

Palmer stays

As expected, the state Supreme Court has stayed the execution of death row inmate Charles Jess Palmer pending the outcome of his appeals through the federal courts.

Palmer was scheduled to die in the electric chair Sept. 16 for the 1979 murder of Eugene Zimmerman of Grand Island.

The order on file with the Clerk of the Supreme Court today said the stay was granted so that Palmer, 56, can pursue the federal appeals process.

Palmer, 56, first was sentenced to death Aug. 7, 1980. He was convicted of the murder of Zimmerman, a coin dealer who was strangled on March 6, 1979. A three-judge panel found that Palmer bound Zimmerman, robbed his place, then returned to the bedroom and strangled Zimmerman so there would be no witness to the robbery. Murder to conceal the identity of the criminal is one of eight aggravating circumstances in Nebraska's death penalty law.

Palmer has been tried three times and sentenced to death three times.

More college graduates paying off loans

WASHINGTON—Defaults on student loans are declining as indebted graduates scramble to "do what's right" and the government uses new tools to dig into their wages and tax refunds in case they don't.

Taxpayers are expected to spend \$2 billion this year paying off uncollected student loans, down from a peak of \$3.6 billion in 1991, Education Secretary Richard Riley said Thursday.

"After years of rising defaults, it's going the other way," he said.

The proportion of loans in default dropped to 15 percent in 1992 — the latest year for which figures are available — from a high of 22.4 percent two years earlier.

"What it demonstrates is that the country is not made up of a bunch of people trying to con the federal government," said Leo Kornfeld, deputy assistant education secretary.

"The large majority of people are trying to do what's right," he said.

As usual, federally backed loans for students of beauty, hair and cosmetology schools were among the hardest to recover.

The government took its biggest gamble in

Nevada, where three gaming schools joined a long list of other institutions to drive up the state's default rate on student loans to 34 percent, by far the country's highest.

Louisiana (23.1 percent), Connecticut (22.3), Alaska (21.1), Florida (20.9) and California (20.1) were the other states where more than one in five student loans was in default.

Borrowers in Montana, North Dakota and Vermont were the best at paying up. Less than six percent of ex-students in those states defaulted on their loans — defined as going at least six months without a payment.

The government has toughened student loan rules in the last few years, lowering the benchmark for penalizing schools with high default rates, garnishing the wages and income-tax refunds of delinquent borrowers and making it harder for them to get credit cards and other loans.

"We can see substantial progress through the cooperative efforts of Congress, schools and the Education Department," Riley said in releasing the default rates.

"Yet, more progress needs to be made." Riley reported a fourfold increase in the amount

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LEO KORNFELD

Deputy Assistant Education Secretary

of money collected from the income tax refunds of delinquent borrowers.

The full weight of collection efforts will bring in more than \$500 million on old and newly defaulted loans this year, he said.

It was the second straight year defaults have declined. The rate fell to its lowest level since the Education Department began reporting the figures in 1986, officials said.

Farmers support conservation program

ABERDEEN, S.D. — Farmers and conservationists voiced strong support for continuing the Conservation Reserve Program at a congressional field hearing Thursday.

But even the most vocal advocates, including U.S. Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy, said the program needs an overhaul. The CRP, which pays farmers to leave sensitive land idle, includes 36.4 million acres.

Payments are too high in some areas for land no longer farmed, and that has forced up rental rates on nearby farmland, the panel of lawmakers was told.

Espy said the CRP has reduced soil erosion in the United States by 700 million tons a year, improved wildlife habitat and eased the pressure on federal crop support programs by cutting the size of the annual harvest.

Farmers who have agreed to take

their land out of production for 10 years receive annual payments totaling \$1.8 billion. It is estimated that at least \$1 billion of that would otherwise go to farmers as crop subsidies, called deficiency payments.

"The CRP has been a tremendous benefit," Espy said. "It has reduced deficiency payments, strengthened farm income, and helped supply and demand."

Leland Swenson, president of the National Farmers Union, said the CRP should be extended for another decade. But he said it should be geared only to the most erodeable lands.

"The program should reward good stewardship and good conservation practices rather than be a rescue program to bail out individuals who have destroyed fragile habitat or farmlands which are subject to exceptional erosion," he said.

The program should be scaled back to include only that farmland truly at high risk of erosion, said Carl Anderson, executive secretary of the South Dakota Grain and Feed Association.

The CRP has done little to boost crop prices but has hurt the rural economy by reducing farm spending in small towns across America, he said.

"If you look at a lot of small communities, all that's left is a grain elevator, a bar and maybe a church," Anderson said.

Diane Beaman, who farms near Bath, said the CRP "breathed life back into soil that was ailing and eroded and very sick."

Espy said USDA is working on changes in the program, which will be debated during consideration of the 1995 farm bill.

A more pressing problem now for

the CRP is that it is not included in the federal budget for future years, Espy said, adding that he is trying to get that solved in talks with the Congressional Budget Office.

Members of the congressional panel said the CRP should be extended, although budget restraints make it necessary to revamp the program.

Major changes are likely in the CRP, Johnson said. Land that should not have been accepted in the program may be left out in the future, he said. Payments may be reduced in many instances to more accurately reflect local rental rates on farmland, he said.

Farmers and representatives of wildlife, conservation and agricultural organizations spoke in support of the CRP. Most favored changes in the program, but Ron Hepper, who farms near Isabel, said it should not be revised.

Alcohol kills Omaha man

OMAHA — Alcohol was a factor in the death of an Omaha man who used a funnel to drink wine and beer quickly, an autopsy report showed Wednesday.

Corey Ramsey, 18, died Aug. 11 of positional asphyxia in association with alcoholic intoxication, Douglas County Coroner Tom Haynes said.

The technical description means that his body was positioned in such a way that he couldn't breathe, Haynes said. The autopsy report didn't detail what that positioning was, Haynes said.

The night before Ramsey was found dead, he drank beer and wine through a homemade funnel, teen-agers who were with him told police. They said Ramsey had passed out.

Tests done after Ramsey's death showed his blood-alcohol level was .19, police reports said. That's nearly twice the percentage — .10 — at which drivers are considered drunk under Nebraska law.

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