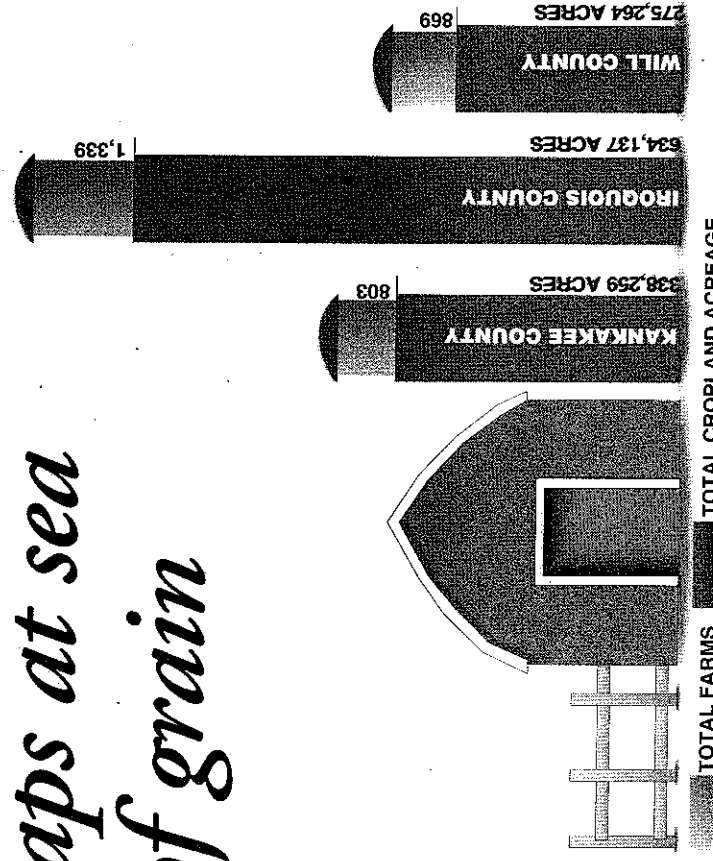


Tide of urban growth laps at sea of grain



Journal graphic/ Nancy Burgan

By Bill Byrns, Journal writer

Today a sea of corn and soybeans dominates the Kankakee River watershed where once virgin prairie and wetlands ruled.

But farming faces new challenges from urban growth and a planned 30,000-acre national wildlife refuge that many fear will eat up existing farms.

Well over 90 percent of the Kankakee River watershed is agricultural land. In Illinois, Iroquois County's 1,339 farms account for a total of 634,137 acres, according to the Illinois Farm Bureau. Kankakee County's 803 farms encompass 338,259 acres and Will County with 869 farms has a total of 275,264 cropland acres.

"If anything, we're losing farms, not farmland," says Bill Olthoff, president of the Kankakee County Farm Bureau.

But Olthoff's assertion flies in the face of a report from the U. S. Department of Agriculture which says Illinois' rate of farm and open space loss has more than doubled to 58,440 acres a year up from 24,600 acres.

Nationally, development claimed nearly 16 million acres between 1992 and 1997 according to USDA's National Resources inventory. That figure is triple the rate of 1.2 million acres reported for 1982-92.

Protection of prime ag lands remains a priority for Farm Bureau, which has fought for "smart growth" and zoning laws and voiced opposition to the proposed national wildlife refuge along the Kankakee River in Illinois and Indiana.

"We have been involved with zoning issues focusing on development from the center outward" rather than a lot of "spot" development," Olthoff says. Today Kankakee County zoning law, championed by Farm Bureau, set a minimum 20 acres in rural areas rather than breaking farm ground into 5-acre residential tracts as had been the practice up to four years ago.

Olthoff says such practices make good sense for both agriculture and the environment.

"As farmers, we maintain the drainage sys-

tems on our lands. When the acreage changes hands — to people who are not involved in agriculture — they are not as concerned with maintaining the drainage and problems begin."

"We are not trying to stop Kankakee County from development," Olthoff emphasizes. "If it becomes a (Chicago) collar county or wants to build a third airport, we can't stop that from happening. We're not a 'collar county' yet, but we are one of the collar buttons," Olthoff observes, noting that farm land is increasingly becoming the most desirable place for new home developments.

"Our concern and our policy is protecting private property rights and promoting 'Smart Growth,'" says Mike Hahn, manager of the Kankakee County Farm Bureau.

Hahn notes that McHenry and Kane counties provide financial concessions to help protect prime farmland. Kankakee County has enacted some zoning regulations to protect

farmlands but has not enacted tax concessions similar to those in Kane and McHenry counties.

"More people today are asking farmers to take land out of production for conservation at a time that it's difficult for the farmer to survive," Olthoff says. "That's why we feel incentive programs are fair for all."

Examples of such projects include setting aside habitat for wildlife and creating buffer strips along streams and ditches running through farmlands.

"I would like to see an 'environmentalist' admit that the purpose of streams and rivers is drainage," Olthoff says, noting that he considers today's farmers to be environmentalists as well as conservationists.

But it's not the drainage issue that sparks

"environmental" critics of agriculture as much as water withdrawals for irrigation, the alteration of streams and surrounding lands and the impact that change brings to natural systems and vanishing wildlife habitat.

Still Olthoff is optimistic about the future. "I think we have a lot of things going on here that are really positive. We've brought together conservationists, farmers, fishermen, hunters to all work toward a common goal," he said, referring to the Kankakee River Basin Partnership, of which he is a member. "That kind of thing is not happening in a lot of places."

Hahn notes that farmers today are doing a better job, both in production and as stewards of the land.

"Water quality is not an issue today because farmers are using conservation practices such as no-till planting, which results in less runoff and less demand for chemicals," Hahn says, noting that the change is partly the result of education, partly economics.

Rising fuel and ag chemical costs have forced farmers to become more economic in their management practices.

"It still amazes me how quickly we went from clean field plowing to no-till farming," Olthoff said of the transformation that occurred largely between 1985 and '95.

The result, Olthoff says is better farming, better water quality and habitat for wildlife.

But the concept of a federal agency determining where a wildlife refuge should be built bothers Olthoff and other farmers, who don't put much stock in the "willing seller" scenario offered by the Fish & Wildlife Service.

"There are places where farmland should be protected, places where you can set aside for

wildlife and for development," Olthoff says. "It's a question of balance."

Statistics from the U.S. Department of Agriculture show that nearly 12 percent of the farm account for over 60 percent of the market value of ag products sold nationwide.

Smaller farms are more vulnerable to buy-offers that could transform farmland into residential developments or wildlife refuges.

Farmers also fear that refuge-building pressure may force a neighboring farm to sell or lead to restricted access to croplands surrounded by refuge lands. Issues of road closings have prompted farm protests over refuge lands in Ohio and by miners and loggers out west when they say Forest Service regulations have hurt their livelihood.

Olthoff says incentive programs such as the state's Conservation 2000 and the federal Conservation Reserve Program offer a better balance for farmers.

Nearly \$1.5 million from the state has been used by the Kankakee River Conservancy District to purchase nearly 1,600 acres in the Mornence Wetlands, along the river east of Mornence.

In 1998, the first year of Conservation 2000 ecosystem projects by the Kankakee River Partnership, the state awarded \$146,676 to the Iroquois County Soil and Water Conservation District to purchase conservation easements. Virtually all of the easements were for stream buffer strips.

Three other projects, totaling nearly \$52,000 included building a buffer strip at Legion Park in Watseka along Sugar Creek, logjam removal on lower Langan Creek near Chebanse and erosion controls at the Perry Farm at Bourbonnais.

Olthoff thinks state and local projects offer greater control and protection for farmland, especially when compared to the refuge project which critics say has yet to define specific boundaries.

"It's a question of balance."

WATER IS SPRAYED to irrigate crops in St. Anne cornfields. The Kankakee River supports both agriculture and recreation in a massive way.

Journal/ Kathie VanTass

