



Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Modern agriculture is doing some tremendous things, producing at levels not even dreamed of a few years ago. Average yields continue to increase and more and more acres are brought into our modern system of intensive cropping. Over the past few decades, small farms have given way to larger, more efficient units and the old ways have yielded to modern mechanization.

Prior to World War II, the typical farm included quite a few animals such as beef and dairy cows, draft horses, hogs, and maybe even some sheep.

But then came the era of bigness and specialization and those little farms were merged into larger units. That meant fence rows and pastureland disappeared. And rolling hills once suited only for grazing and hay production came under the plow.

As this kind of intensive agriculture continues, some conservationists are starting to worry about the future, and they're asking some pretty serious questions.

Former Secretary of Agriculture Bob Berglan says we are on a collision course with disaster. Our

water supplies are being reduced, we have whole watersheds where the ground water resources are being depleted, and we have mined our soil.

In fact, he says, the erosion of America's farmland is probably at a record rate and thus simply cannot go on.

Knowledgeable experts agree with Berglan, pointing to major changes that need to be made in the way we farm our soil. And yet other knowledgeable observers point to new yield and productivity levels across the country and say that the conservation collision talk is a bunch of baloney.

No matter which side of this conservation issue you line up on, it's hard not to recognize that there is a growing national concern about soil erosion. Maybe they're ill-informed, but a lot of folks are wondering about increased erosion that's polluting our streams and lakes with silt, fertilizers and chemicals. And they're wondering whether this erosion, if left unchecked, will eventually reduce the nation's ability to produce food.

Knowledgeable or not, these concerned citizens know that soil erosion reduces agricultural productivity while at the same

time polluting water and air. And those factors have serious consequences for our future security and well being.

Locally, soil erosion may not be a big deal, although I suspect it's a bigger factor than most farm people want to admit. Nationally, there are some downright disgraces going on. I've seen land being farmed, in Iowa for example, that had no business being tilled. Fields that once provided excellent pasture and hay crops have been plowed and planted to corn and soybeans, and the erosion was obvious to passing motorists on the interstate.

But the push is on to get maximum yields per acre and to use every acre that's available.

Former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz urged farmers to plow their ground right to the fence rows. That was his way of saying we needed an all-out push to increase food output to meet domestic and foreign demands. Some farmers took him literally, plowing land that should have been left in grass.

A little erosion here and a little there adds up to one gigantic erosion problem, one that may require government action.

It took the government and its many programs to stop the erosion abuses of the 1920's and 30's, and that may be just what will be required again. When farm prices were low, land relatively cheap, government incentives strong, and when there was a surplus of farm products, it was fairly easy to change farming habits and emphasize soil conservation.

Programs that encouraged farmers to terrace, plant cover crops, provide drainage systems, and build waterways were effective. But can that be done again when farmers are anxious to till every possible inch of ground and not be worried with man-made obstacles that stand in the way of large tillage equipment?

Those in the forefront of the current soil conservation movement feel that farmers and landowners aren't apt to bite the conservation bullet on their own, and they're calling for some completely new approaches to promote better conservation.

That includes. Direct government rules and regulations on how land can be farmed.

More government incentives to use conservation practices.

Cross-compliance with commodity programs wherein a farmer not using approved practices would not qualify for government loans.

Some of the really radical thinkers are saying farm exports should be restricted because current high commodity prices are encouraging farmers to plant marginal acres.

There are two key points that must be dealt with in an national dialogue on conservation. First, is erosion really increasing significantly; and second, if erosion is increasing, what's the best way to deal with it?

The most widely quoted

statistics on soil erosion come out of a study conducted by the Soil Conservation Service following passage of the Soil and Water Resource Conservation Act of 1977.

That study points out that of the nation's 413 million acres of cropland, only two-thirds or 272 million acres are considered at a safe level of erosion, meaning that those acres are losing less than five tons of soil per acre per year. Conservationists believe on those acres, soil is being rebuilt about as fast as it's being lost.

That means that another third of our cropland is losing soil faster than it's gaining and eventually it will be worn out.

Of course, these are only estimates and there is considerable room for error. And you can find experts on both sides of the soil conservation issue.

It's my guess that soil conservation will be an important item on the national agricultural agenda during this decade and that farmers will see some new restrictions and new incentives aimed at cutting down the level of erosion whether it be considered excessive or not.

Del. veg guide now available

NEWARK, Del. — The 1981 edition of "Commercial Vegetable Production Recommendations" is now available to Delaware farmer.

The guide was prepared by the Extension Service and is intended to help commercial growers make the many managerial decisions they're faced with over the growing season.

The publication contains information on soil management, testing, liming and fertilizing; production of transplants; irrigation; air pollution injury;

pesticide formulation and application; detection and control of soil pests; pesticide safety; as well as specific recommendations regarding many commercial vegetable crops.

It is not for use by home gardeners.

Commercial growers interested in obtaining a copy should contact their county extension office in Newark 302/738-2506, Dover 302/736-4675, or Georgetown 302/856-5250.

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