Adapting land retirement programs in response to Iowa’s changing economy

Participants in these discussions were skeptical about existing state or federal natural resources plans and the technical tools used to develop such plans. They stated that land use planning needs to be a local, transparent, participatory process in order to earn public confidence and support in Iowa. Participants generally supported the idea of targeting USDA program funds to maximize long-term public conservation benefits. They acknowledged the Conservation Reserve Program, the Wetlands Reserve Program and other USDA programs currently miss enrolling much of Iowa’s most environmentally sensitive and vulnerable lands. They noted these programs are popular because most landowners are free to apply and to compete for federal funds.

What was done and why?

Two key questions were to be addressed during the project: 1) What conservation plans and technical tools exist (or are needed) to better define and target environmental benefits from conservation programs? 2) Can Iowa leaders agree on a process or processes to pinpoint lands that should be permanently retired from crop production and lands that should be protected from conversion to agricultural crops?

What did we learn?

In regard to the first objective related to the conservation plans and technical tools that exist (or are needed), discussion revealed no effective plans or tools available at that time. Acceptance of targeting would depend on trust in the plans and tools – and such trust could only be built through local control, which requires flexibility inconsistent with federal policy.

Discussion revealed that participants understood and agreed on the importance of targeting lands that needed protection or retirement from production, but there was reluctance to support targeting unless there was a local planning component – and even then, participants would want to see the planning results before agreeing to target programs based on those results. Therefore the preference was to continue eligibility for the most applicants to compete within federal programs.

Duane Sand has built upon the thinking of this project, plus subsequent trends, to provide further thinking on the Conservation Reserve Program as it was being scrutinized in 2011 for the next Farm Bill. He prepared a related paper, “2010 USDA Conservation Policy Update: Opportunities to consider in light of recent catastrophic flooding.”