

# JOURNAL OF SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION

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A discussion of natural prairie protection and how government programs impact that protection.

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Forested streamside management zones have many benefits, but suggestions differ on the width and uses of the zones. This article describes research that shows that even at a relatively small width, the effectiveness of protecting water quality is just as great as wider streamside zones.

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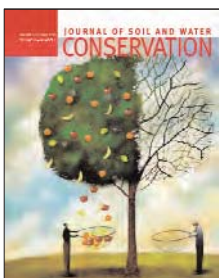
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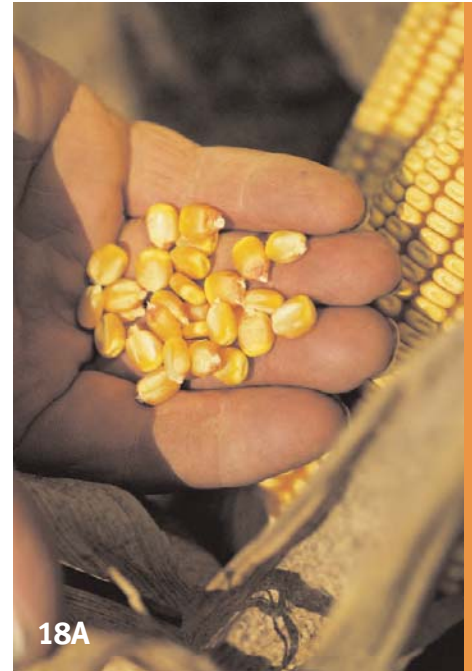
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**“Pursuing fairness comes at the expense of cost-effectiveness. Paying farmers to continue to do what they have already been doing—whether it is growing grass or conservation tillage—is a redistribution of taxpayer dollars. Unless the motivation factor is huge, little will change with on the ground environmental quality or wildlife habitat.”** —Sandra Batie

**Readers are invited to express their views on land and water management.**

Please make your letter less than 150 words. Letters may be edited for length and clarity.

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— Deb Happe, editor

### GREEN PAYMENTS DISCUSSION CONTINUES

The March–April viewpoint article by Clay Ogg, points out a problem with green payment programs. If budgets are limited, which they are, then paying one type of farmer or rancher to implement one practice—such as enrolling grasslands—comes at the opportunity cost for other practices such as the enrolling of cropland in the CRP. Furthermore, grassland reserves may be great for, say, improving the nesting success of gamebirds, but cropland enrollment will improve water quality.

Also, paying farmers who are already engaging in the desired practice (aka good stewards can be labeled as “fair” and perhaps such rewards provides motivations to others to become good stewards. This rationale is behind the current “Reward the Best to Motivate the Rest” program slogan of CSP.

But pursuing fairness comes at the expense of cost-effectiveness. Paying farmers to continue to do what they have already been doing—whether it is growing grass or conservation tillage—is a redistribution of taxpayer dollars. Unless the motivation factor is huge, little will change with on the ground environmental quality or wildlife habitat. The same funds used to subsidize a change in behavior to adopt pollution prevention practices or habitat improvement by other farmers and ranchers, may be unfair, but will achieve improved environmental outcomes as measured against a status quo baseline.

Since budgets are limited, choices need to be made. But all program choices have unintended impacts—such as the one Ogg pointed out of allowing haying in a grassland reserve negatively affecting the incomes of current hay producers as

the quantity of hay produced increases dramatically.

Clay Ogg has clearly indicated his preferences for cost effectiveness as the green payment program goals. Other may differ. But the issues he has highlighted—“cast a shadow” on the future debate as to the design of green payments. Hold on to your policy debate hat! We are in for an interesting ride.

There is nothing new in this type of debate—it is the one that has dominated conservation policies for the last several decades. It would be great if we could change the issues of the debate somewhat—so that we are not just looking at issues of efficiency (ie cost-effectiveness) or equity (ie fairness). But rather, ideally, to design an alternative that would motivate farmers to be more creative and to think differently about how to do things differently and obtain enhanced environmental and habitat quality. For example, payments for outcomes of environmental services—performance measure, be they gamebird reproduction or reduction in nitrogen and phosphorus loadings, or specific changes in landscapes—would generate opportunities for innovations in conservation that are appropriate to a farmer or rancher’s operation. Farmers and ranchers know their farms and ranches best. Cost sharing for single practices on individual fields neglects this knowledge and squelches innovation.

Also maybe we should plug our conference and the publication —ie what we learned from the conference was....the need for innovation and flexibility.)

—Sandra Batie