

What Conservation Compliance Means to Farmers

Maurice G. Cook¹

Introduction

The Conservation Title of the 1985 Food Security Act has been described as the most comprehensive conservation legislation to be enacted in 50 years. For the first time in history, receipt of most federal farm program benefits, e.g., commodity price supports, agricultural credit, and crop insurance, became legally contingent on the application of appropriate land stewardship practices by agricultural producers.

Congress authorized this sweeping policy change, in part, because of the shared belief within much of the agricultural and environmental communities that federal farm programs should promote natural resource conservation instead of operating at cross purposes with conservation goals as the programs had sometimes done in years past. The legislation gives major attention to two areas: 1) Highly erodible lands and 2) wetlands. It prescribes specific requirements regarding the use and management of these lands. This presentation will focus on compliance provisions for highly erodible land because they are particularly relevant to a conservation tillage conference.

Compliance Provisions for Highly Erodible Land

Two specific provisions apply to highly erodible land: 1) Sodbuster and 2) conservation compliance. Sodbuster applies if one breaks out highly erodible land that was not used for crop production at any time during the period 1981 to 1985. If such a field is brought into production of an annual crop, the farmer must do so under an approved conservation system in order to remain eligible for farm program benefits.

Conservation compliance applies if one continues to plant annually tilled crops on highly erodible fields. To remain eligible for farm program benefits, the farmer must follow a locally approved conservation plan for those highly erodible fields. The plan, approved prior to January 1, 1990, must be fully implemented by January 1, 1995.

Because most farmers are in the very early stages of implementing conservation compliance plans, any assessment of the effects of the compliance provisions on them must be inconclusive at this time. The full impact of the legislation will probably be realized during the latter part of the implementation period, say, 1993-95. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to make a preliminary evaluation of the possible influence of the compliance provisions on farmer attitudes and behavior. This should help in identifying potential problems and taking appropriate steps to overcome them.

Implications for the Farmer

A. Sodbuster

During the 1970's and 1980's, large acreages of native grass and trees were converted to cropland. The possibility that federal farm programs were subsidizing this conversion prompted the Congress to include the sodbuster provision in the Conservation Title of the Food Security Act.

A farmer considering sodbusting must remember that he needs an approved conservation plan and any required structures in place before the crop is to be planted. Where native vegetation is present, a basic conservation system plan is designed to reduce post-treatment erosion to the soil loss tolerance level (T) or below. Sodusted fields in introduced species of vegetation can be planned to whatever level of soil erosion control is allowed by any of the conservation systems in the local Soil Conservation Service (SCS) field office technical guide, including alternative conservation systems. Alternative conservation systems are offered as an option to basic conservation systems. They must achieve a "substantial reduction" in erosion. The technical guide contains lists of treatment alternatives by soil groups and indicates for typical slope lengths and other conditions which alternatives will achieve T and which will not. SCS officials thus know which alternatives are eligible for use on sodusted land. Conservation plans would be more complete and technically defensible for producers, however, if preplan and postplan erosion rates were documented for all sodusted fields.

¹Professor, Department of Soil Science, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC 27695.

The sodbuster provision appears to have slowed the conversion of highly erodible land in grass or trees to cropland. No records of sodbusting activity exist beyond the USDA field office level, so there is no way of determining just how much sodbusting is occurring from either the state or national perspective. In regions such as the southeastern United States, the potential for sodbusting is limited because the most productive land is already farmed.

B. Conservation Compliance

Of all the provisions in the Conservation Title, conservation compliance is the most sweeping in scope and in its potential to reduce soil loss on highly erodible land. Producers who have highly erodible cropland must "actively apply" the plan according to the schedule set forth in it during the period of January 1, 1990, through December 31, 1994

Significant reductions in soil erosion will result if conservation compliance plans are implemented as written. But implementation will be difficult for a significant number of plans, and the soil erosion reduction overall may be less than reported or anticipated. First, some plans call for crop residue levels that will be difficult to achieve and maintain. Other plans entail installation of structural practices that may not be affordable with available public and private funds for cost-sharing and technical assistance. Second, preplan erosion estimates in some cases may understate existing erosion conditions. These observations suggest that while erosion will be reduced significantly, average reductions may be less than estimated in the plans.

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) policy requires that the erosion reduction be "substantial". It gives all affected producers the option of filing and applying either a basic conservation system that will reduce erosion to rates equal to or less than T, or an alternative conservation system that will reduce erosion substantially but the rates will exceed T. It would be helpful to both the producer and USDA to know how serious the erosion problems were at the time of planning and the degree to which those problems would be solved if the plans were implemented.

C. Conservation Awareness

Through the Food Security Act, conservation programs were integrated with commodity programs for the first time. Heretofore, conservation programs were entirely voluntary. Many farmers on their own initiative developed and implemented conservation plans through the local conservation districts.

Although there were secondary economic incentives, e.g., tax benefits for practicing conservation, there were no penalties for failing to practice conservation on highly erodible land. In fact, conservation programs and commodity programs were often conflicting. For example, strong commodity prices encouraged the plowing of erodible land and deterred interest in soil conservation practices.

It is imperative now, though, that farmers growing annual crops on highly erodible land think about conservation and its implications for the total farm operation. The potential loss of federal farm program benefits is too great an economic risk for farmers to ignore conservation compliance. Essentially all producers who have highly erodible land are now aware of that fact, and this enhanced awareness alone should improve soil conservation efforts.

D. Cropping Systems

Changes in farming practices—most of them modest and in-expensive--and application of special conservation measures called for in conservation compliance plans will significantly improve erosion control on highly erodible cropland. Maintenance of crop residue cover on the soil surface will be the key to success for most producers. It appears that in some plans, however, residue cover goals are unrealistic, given the agronomic potential of the soil and expected crop yields. For example, some plans call for keeping as much as 60 percent residue cover with continuous soybeans. Producers may have to adapt additional, low cost practices such as stripcropping or contouring to attain the erosion reduction goals set forth in the plans.

Because of the overwhelming importance of residue management practices to control erosion, conservation tillage will likely assume a greater role in achieving conservation compliance. By definition, conservation tillage embraces any tillage technology that leaves a crop residue cover of at least 30 percent on the soil surface at planting time. Various states have modified this percentage upward. For example, North Carolina requires 50 percent residue cover as a conservation tillage standard. The higher residue requirements are consistent with the percentages observed in many compliance plans. Such levels, though, will require producers to adopt rigorous conservation tillage practices. This will pose a major challenge to many producers in many locations.

In those instances where highly erodible land is dominant and the amount of land for annual crops is limited, farmers may need to change their traditional

farming methods. An example of this is the northern Piedmont region in North Carolina where it is customary to grow flue-cured tobacco continuously in the same fields. Due to the high erodibility of the soils plus the clean-tilled characteristics of tobacco culture, crop rotation is required to achieve conservation compliance. Even where some kind of rotation is currently employed, it should include more grass sod in the cycle.

Cropping system changes are perceived more as an inconvenience, though, rather than imposing a lasting economic hardship on the farmer. Referring again to the tobacco example, growers tend to have their curing barns close to the fields where the tobacco is grown. Introducing a crop rotation will likely mean a greater hauling distance from the field to the barn, and increased time and labor requirements. These changes may have a negative agronomic impact initially, but it should be offset by improved management of all the fields used in the cropping system.

Some farmers fear that the change in cropping system will reduce their crop production and thus their economic returns. This may be true in the short run. It is generally believed, though, that well-managed rotations can produce crop yields comparable to monoculture. The net income is even likely to be higher due to increased biological control of pests and reduced requirement for costly chemical inputs.

E. Technical Assistance

Farmers will require technical assistance from SCS to implement many of the compliance provisions. The SCS workload may exceed available staff capacity in many field offices between 1990 and 1995 because of a heavy demand for technical assistance to implement and monitor existing plans. Furthermore, a substantial proportion of the plans may need to be revised. A technical assistance shortfall could seriously compromise the effectiveness of conservation compliance.

Implementation and spot-checking of conservation compliance plans could require a great deal of technical assistance during a period when staff load is greatest. Compounding this problem is the likelihood that many conservation compliance plans will have to be revised, some them substantially and perhaps more than once, as implementation begins in 1990. Plan revisions have long been a part of SCS procedures, e.g., Great Plains Conservation Program, but never on such a large scale. Both revision and implementation of plans will be primarily conducted "one-to-one" with producers, intensifying demands on staff. Other

Conservation Title provisions, notably swampbuster, will further stretch the technical assistance workload.

As a result of these concerns, a widening gap is anticipated between technical assistance needs and staffing that could seriously compromise implementation of conservation compliance as early as the end of 1990. The problem could become acute by 1993, particularly if enforcement challenges prove substantial and require routine field inspections. Farmers are encouraged to initiate revisions early in the implementation period to avoid a possible crisis as 1995 approaches.

F. Financial Assistance

Actually putting certain practices contained in the recommendations on the ground will likely require financial assistance. Almost one-half of the producers queried in a national survey (1) indicated they would need some financial assistance to implement their plans. This appears to be less than what has been generally expected, however. This indicates that farmers are seeing recommendations that are agronomically and economically sound.

Financial help is available through various sources in addition to federal cost-sharing. Some states now offer cost-share programs. In North Carolina, cost-sharing is available for practices that promote water quality. This embraces many of the traditional soil conservation practices. Also, there are incentive payments for practicing conservation tillage.

G. Attitudes

There appears to be widespread support for cross-compliance, i.e., that a producer should conserve the soil on highly erodible cropland in return for federal program payments. In a producer survey(1), 74% of all respondents agreed with the conservation compliance philosophy. Of those who had obtained a conservation plan, 80 percent said they considered the plan reasonable and practical. Nearly the same percentage said implementation of the plan would have a positive impact or no impact on the profitability of their farming operation. A majority (55%) expressed support for the sodbuster provision, including its enforcement, that could result in the loss of federal farm program benefits.

Summary

Current federal farm policy holds that producers who wish to avail themselves of commodity price support, agricultural credit, and crop insurance

programs must take proper care of the soil and water resources on which the long-term sustainability of their farms and the nation's food and fiber supply depends. Decisions about conservation activity are now among the most important business decisions they must make from year to year.

At the same time, conservation compliance has abruptly changed the programs and priorities of federal soil and water conservation agencies along with those of many cooperating state and local agencies. These are agencies that previously did business with their producer clients on a voluntary, first-come, first-served basis. The conservation planning and enforcement mandates associated with implementation of the provisions in particular pose workload and other challenges heretofore unfronted by many of the agencies involved.

Many important questions about conservation compliance and its implementation cannot be answered yet. To this point it appears that the conservation infrastructure is in place throughout the American countryside to deliver programs of the magnitude required by the Conservation Title. There is a clear indication of positive producer attitudes toward these revolutionary conservation policies. This speaks well for the farmer in his/her role as a producer of food and fiber, and protector of the environment.

References

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