

# USDA Defines 'Highly Erodible Land' In Sodbuster Provision

HARRISBURG — "Highly erodible land" is a new U.S. Department of Agriculture buzz word. According to a USDA conservationist, this term can have a big impact on farming operations in Pennsylvania.

"The conservation provisions of the 1985 Farm Bill require protection of highly erodible land against soil erosion to keep eligibility for other USDA programs," declared Gene Thompson, Food & Agriculture Council (FAC) Chairman. Most county farmers benefit from one or more of the involved USDA programs, such as crop subsidies, farm loans, disaster payments and crop insurance. Nationally 80 percent of the farmers will be affected by this portion of the farm bill.

The question of what is highly erodible land is on the mind of many county farmers.

USDA defines highly erodible

land as that with the potential to erode excessively when cultivated without adequate conservation treatment. In further refining the definition, land without cover or conservation practices which would erode eight or more times faster than it is being formed would be classes as highly erodible.

Since the definition includes the "potential to erode," large acreages of pasture, woodland and other farmland will also come under the provisions if converted to cropland. Nationally, 117 million acres of cropland and 227 million acres of noncropland have been identified as highly erodible.

Erodibility of the land is determined by a combination of the Land Capability Classification System and the Universal Soil Loss Equation (USLE) as used by the Soil Conservation Service. USLE is a determination of the actual erosion occurring on the land. Both

methods use the soil units in the county soil survey report as the basis for determination.

Land Capability Classes I through VI are increasingly fragile. "All Class III, IV and VI soils are highly erodible", reported Robert Heidecker, Soil Conservation Service. Class I soils are not highly erodible. The questionable soils are in Class II. Factors such as climate, topography and soil properties determine which Class II soils are or are not highly erodible. SCS is directed by the Farm Bill to identify highly erodible soils where they are intended for use as cropland, and where the farmer wishes to remain eligible for USDA benefits.

SCS field offices are prepared to help farmers determine whether their fields have highly erodible soils.

The amount of highly erodible land determines if a farmer must

apply soil conservation practices to benefit from other USDA programs. For a field to be considered highly erodible, one-third or more of the field must be highly erodible or the area of highly erodible soils must exceed 50 acres.

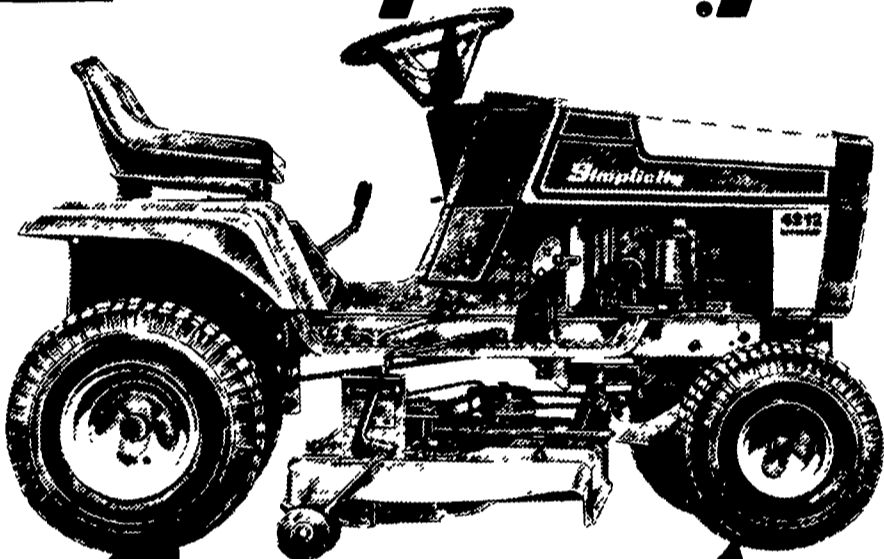
Under the provision commonly called sodbuster, all land not planted to a commodity crop during 1981-85 but plowed after Dec. 23, 1965 would require application of needed soil conservation practices within two years of plowing to maintain USDA program eligibility. Any of this land plowed in 1968 or later must have the needed practices applied before plowing to remain eligible. Commodity crops are annual tilled crops.

Under the conservation compliance provision, any farmer who has been planting an annual crop

on highly erodible land must have a conservation plan and begin application of practices by January 1, 1990. The local conservation district must approve the conservation plan. The plan must be implemented by January 1, 1995 to maintain eligibility. Thompson cautioned that if farmers become ineligible, he or she loses USDA program benefits on all the land farmed by that individual, not just on the highly erodible part.

Farmers with questions about highly erodible land should contact the USDA Soil Conservation Service office for their county. SCS will also assist with the development of conservation plans and with the application of practices. Cost sharing for practice application may be available from the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service.

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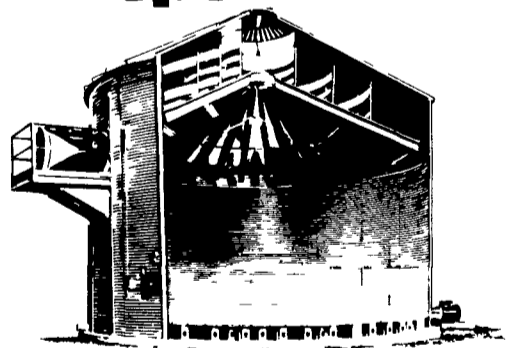
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