La. farmers eligible for reforestation plan

By BETSY OTHEN

Forty-five million acres of farmland nationwide will be the target of a new federal program designed to save the 764 million tons of soil normally lost each year to erosion.

Louisiana farmers are among those eligible to participate in the federal Conservation Reserve Program, part of the 1986 farm bill. It is an effort to conserve soil and water resources, improve water quality, curb production of surplus commodities and increase the timber supply.

The federal program will be administered by the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service office in each parish as a cooperative effort among several state and federal agencies. The program seeks to replace farmland usually used for crops with trees or grasses, whichever the farmer prefers.

For 1986, up to 12,800 acres of Louisiana farmland will be chosen by the ASCS for the reforestation program. The amount of acreage in the program will increase from this year’s five million to 45 million nationwide by 1996.

Reforestation program advantages

- Based on the 45 million acres rejuvenated nationwide in the program over the next five years, erosion will be reduced by 764 million tons of soil per year.
- By doing this, sediment, or soil washed into streams and rivers, will be reduced by 21 million tons per year.
- This program is expected to reduce the use of pesticides by 61 million pounds per year and prevent the pesticides from moving into streams and water supplies nationwide.
- The program is expected to reduce fertilizer use by 1,445,000 tons per year.

In order to participate in the program, a farmer must go to his local ASCS office to apply for eligibility. The application period is March 3-14. Farmers must register for the program.

What is the cost of planting trees or grasses? What will the farmer have to pay?

LeRay said the cost of planting either cash or commodities certificates as decided by agriculture officials, not the landowner.

"Commodities certificates are negotiable certificates worth so many dollars worth of a commodity, of the farmer’s choice.

"The 1986 payments will not be paid until Oct. 1 of each year,” LeRay said.

Tree seedlings can be bought by farmers in the program from the state Office of Forestry, or from a nursery. The trees must be "commercially grown trees beneficial to Louisiana, such as pine, cypress, oak and other hardwoods,” LeRay said.

Grasses may be planted instead of trees, if the farmer prefers, or the farmer may let natural grasses grow over the areas. But there are restrictions on what farmers will be allowed to do with the property, said LeRay.

"Grazing cattle is strictly prohibited,” LeRay said. "Nothing can be done to disturb plantings continuously for the 10 years."

Farmers can, however, lease the land for hunting.

What about the cost of planting trees or grasses? What will the farmer have to pay?

LeRay said the cost of seedlings (or grasses) and the cost of planting will be shared by the ASCS and the farmer.

For example, if a farmer plants pine trees, the ASCS will pay 49% of the $80 estimated cost of planting one acre. Cost varies among different trees.

"The farmer does all the work, and then we’ll pay our share,” said LeRay.

Not all parishes have highly erodible soil. LeRay said parishes most likely to be involved in the program are Franklin, Richland, Catahoula, Concordia and the Florida parishes.

The program has advantages and disadvantages for farmers, said Dr. Alan Main, forestry specialist with the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service at LSU.

"The advantage is that trees grow by farmers can be marketed by the farmers after the first 10 years are over," said Main, adding that using the land for hunting leases also can benefit farmers.

"The disadvantages are that this is a long-term project — 10 years at least — with another five-year period afterward needed to produce an appropriate marketable crop (of trees),” Main said.

By participating in this and other federal programs, farmers will receive subsidies in the form of price supports, for example, said Joyce LeBlanc of the state Office of Forestry.

She said that, by 1990, all farmers will have to become involved in programs that prevent or at least slow the destruction of soil nationwide.

“We don’t know how many farmers will participate in this program, but it is new, LeBlanc said.

“Only a small number of farms participated in the federal programs in the past 10 years in the Forestry Incentive Programs — only about 500 landowners,” said Gus Nachod of the Office of Forestry’s Forestry Management Division.

The division will supply tree seedlings to farmers.

"This program is very similar to the Soil Bank Program of the 1960s, but the difference is that the land used for the new program is crop land,” Main said.

The Soil Bank Program, which involved a general reforestation, proved successful.