

Teachable moment for soil conservation



Indiana Prairie Farmer Says

By **TOM BECHMAN**

THE Indiana Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts has fought the good fight for more than 20 years. Until the mid-1980s, state dollars for soil and water conservation projects were miniscule. Nevertheless, the state endorsed an underfunded T by 2000 program in the mid-80s, and districts made the most of it.

T by 2000 turned into Clean Water Indiana, the current soil conservation program. At least once, IASWCD lobbied for \$20 million dollars over a two-year state budget. Dollars awarded were typically confined to cigarette tax revenue.

The hard-working people behind the program can boast of many accomplishments, including at least one soil conser-

vation project completed in nearly every county in the late '80s. But one fact still remains: Indiana state government contributes only a small percentage of what neighboring states contribute for soil conservation.

Reality hit again in 2007 when the House passed a \$5 million funding bill for Clean Water Indiana, only to see it sliced to \$1 million over two years in the final compromise bill.

Wake-up call

IASWCD has tried legislative breakfasts in January, summer tours for legislators, proposed taxes on bottled water — almost everything imaginable — but nothing has stuck so far.

Perhaps the June flood did what IASWCD couldn't accomplish in decades. The flood demanded attention, including that of legislators and state leaders. Our August '07 cover featured an awestruck Lt. Gov. Becky Skillman and a farmer standing near a canyon carved out of his cornfield.

Estimates for what it would take to put fields back in pre-flood condition are staggering. Would increased state support in years ahead of the flood prevented all devastation? No. Could it have lessened the impact? Yes.

In the case of the cavernous August cover, a rock chute or spillway between the field and gravel pit could have prevented much of the damage, at a cost far less than hauling back in 1,500 truckloads of soil!

Why is government so willing to find money in times of crisis, but yet so slow to move forward on good causes in good times? It's one of the mysteries of 21st-century government in America.

Future plans

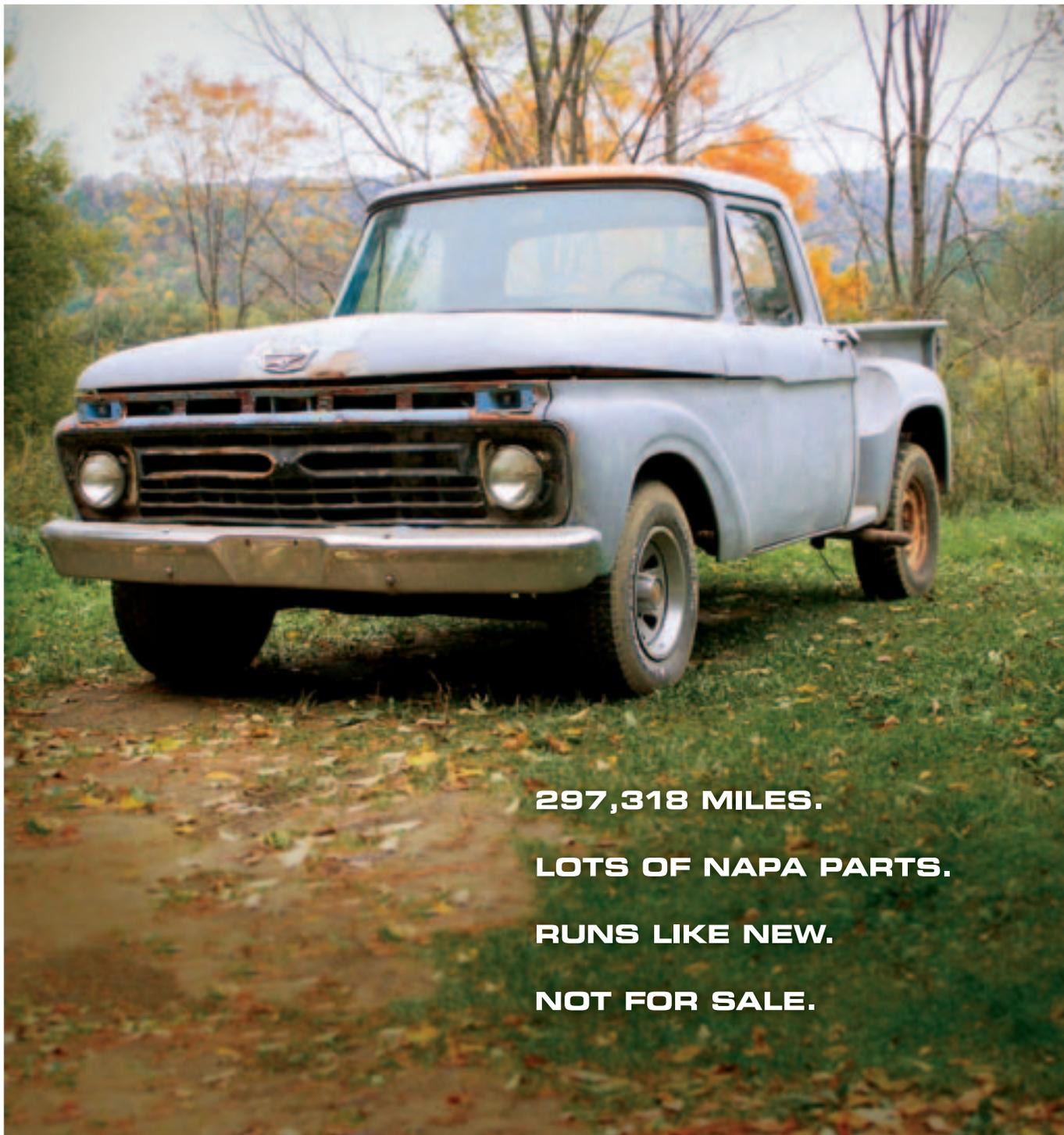
What's done can't be undone. However, there's a real opportunity to be ready for the next flood, or even the next 1-inch rain on sloping soils. If the Legislature ponies up reasonable funds for Clean Water Indiana in next winter's session, soil and water conservation districts in every county in Indiana will get back to the business of solving key erosion problems. Right now, many are hamstrung by lack of funding.

The politically correct course today is diverting money to a few handpicked watersheds, supposedly so concentrated funding can make more impact in one spot. The problem is only a few people get excited about asking legislators for more help.

Why not go back to the days when every county was guaranteed a couple of conservation demonstration projects every year? After all, Mother Nature doesn't recognize watershed boundaries.

The stage is set to recharge enthusiasm for soil conservation. Everybody knows the potential for devastation; everyone needs to see possible solutions.

Farmers in southwest Indiana tell us some of the river bottom land that was destroyed will never be farmed again. That's too bad. Now's the time to assess what it will take to prevent this from happening again, and then start down that funding path.



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