

Farm Bill's Conservation Reserve may aid bay cleanup

COLLEGE PARK, Md. — The Conservation Reserve Program contained in the 1985 farm bill could remove up to 20 percent of Maryland's farmland from production and considerably reduce the amount of sediment reaching the Chesapeake Bay.

According to Pearlle S. Reed, state conservationist for the U.S. Soil Conservation Service, about 363,000 acres of Maryland's farmland is eligible under the program. It is designed to remove up to 40 million acres of highly erodible or erosion prone land from production nationwide by paying farmers for putting it in grass or trees for 10 years.

Putting all the eligible land in Maryland in the Conservation Reserve Program could reduce the amount of soil erosion by over one-half, or six million tons annually, Reed said. "We estimate that about one-fourth of the soil that erodes ends up in the Chesapeake Bay. So even if the program is only moderately successful, the potential for improving water quality in the bay is there," he explained.

Sign-up for the new program is expected to be completed within 60 days. That means farmers will have to be ready to make a quick decision about participating.

Most likely to participate in the

program, said Reed, are absentee landowners who rent their cropland to other farmers. Erosion on rented land is generally higher than on owner-operated land because the tenant has little incentive for practicing soil conservation. Least likely to participate are dairy farmers who

need every acre to raise feed for their cows. Reed also expects some grain farmers to retire highly erodible acreage and use the Conservation Reserve payments to rent more productive land.

Eligible is all land in capability classes VI, VII and VIII or class II, III, IV and V land that is eroding at

twice or more the tolerable rate. Cropland is defined as land that has been tilled during any two of the past five years.

Land that is accepted into the program must have a conservation plan prepared on it to bring erosion within tolerable limits.

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