

Mighty water leaves its mark on farmers' fields

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Forget about failed dikes and flooded towns for a minute. Even the smallest streams and trickles have shown water's inexorable power to go where it wants this spring.

Beneath a cosmetic layer of growing crops, rushing water has left wide scars on farmers' fields and caused millions of dollars in damage to structures designed to hold it back, according to state conservation workers.

"We've had farmers who terraced their ground. It just blew out their intake pipes and even washed out the terraces," said Marilyn Schuchhardt, a program assistant with the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service in Black Hawk County. "The rain just came too hard and too fast."

If you don't believe the water's power, just ask Garry and Don Dufel, who own land near Hudson.

In a flat field where corn was seeded, the Dufels now have a 25-foot-wide streambed that flows down to Black Hawk Creek. Where water burst through a fence row, the ditch is 5 feet deep.

"Once it makes a path, then it's hard to stop," said Garry Dufel.

Dufel estimated that the new ditch washed out approximately 2 acres of corn, and contractors have said it will cost about \$12,000 to fix.

"You'd be surprised how many farmers are going to get out in the fields and find these," Dufel said.

As a preliminary figure, the Soil Conservation Service

Erosion damage

Estimated damage to farmers' terraces and waterways in Northeast Iowa counties, as of July 12.

Black Hawk	\$207,000
Bremer	44,000
Buchanan	54,000
Butler	208,000
Chickasaw	90,000
Fayette	235,000
Floyd	0
Franklin	310,000
Grundy	100,000
Hardin	110,000
Howard	180,000
Tama	250,000
Winnieshiek	61,000
Total	1.85 million

Source: U.S. Soil Conservation Service

COURIER graphic

those structures' useful life, said Jerry Muff, district conservationist for the Fayette County SCS.

The damage will be difficult to fix without additional federal money, Webster said. The Black Hawk County SCS already had earmarked 90 percent of its state cost-share money by July, he said.

"In a disaster year like this, the demand for money is going to be so great that we won't be able to handle it," he said.

Congress on Friday approved \$20 million for field

for Iowa has estimated between \$12 million and \$15 million in damage to waterways and terraces alone.

In Black Hawk County, the conservative damage estimate is \$207,000, according to the SCS.

Much of the reported damage occurred on new waterways and terraces that were built recently to comply with federal conservation mandates, said Mike Webster, district conservationist for the Black Hawk County SCS.

Grass grown on the new projects had little time to establish roots. Without a strong cover crop, waterways and terraces were more susceptible to erosion, Webster said.

"The newly constructed waterways that didn't have a lot of grass growing really washed out," Webster said.

But silt that flowed onto fields, plugged drain pipes and filled the space behind terraces may have caused more damage by shortening

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RYAN GUTZ/Courier staff photographer

Rain water burst through a 5-foot high fencerow this spring to cut a 25-foot-wide drainage scar through the Hudson corn field of Garry, left, and Don Dufel.

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repairs across the country. Farmers must pay for roughly one-third of such repairs, while the federal money will cover the remainder, according to Tom Grau, Iowa ASCS executive director.

Grau said he hopes banks would make it possible for farmers to make repairs this year, even though farm profits are likely to be small given late planting dates and cool weather.

"I would hope the lenders would work with (farmers)," Grau said. "You're talking about damage to their means of production out there."

Even if money is available, weather may cause more problems, according to John Miller, who farms near Cedar Falls. New grass crops must be planted soon in damaged waterways to provide any protection through the winter and next spring, Miller said.

"One of the problems is it dries on the surface but below it's still very wet," Miller said. "If we don't get it in the next few weeks, we'll really have trouble."

Most observers agreed that the damage would have been worse this spring without the recent popularity of conservation tillage practices.

"We had some bad erosion, but without the big increase in ridge till

and no till, it would have been a lot worse," Webster said.

Miller added that the heavy rain this year shows the limits of conservation tillage and the need for well-established terraces and waterways to control heavy runoff.

"A year like this certainly shows that you may be able to hold down your siltation to permissible limits (with conservation tillage), but you won't be able to handle the volume of water," he said.

This year also illustrates the downside of no-till, which tends to keep more moisture near the roots of plants than conventional tillage, according to Waterloo farmer Jim Sage. But Sage said farmers should take a look at the benefits in a bad year before abandoning no-till altogether.

"This year may discourage some people, but we need to think over the lifetime of farming," Sage said. "If you're not losing that soil, you're gaining over the long run."