

Retired commissioner reflects on soil conservation

By DAVID BAYER

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John Sander, 47, a Lee County farmer, says he has benefited from his 14 years as a Soil Conservation District Commissioner.

He retired from the commission on Jan. 1 to allow room for new blood in the organization. However, he will continue to serve as an assistant commissioner.

"If I had taken another six-year term, I would have been on there 20 years, and I think that's too long," he said. "You can get in a rut and be doing the same things every year. It's good to get new blood in there."

Sander was elected to the commission Feb. 21, 1973. Since then he has served as chairman and vice chairman of the commission. He has also served as chairman of the County Land Preservation Policy Committee, the Finance Committee, the Watershed Development Committee and the Land Treatment Planning Committee.

In 1985, he received the Outstanding Soil Conservation District Commissioner award.

Sander has benefited from his service on the commission by learning how to conserve soil on his own farm. He said he has always been interested in soil conservation but being on the commission helped him to use more soil conservation on his farm.

"If you're telling others to do a good job, then you'd better do a good job yourself," he said.

The purpose of the Soil Conservation Commission is to help farmers practice soil conservation so that good topsoil is retained for good crops.

The commission annually determines which farmers qualify for the state cost-share program, a program in which the state shares up to 50 percent of the cost of terracing.

When the county had a similar cost-share program, the commissioners also determined who qualifies that funding.

But the commissioners do more than approve farmers for funds.

"I guess one of the things is to try to set an example to your neighbors by using some conservation practices on your own farm," Sander said.

The commission has also been involved in educating children. In the past, they have sponsored an essay contest and a poster contest related to soil conservation for students in Lee County. They have also distributed comic books dealing with soil conservation to classes.

They also conducted a tour during a summer for farmers to see the no-till planting other farmers were doing.

Sander said he believes the purpose of the commission is "to promote the wise use of our land."

"A saying I've heard is, 'If you take care of the land, the land will take care of you,'" he said. "I guess that isn't always true. Some farmers have taken care of the land and lost their farms in the last five years.

"But I'd say if you take care of the land, it's going to be more productive."

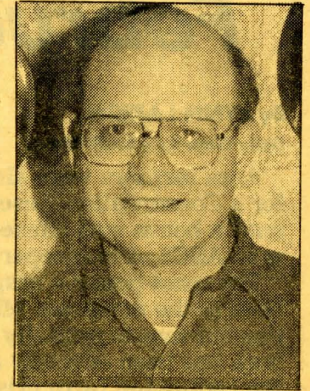
Sander and his brother Wayne, 55, have been using soil conservation practices on their land. They farm about 675 acres in the rural Farmington area, but in Lee County.

They began farming together in 1962 after John graduated from Iowa State University. Since then they have been farming 320 acres at Wayne's farm near Primrose, and bought John's house and 330 acres in 1968 and began farming that.

They also own 20 acres of timber land bordering the Shimek State Forest.

For the last six years they have been using no-till planting. In 1986, they used this relatively new planting style for some 250 acres of corn. They farmed 30 of about 220 acres of soybeans using no-till, which is more than 13 percent.

"You might think you would need to use more chemicals (for weed control) in no-till," Sander said. "We haven't really found that to be true. If you get into the system (no-till) and find out what chemicals work, then you don't really use any more chemicals than without no-till."



John Sander
Retired
Soil Conservation
District Commissioner

Soil conservation methods protect the ground-water from pesticides because they reduce the amount of pesticide-carrying soil going into the water, he said.

The Sanders brothers have been using conservation tillage for the remainder of their crops. In this process, they use a chisel plow to break up some of the ground but still leave much of the crop residue intact.

Another conservation method they have been emphasizing recently on their farm is terracing. A series of ridges is formed in the field to stop water, forcing it to plow down pipes into underground tiles, which take the water down the hill.

The Sanders have installed 28,850 feet of terracing during the past 12 years to protect about 200 acres.

Soil conservation methods they have always used include crop rotation, grass waterways and contouring.

Sander has promoted no-till, conservation tillage and terraces among neighboring farmers, but he said farmers should begin conservation practices carefully.

"On any of these things, it doesn't pay to go leaping into them right away," he said. "It's better to

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