

Landowners should consider benefits of Conservation Reserve program

1-3-86

The Conservation Reserve, a USDA program designed to remove erodible land from rowcrops, was announced earlier this month as Secretary of Agriculture John Block termed it "the most comprehensive conservation program this country has ever seen."

Locally, the program will be administered primarily by the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) and the Soil Conservation Service (SCS). The Extension Service, Soil Conservation District, County Conservation Board, Iowa Conservation Commission and others will help with the program.

"We don't have complete program details or rules yet," says Janice Hoehle, Executive Director of ASCS for Louisa County. "But we have received preliminary information and can answer many of the questions a farmer might have on this program."

Under the program, farmers may submit bids to the ASCS on their highly erodible land. The winning bidders will then be asked to sign a 10 year contract requiring them to take the land out of crop production and plant it to grasses and legumes, wildlife planting or trees.

Farmers will receive yearly rental fees for the 10 year period, as well as half the planting costs for establishment of ground cover.

"Plans now call for a sign-up in early March for this year, and another sign-up this summer for 1987," Hoehle says.

Cropland is eligible for the program if it's in capability class 6 or higher, or if it's in capability class 2 to 5 and is eroding at a rate more than twice the tolerance level for the soil involved, as specified by SCS technical guidelines. On most soils, that means erosion

rates above 10 tons per acre.

ASCS determines whether the land qualifies as cropland. Basically, it's land that has been planted to produce an annual agricultural commodity at least two of the 1981 through 1985 crop years.

Steve Yaddoff, District Conservationist for SCS in Louisa County, says using the soil survey is a good way to see if your land meets erosion qualifications. "The soil survey lists capability classes for each soil. We can also help determine erosion rates and consult with landowners about the reserve program if they'll call or stop by the office."

All agencies involved plan to have question and answer information sheets available on the program soon.

"Already we're hearing rumors and misconceptions about the program," Hoehle says. "One is that there are some so-called average bid figures being put up. We want to stress that the bidding process will be just that. A farmer should bid what he thinks is the right price for himself. There are no pre-established bid prices."

Program administration meetings for agency personnel are scheduled for the third week in February. "We plan to have all the detailed information on the program at that time, but that doesn't leave much time for someone to consider the program in detail," Hoehle says.

"In the meantime, we're encouraging farmers to get the preliminary information from us, determine which soils they'll consider for the program, and think about their bids."

ASCS plans to include information on the program in its February mailing to all producers in the county.