State farmers may place erodable farmland in conservation program

Louisiana farmers will have two weeks beginning March 3 to submit bids to place highly erodable land into a conservation program under the 1985 Farm Bill, according to Willie Cooper, state director of the federal Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service in Alexandria.

The conservation provisions of the new law are designed to put much of the marginal land, turned to the plow in the go-for-broke days of the mid 1970s, back in its natural state.

Another feature of the conservation section denies farm support programs to farmers who begin cultivating land designated wetlands or erodable that has never been farmed, Cooper said.

Louisiana has 178,000 acres eligible for the conservation effort because of its fragile nature. To qualify, however, the land also must have been farmed two of the last five years, Cooper added.

“The most severely impacted area in Louisiana is the Macon Ridge area of Richland and Franklin parishes up in the northeast part of the state, coming on down the ridge, swinging across into the Beauregard Parish area on the Texas line. This stretch has the most eligible acreage,” Cooper said.

Farmers will bid against other farmers. The low bidders will receive an annual rental payment over a ten-year period, Cooper said. In addition, there will be a 50-50 cost sharing between the farmer and the federal program to provide trees, shrubbery or grasses to plant on the land.

Bill O’Connor, staff aide to the U.S. House Agriculture Committee, was instrumental in drafting the legislation. O’Connor says the legislation is a reaction to the 1970s when, “You could make a dollar pretty quick during the seventies in agriculture.

“Whole huge ranches in some states were being put under the plow. There were plows measuring over 200 feet across cutting 200-foot swaths through huge open pastures,” he said. “Neighboring farmers were very angry and upset at seeing that. They knew it was not efficient and over the long term they knew it was very bad for the soil.”

The program is designed to remove 45 million acres from farming nationwide, O’Connor said, with most of the acreage coming from the fragile lands of the mid West.

O’Connor acknowledges, however, that the conservation program is going to lead to unfavorable comparisons with the old Soil Bank program. “There are a lot of horror stories that come out of the soil bank, horror stories of people, driving by hundreds of acres of land that had never been planted to grass. The last time a plow touched it was when it went into the soil bank and they just left it there,” he said.