

Farm Bill sodbuster plank creates soil resource bank

WASHINGTON — The 1985 farm bill has chartered what amounts in effect to a soil resource bank that will pay rich dividends to future generations of Americans, Chairman Kika de la Garza, D-Tex., of the House Agriculture Committee said.

The conservation section of the 1985 law, building on a half century of conservation efforts by farmers, ranchers, private resource protection groups and government agencies, breaks new ground with policies designed to help preserve the nation's most vulnerable soils.

"What we have is a new national policy. It recognizes that if our country is to remain strong in the 21st century, we must preserve the soil resources on which national strength is based by making preservation of fragile lands more attractive than short-term uses which allow soils to wash or blow away. We must encourage landowners to keep highly erodible soils out of intensive uses, like crop production, until they have been adequately protected," de la Garza said.

The new law, the Food Security Act of 1985, moves toward protection of fragile land from two directions:

— For highly erodible land which has not been cultivated since 1980 or protected by adequate conservation measures, the law provides a "sodbuster" program to discourage plowing up fragile soils. If a farmer plants a crop on fragile land in violation of the terms of the law, he will not be eligible in the year of the violation. Highly erodible land that was in crops (or idled under a government acreage control program) between 1981 and 1985 would at first be exempt from the sodbuster sanctions, but this exemption would disappear for any producer who fails to begin installing an approved conservation plan on his land by 1990 or two years after completion of a government soil survey on his land, whichever is later. Producers would have until 1995 to complete application of the conservation plan. A companion "swampbuster" provision would, with some designated exceptions, deny farm benefits to producers who convert wetlands to crop use in the future.

— For highly erodible soils which are already in crop use, the law creates a long-term Conservation Reserve program under which farmers would contract, in return for payments, to shift 40 to 45 million acres to less-intensive uses including grass and trees for periods of 10 to 15 years.

"The law does not forbid any landowner to make his or her own final decision on land use, and it includes specific new appeal machinery for any producer who gets an adverse ruling under the new programs. But if anyone brings highly erodible land or designated types of wetland into cultivation without protecting it with an approved conservation system, he or she will not be able to get federal farm program benefits," de la Garza explained.

"These new steps have been germinating for years. They are not free from controversy, but they were adopted with a broad a public and political consensus as we have seen on any major issue in decades. Nobody can be sure of the total amount of land that will be affected because, while we have set the Conservation Reserve goal at 40 to 45 million acres, we cannot be sure how much additional land will be saved from potential future sodbusting by the terms of the Act. But whatever the total, it represents a resource which will be available when future generations need it — and there will be some near-term gains through reduced production of price-depressing surpluses," de la

Garza said.

Major provisions of the new program include:

SODBUSTER PROGRAM: To discourage plowing up highly erodible land for use in crops, the bill would ban any type of price or income support for crops produced by a farmer who violates its provisions. The ban would extend to, among other things, crop insurance protection, disaster payments, Farmers Home Administration loans that would be used in a manner contributing to excessive erosion on fragile land, and farm storage facility loans. "Highly erodible" land would be defined (for both the sodbuster section and the Conservation Reserve) as either land rated in certain designated classes under the federal land capability classification system or other land which would have an excessive erosion rate if used for crops, and the law directs the Agriculture Department to speed up completion of soil survey work.

SWAMPBUSTER PROGRAM: Under this section, farm program benefits would be lost by any person who, in the future, converts wetlands to use for agricultural commodities produced by cultivating the soil. "Converted wetlands" are lands that meet a wetland definition contained in the law and that are in the future drained, dredged, filled, leveled or otherwise treated in order to make them suitable for cultivation. The "converted wetlands" definition excludes some specific situations including artificial lakes or ponds, wet areas created by delivery of irrigation water, wetlands on which agricultural production is made possible by natural conditions, those where the producer's action has only minimal impact (as determined by the Secretary of Agriculture) on the value of wetlands, and those handled in accordance with an approved wetlands conservation plan. Wetland conversions begun before passage of the bill are not affected.

CONSERVATION RESERVE: To help producers get highly erodible cropland into less-intensive uses on a long-term basis, the Secretary of Agriculture would be required to offer farmers a chance to sign contracts under which 40 to 45 million eligible acres would be given protection and kept out of crop use for periods of not less than 10 years or more than 15 years. Producers signing reserve contracts would have to use conservation plans approved by a Soil Conservation District, or a state forestry agency if trees are involved in the plan. The contracts would require the conversion of erodible land previously used for crops into uses such as pasture, permanent grass or legumes, or trees. Also, the Secretary could make contracts specifically for converting land to shelterbelts, windbreaks, or vegetated stream borders. In return for the landowner's agreement, the Secretary of Agriculture would provide two kinds of assistance — technical and cash (or "in kind") aid covering half the cost of establishing approved conservation practices, and annual land-rental payments in cash or in kind. Rental payment rates will be established on a bid basis and payments to individual farmers or ranchers would be limited to \$50,000 a year. No more than 25

percent of the cropland in any county could be enrolled in the Reserve unless a higher limit would not hurt the local economy. The Secretary of Agriculture has discretionary power to include in the Reserve lands which pose an off-farm environmental threat or which might suffer continuing degradation because of salinity. Under the law, the Secretary is required to sign reserve contracts at minimum annual rates beginning with not less than 5 million

acres during the 1986 crop year and working up to the final 40-45 million acre total by 1990. He is given flexibility to reduce the minimum enrollment rate for individual years, but this would not affect the need to reach the final goal by 1990.

In related areas, the new farm law also:

— Extends the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act through 2008, and requires national resource assessments (and reports to Congress) at 10 year intervals

beginning in 1986. The assessments by the USDA are intended as a guide to policy planning.

— Allows the Secretary to provide technical assistance to property owners, agencies of local and state governments and interstate river basin commissions, on request, to help in efforts to protect subsurface water, controlling salinity, and reducing vulnerability to flood hazards that may affect water resources.

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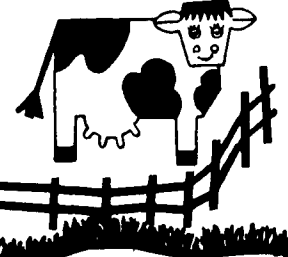
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