

Conference focuses on soil, water conservation

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Black Hawk County farmers must wait until next winter to find out if part of their farm will be determined a wetland, a U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service official said Thursday.

A federal logjam over wetlands determination finally broke last fall, getting the process moving after approximately a year of delays.

However, the determination of wetlands takes time, said Mike Webster, district conservationist for the NRCS, formerly the U.S. Soil Conservation Service.

"Black Hawk County is set to be done some time late this summer or early next fall," Webster said. "The earliest a notice would be sent to landowners is sometime this winter."

The need for a formal ruling on what constitutes a wetland arises from "Swampbuster" provisions of the 1985

Farm Bill. Under the law, producers who farm or alter wetlands could lose their eligibility for federal farm programs.

A previous designation process was halted a year ago when the four federal agencies involved in the process found they had different criteria for what constitutes a wetland. The agencies ironed out their differences this year and signed an agreement in August.

Webster said the first step in determining wetlands will be a review of five years of aerial photographs by a state NRCS team to pick out potential wetland areas.

The team deliberately includes wet and dry years to make a more accurate interpretation than a single site visit would allow. It also saves time, Webster said.

Once likely wetlands are picked out, the local NRCS office will gather more information before making a determination, he said. After a deci-

sion is made, landowners may appeal.

If farmers want to work on an area that might be a wetland, they may request an earlier determination, Webster said.

Webster noted that many rumors about restrictions on farming wetlands may not be true. For example:

■ If a farmer did not alter a wetland after the 1985 Farm Bill was enacted, he may continue to farm the land as he has in the past.

■ Drainage cannot be improved on wetlands without jeopardizing federal crop benefits; drainage can be improved on areas completely drained before 1985; drainage can be *maintained* on areas partly altered before 1985.

Webster spoke at the Urban Soil & Water Issues Conference Thursday, sponsored by the Black Hawk Soil and Water Conservation District and the NRCS.