

Check out the Contours on That One

By Dal Grooms

There's been much talk recently about how state-of-the-art airport security equipment can reveal body contours. Many people shudder at the thought of someone looking at the very personal curves and slopes of their bodies. Farmers and ranchers, on the other hand, are more than happy to show off another kind of contours—the ones on their farmland.

Nature has given the United States many land formations but crop farmers often are most attracted to that 20 percent with rolling hills and rich soils. To protect that soil, farmers use a variety of conservation methods but the ones that really show off the land are terraces, buffers and contour planting.

These conservation practices accent the grace and beauty of America's farmland like a string of pearls around a woman's neck. Terraces in particular are like pearls that highlight the rich, productive hillsides.

One can clearly see conservation practices in place when driving through farm country all across our nation. There are bands of color that can be seen with strip cropping and frames around fields when borders are used. And be sure to take note of crop buffers planted to protect the branching veins of waterways.

But conservation practices aren't just about accenting the hills and slopes of the land. They are about keeping the soil in place—an important factor in crop productivity.

The practices are working. The Agriculture Department's most recent National Resources Inventory report shows that between 1982 and 2003, soil erosion nationwide dropped dramatically. When the amount of soil lost per acre is compared, it's down 66 percent. That means less dust in the air and clearer water in streams. It also means wildlife will find more habitats for shelter and food.

USDA's conservation programs during that time have included taking farmland out of production. It's been exciting during the past seven years, however, to see more focus being put on conservation measures for working land. This approach results in a working resource that provides food, fiber and fuel. But it also yields a cleaner environment, enhanced wildlife habitat and a farmscape marked by beauty.

Under the skilled hand of a conservation-minded farmer, our farmland works in numerous ways.

So, the next time you're driving through farm country, take a look. Appreciate the farmland resources Mother Nature gave us. Appreciate the farmer who dressed them with conservation practices. And know these are contours each of us would be glad to show off.

-30-

Dal Grooms, a new contributor to Focus on Agriculture, is a native of the Midwest, where she writes about rural and agricultural issues.