

# Fragile land converted to crops

## Southern, northeastern Iowa change most, study shows

*By Christopher Doering | Gannett Washington Bureau*

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U.S. farmers converted an estimated 7.2 million acres of wetlands and fragile lands to cropland from 2008 to 2012, the Environmental Working Group reported Tuesday.

The findings come as Congress plods along on crafting a five-year farm bill that would end the \$5 billion in direct payments given to farmers regardless of need, in favor of expanding popular crop insurance programs subsidized by the federal government. Crop insurance traces its roots back to the 1930s when the program was established in response to the Great Depression.

“The data strongly suggest that over-subsidized crop insurance policies are greasing the wheels of conversion to row crops,” said Craig Cox, EWG’s senior vice president for agriculture and natural resources. “The government is picking up too much of the risk of plowing up and planting fragile land, all at a cost of billions of dollars to taxpayers and untold environmental degradation.”

The advocacy group used the data from the study to encourage Congress to include a conservation compliance measure in the farm bill, which would require a farmer to engage in conservation measures in order to receive subsidy payments.

“The so-called conservation compliance provisions of the farm bill are by far the most important federal policies that could slow or reverse the environmental disaster underway as more and more fragile land goes under the plow,” the study said.

Using mapping and geospatial technologies, EWG found that in Iowa only two counties — Taylor and Adair — saw between 2,500 and 5,000 acres of wetland and wetland buffers converted to cropland.

But almost 40 counties in Iowa — including most of them in the lower third of the Hawkeye state and a group in the northeastern part bordering Minnesota, Wisconsin and Illinois — had highly erodible land converted to cropland from 2008 to 2012. The amount of land shifted to growing crops varied, but most counties experienced a conversion of between 5,001 to 15,000 acres.

From 2008 to 2012, 5.3 million acres of highly erodible land, most of it grasslands, were plowed up to grow crops in the United States. Iowa, South Dakota and eight other states accounted for 57 percent of all the area converted from highly erodible land to cropland. About 40 percent of the land was used to grow corn and soybeans, EWG said.

Across the United States, EWG also said 1.9 million acres of wetlands and nearby habitat were plowed during this period, with the most dramatic loss occurring in South Dakota, North Dakota and Minnesota. Corn and soybeans were planted on 60 percent of the converted land, according to the report.

The Iowa Farm Bureau Federation said last week that 1.1 million acres of grassy habitat were converted to corn production and 740,000 acres shifted to soybean production. At the same time, Iowa farmers converted 414,000 corn acres into grassy habitat and 187,000 acres of soybean ground into habitat areas.

Still, the IFBF study said despite the lure of record-high grain prices, farmers in 40 of Iowa's 99 counties developed new wildlife habitat with more land being converted to grassy habitat from cropland than grassy habitat conversions to corn and soybeans. Another 18 Iowa counties had minimal net loss of grassy habitat of less than 10,000 acres per county.

The study was part of a seven-state Farm Bureau review that looked at land use changes in the Midwest from 2007 to 2012.

David Miller, director of research and commodity services for the Iowa Farm Bureau, said the EWG interactive maps showed only the counties where highly erodible land was converted but failed to show those where more land was switched from crops to grasslands. In addition, he said in the case of Iowa, about 80 percent of the grasslands that were converted did not come from land considered to be highly erodible.

"It is clear that they have a political point they are trying to make in the current farm bill debate," Miller said. "They are publishing data that is geared to support their point as opposed to giving the full picture."

A study published in February in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences by researchers at South Dakota State University estimated 1.3 million acres of grassland in the Western Corn Belt States of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Minnesota and Iowa had been converted to corn and soybeans from 2006 and 2011.

"In the U.S. Corn Belt, a recent doubling in commodity prices has created incentives for landowners to convert grassland to corn and soybean cropping," Christopher Wright and Michael Wimberly, the authors of the study, said in the report. They wrote that recent land conversions, especially in Iowa and North Dakota, appear to be part of a "persistent shift in land use."

## Iowa land plowed up

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### Highly erodible land converted to cropland, 2008-2012

KEY:  2,500-5,000 acres  5,001-15,000 acres  15,001-25,000 acres



Source: EWG Plowed Under

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