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10-26-92 W100 Couriers

# USDA plans water quality survey

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Hoping to prove farmers are doing their part to boost water quality, the U.S. Department of Agriculture plans to survey 900 farmers in Iowa and Minnesota this winter on chemical and pesticide use.

"This is a very important study," said Howard Holden, deputy statistician for Iowa's Agricultural Statistics Department. "It will help dispel the attitude that farmers are to blame for water quality."

Holden said he hopes the study will lend hard numbers to the impressions agriculture experts bat around. "Right now everybody's working off 'I think,' " he said.

The random surveys will be sent in November and December to 900 farmers in the central Iowa and Illinois Basin, which extends from south-central Minnesota through southeast Iowa into central Illinois. Other river basins in this year's study are the Upper Snake Basin in Idaho, the southern Georgia Basin and the Virginia-North Carolina Basin.

The survey of the four river basins will cost \$938,500. Results will be completed next summer.

The surveys will question farmers about their plowing and planting practices during the last three years. Some farmers are still completing conventional tillage practices, while many have switched to low- or no-till practices.

The survey also will ask farmers which chemicals they have used on fields and how much.

Matching that data to results from water quality tests, researchers will learn which agricultural chemicals are draining into the water table and how high the levels are, Holden said.

Surveys already completed show the use of pesticides is dropping, Holden said. In 1985, atrazine, a broad-based weed killer, was used at a rate of 2.8 pounds per acre. By 1990, the rate had dropped to .93 pounds per acre.

A 1990 Iowa law limited atrazine use to 3 pounds per acre. Fields where the water table was close to the surface, or the soil extremely porous, were deemed

pesticide management areas and atrazine use limited to 1.5 pounds per acre.

Atrazine causes cancer in humans and has drawn attention because it doesn't break down easily and has turned up in tests of rain water, he said.

The surveys are part of a national program started in 1989 to test the nation's water supply. The program grew out of increasing pressure from environmental groups to identify how farmers affect nature, Holden said.

Last year, surveys were sent to farmers in the Platte River Basin in Nebraska, central and south-central Indiana, eastern Washington and south-central Pennsylvania. Preliminary results from those surveys haven't been compiled.

Farmers in other river basins will be surveyed in the future.

In addition to the USDA, the United States Geological Service, the Soil Conservation Service, the Economic Research Service and the National Agricultural Statistics Service also are involved in the study.