriculture Department spokesman. "Because people get paid more for their crops, land values are higher and it's harder to get into the program."