

Conservation is a long-term investment in agriculture
By Mike McGrath

For the past two years the Minnesota Project has been working with Soil and Water Conservation Districts in southeastern Minnesota to encourage farmers to enroll in conservation programs to protect water and soil resources, and to increase fish and wildlife habitat. It's a noble task, but not an easy one.

In a geographic area that is dominated by corn and soybean production, and with current farm policy dominated by financial incentives that encourage corn and soybean production, farmers often perceive that they cannot afford to incorporate conservation practices into their operations.

At the local level, every county in Minnesota has a Farm Service Center where agricultural programs are administered by government. In the southeast, some of these service centers pay over \$30 million a year directly to farmers in their county enrolled in subsidy programs for corn and soybean production. For farmers, enrollment in production programs is easy and payments are guaranteed up to limits so high that most farmers will never reach them.

The subsidized production of annual crops such as corn and soybeans is a short-term investment in the land. Each year a new crop is planted, sprayed, harvested and sold. It's a production system with an annual cycle that utilizes technology to maximize short-term gains from the land, and if left by itself it will continue to whittle away at our natural resources as well as our taxpayer wallets.

As a counterbalance to this production emphasis, local service centers also administer an almost overwhelming number of agriculture conservation programs, none of which are guaranteed, none of which pay equally as well as the production programs, and all of which have competitive enrollment because of insufficient funding to meet the demand.

Conservation payments are a long-term investment in the land. With incentives, farmers can address resource needs on their land and install practices that prevent soil erosion and protect water quality, such as grassed waterways, buffer strips, contour strip planting, and crop rotations that include perennials like hay and pasture.

These practices have a long life span. They are installed to protect, enhance, and build resources for the future. One doesn't plant a grass waterway this year and plow it out next year. Future generations will reap the benefits of these investments.

There is a saying that is often heard these days in local agriculture circles in anticipation of the upcoming 2007 Farm Bill debates: "It's hard to be green if you are in the red."

It almost sounds like something Kermit the Frog would say after he accidentally hops into a bucket of barn paint.

But what it really means is that farmers view conservation as a luxury that they can only afford if they are first subsidized in their production of corn, soybeans and other commodity crops. Then, conservation can be considered, but only if it includes opportunity cost incentives.

It is not that farmers do not want to install conservation practices on their farms, it is just that for far too long the system has conditioned them to maximize the production of row crops without requiring a long-term investment in the conservation of natural resources.

In a recent speech, outgoing Minnesota Farm Bureau President Al Christopherson countered those who seek to increase funding for conservation in the next farm bill with a statement that reflects the myth that causes the disparity in funding between production and conservation: “The prosperity of our rural communities is dependent more on the returns to ag production than to conservation and recreation. We need to remember that ag production helps maintain the infrastructure for 12 months of the year.”

Maybe in the short term this is true. But in the long term, it will be the natural infrastructure – healthy soils, clean water, and clean air – that maintains our prosperity in rural America. Until we look at conservation programs as an investment in the future of agriculture and rural communities, we are doomed to overproduce ourselves into resource oblivion at the expense of our grandchildren’s ability to live in rural communities and a clean environment.

It may be hard to be green if you are in the red, but it’s definitely hard to be green if you are paid not to be green. Perhaps it is time for a new long-term vision for agriculture and our rural communities.