

Farm Commentary

by Dick Wanner

Must Conservation Be An All Or Nothing Proposition?

Conservation took a beating this week in Harrisburg at a hearing conducted by Rep Kent Shelhamer's House Agriculture Committee. Shelhamer and his colleagues, and most of the witnesses appearing before the committee, drove home the point time and again that conservation was expensive, and the farmer just can't afford to conserve his soil.

Keith Eckle, a Lackawanna County dairyman and vegetable grower, told the committee that he believes conservation pays, but only to a degree. He asked the committee why farmers were still able to grow crops after many years of what the soil scientists said were drastic soil losses. He said farmers in Northwestern Pennsylvania were strongly opposed to the July 1, 1977, deadline set by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Resources for the implementation of conservation plans on Commonwealth farms.

Eckle told the committee that he didn't like the DER deadline, and he also didn't like the way some DER employees were approaching farmer resistance to the deadline. "We had one DER person come to a meeting in Lackawanna County," Eckle told the hearing, "who said he'd strap a gun on if he had to enforce the regulations. I certainly don't think that's a good way to deal with the problem."

We have to agree with Eckle about the gun. Any employee of DER or any other regulatory agency who'd make a statement like that should be at least reprimanded and probably dismissed.

But we cannot endorse any movement which would have us believe that there is no need for soil conservation.

Perhaps farmer resistance is rooted in the origin of the conservation regulations. Nobody wants DER to come to his farm, tell him he's not doing a good job and threaten him with jail. Nobody wants to be told that he's responsible for spoiling Pennsylvania streams, or that he's a poor steward of the soil. Nobody wants to be shamed or forced into complying with the sedimentation regulations of the state's Clean Streams Law.

It seems to us that people are setting up battle lines. You're either for conservation or against it. And if there's any strength in numbers, the people who are against conservation regulations are not only going to win the battles but the war.

We hesitate to join either camp. Farmers are an independent lot, they're beset by economic problems and they are no doubt doing a much better job of conservation than many would have us believe.

But there's also no question that soil is washing away from Pennsylvania farms. Some soil loss is unavoidable. Others is tragically wasteful. Even in Southeastern

Pennsylvania, in the garden spot of the world, one does not have to drive very far to see corn fields plowed and planted in straight rows running up and down steep slopes.

Topsoil from carelessly tilled fields finds its way into the streams of Pennsylvania. Too much sediment can choke the life from a stream, killing fish and aquatic plants. But a dirty stream isn't the real tragedy of soil erosion.

The real tragedy is the loss of topsoil. If topsoil washes away faster than it builds up, we'll sooner or later find ourselves with a shortage of what is by far our most important resource.

We feel that there has to be some way for conservationists and farmers to get together. Many farmers are already dedicated conservationists, but too many, it seems, feel as though they are in danger of being coerced into meeting unreasonable standards.

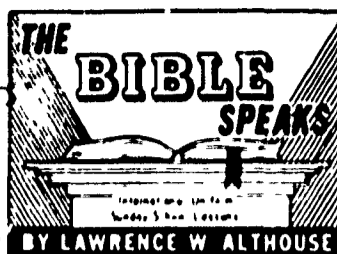
No farmer wants to lose all his topsoil. And no farmer wants to spend thousands of dollars to protect land that he feels is being adequately cared for. SCS people are quick to point out that cropping practices, rotations and contour strips can also reduce erosion, but most farmers are under the impression that they'll be required to build terraces to comply with DER regulations. And they say they can't afford terraces.

It is no doubt theoretically possible to stop all erosion. But this would be an excessive burden to place on farmers. If we have to have laws and regulations governing soil loss, then those rules, we feel, should be aimed at stopping only the soil loss which exceeds the amount that's built up every year by normal farming practices.

Certainly, with this minimum erosion standard, a lot of sediment will still wash into Pennsylvania streams. But if all farmers were to meet this requirement, the silt load would definitely be reduced. And if developers and road builders could be compelled to meet zero erosion standards, then, conservationists tell us, we'd automatically solve 50-percent of our sedimentation problem.

Farmers should be willing and able to meet minimum - rather than absolute - erosion standards. And most farmers want to keep the topsoil on their fields, whether those fields are owned or rented. We feel government policy should be aimed at encouraging farmers to meet minimum erosion standards and helping them when they need help. And in cases of extreme neglect, farmers should be just as liable for prosecution as careless roadbuilders and developers.

Conservation practices can be an invaluable management tool in the operation of a successful farm. But conservation laws that are too stringent can put farmers out of business.



ON SEEING STARS Lesson for April 6, 1975

Background Scripture: Psalms 104.
Devotional Reading: Psalms 95:1-7.

Some evenings ago, frustrated with seemingly endless and insoluble problems, I decided to take a walk in order to "clear out the cobwebs." As I walked along in the inky darkness, I happened to glance upwards and was surprised to find the dark sky punctured with millions of bright, shining lights. Like a gawking tourist who was seeing them for the first time, I stood and stared upward for a long time.

Suddenly I was aware that the "cobwebs" were gone. The light of those myriad stars had cleared my vision. For a while I was absorbed into something that utterly dwarfed my problems: a picture window into God's great universe!

"Thou art very great!"
When was the last time you stood and looked into the sky on a beautiful starry night? Can you remember in your mind's eye the thousands of twinkling lights? Few of us can look into such a sky without a deep sense of awe and reverence overcoming us.

It had been a long time since I had looked into the heavens on such a night. This is a statement I make with regret since it is only a matter of a few days since I had seen a cruel face, a littered lawn, a dingy street. I am not suggesting that we should not look at these things - we can hardly help it - but that if we only see these things and miss the starry skies, the red sunsets, and the wild flowers of the field, we are missing something vital.

The ancient man lived closer to these things than most of us do today. He tended flocks on the hills of Judea and had the whole evening to contemplate the heavens. He walked along winding roads and had time to see the wayside flowers and stop beside the quiet pools and springs.

Not us . . . we whizz along the highways, seeing little but the ever present billboards and discarded refuse. We drive to school, to work, to play and there is no time for wayside flowers and quiet streams.

"I will sing praise"
A number of years ago I led a group of high school youths on a bicycle trip over some terrain that I thought was quite familiar to me. Many times I had driven over the roads of this area. Yet, how different it seemed by bicycle! How differently things looked! There were so many things I had never even noticed before.

Perhaps this is why we miss so much that is around us: we don't take time to really see what is there. Yet, when we do, we find God speaking to us through what he has created. Suddenly we are confronted with something bigger than ourselves and our own problems and concerns.

Obviously, it was an ex-



NOW IS THE TIME . . .

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To Prepare Soil Conservation Plan.

Considerable publicity is being given to the Pennsylvania Clean Stream Law requiring land owners to develop a soil conservation plan by July 1, 1977. There are rumors of this deadline being extended, but we do not have any definite information on this fact at this time. The important thing is that land owners should be interested in controlling both water and soil erosion from their land. This is good soil husbandry at any time. The law does not state any particular person or agency to prepare this plan. It may be done by individual farmers, or some of the agencies interested in soil and water conservation. It does not have to be done by the Soil Conservation Service or the District, even though these two agencies have assumed the responsibility of developing conservation plans when the land owner signs the request for this assistance. Farmers are urged to be alert for future developments.

To Evaluate Machinery Purchases

Many farm management authorities claim that the great majority of our farmers have over-invested in farm machinery; they purchase large machines for small acreages in which case the overhead investment is too big. At a recent meeting Fred Hughes of Penn State suggested that farmers and bankers take a good look at machinery investments and be sure the volume of the farm operation will justify the investment. In many cases the work can be done by custom operators, or the purchase made in cooperation with neighbors, in order to make the investment a good one. The temptation for a new machine, or a larger piece of machinery is very strong on the part of many farmers. The question to answer is, "Will its useage pay for the machine?"

Farm Calendar

Saturday, April 5

Manheim Young Farmers and wives bowling night.

Monday, April 7

7:30 p.m. - Manheim Young Farmers monthly meeting on Land Tax.

experience such as this that led the psalmist to declare:
Bless the Lord, O my soul!
O Lord my God, thou art very great!

(Psalms 104:1)
When life closes in around us and we have forgotten the Source of our being, it is then that we must once again lift up our eyes and see the stars and turn once more to the Creator who made us and sustains us.

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To Protect Milk Flavor

The grazing season is approaching when some milking herds will go to pasture; fresh grass may cause a "grassy" flavor in the milk flow and cause rejection by the milk dealer. This is especially true if the pasture contains wild garlic. If garlic is present, then dry cows or heifers should be used to graze the area for the first week in order to reduce the amount of garlic. Milking cows should be removed from any lush pasture at least 4 to 5 hours before the next milking period and kept in a well ventilated barn. Good herd management on fresh pastures is needed at this time of the year.

To Go Easy On Credit

Many farmers do need credit at various times of the year and this is often considered good management. However, with depressed prices of farm products and higher prices of inputs, producers are urged to be careful of not getting too much credit and then not being able to meet the payments. For example, to borrow money to expand the swine business when feeder pigs are bringing 80 cents per pound, might get a producer in the financial bind if he has to pay for the expansion with pigs worth only 50 cents per pound. This same situation might apply to rental costs on corn ground this spring, if the arrangements were made last fall when corn was worth much more. Use caution and planning in getting farm credit at this time.

7:30 - 9:30 p.m. - Vegetable Gardening Meeting at the North Chester County Tech School in Phoenix.

8:00 p.m. - Lancaster County Poultry Association directors meeting at the Farm and Home Center.

7:45 p.m. - Eastern Lebanon County Soil Conservation District Planning meeting at the Elco High School vo-ag classroom.

Tuesday, April 8

7:30 - 9:30 p.m. - Vegetable Gardening Clinic meeting at the Community Center in West Chester.

6:30 p.m. - Ephrata Young Farmer's Ladies' Night at the Cloister Restaurant in Ephrata.

Thursday, April 10

7:30 p.m. - Elizabethtown Young Farmers meeting at the E-town ag classroom on Farm Management.

1:00 - 4:00 p.m. and 7:00 - 10:00 p.m. York County Home Ground Seminar meeting with topics on landscaping and planting techniques at the 4-H Center in Bair.

7:30 - 9:30 p.m. - Vegetable Gardening Clinic meeting at the North Coventry Grange in Pottstown.

7:00 p.m. - Berks County conservation banquet at the Berks vo-tech West

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