



Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Don't be too surprised if you hear a lot about soil conservation over the next few years. The warning has been sounded and now the struggle begins to do something about the millions of tons of soil that are lost each year in this country.

It's a bit frightening when you think about the magnitude of the loss and the thin layer of topsoil that covers this country. Really, only a few inches of productive land is all we have between abundance and starvation. And we're losing it at an annual rate of 5.5 billion tons of soil.

They may not mean much, but a Department of Agriculture expert has figured it out as enough soil to cover the state of Iowa with a layer an inch thick. And that's an annual loss. How many years can such abuse continue?

It apparently took millions of years without tillage to develop our rich productive agricultural soil. And in no more than a couple of centuries we have seriously threatened the very basis of agriculture.

Maybe it will take another Dust

Bowl to turn this country around and head it toward the conservation mindedness necessary to turn the tide. As the stories go, back in the thirties a combination of improper farming practices and dry weather created the great dust storm that actually darkened the skies over the nation's capital.

Then things started to happen. It didn't take many days to produce a whole raft of legislation aimed at doing something about soil conservation.

And so for 30 or 40 years, there was a great national consciousness among farmers that soil should be preserved.

Then came the opportunity for agricultural exports and the plug was pulled out and farmers started plowing land that should never have been tilled. Since then we've had some dry years that has left millions of acres barren and susceptible to wind and water erosion.

Conservationists point out the stake in protecting farm topsoil has risen sharply. With so many more people to feed, failure to better protect our topsoil even-

tually could mean hunger for millions

"Soils being taken by erosion generally are the richest in nutrients and organic matter and have the most favorable conditions for plant growth," according to Norman Berg, chief of USDA's Soil Conservation Service.

He says this constitutes a significant drain on the productive potential of land where our food is produced. Berg compares soil losses to bags of money floating down the nation's rivers. Figured at 1979 prices, he estimates the putting all of the lost nitrogen and phosphorus and one-fourth of the lost potassium back into the damaged land would add up to 18 billion dollars in just one year.

At today's erosion rate, Berg says food supplies will be seriously threatened in about 100 years. In

Iowa, as one example, half of the original topsoil of 6 to 8 inches already has been lost from sloping, unprotected land during the century that state has been farmed. Estimates are equally grim for many other states.

So what can farmers do to turn this soil conservation problem around? They already have the know-how and the technical support required. It's really just a matter of priorities.

Is soil conservation more important than extra profits? Is it worth giving up some current income in exchange for future potential? Does it really matter that some other generation may run out of soil as long as this one is well kept?

It seems to me a heavy burden to place on farmers to ask them to save the nation's soil for future

mankind all by themselves. If farmers have an obligation to be stewards of the soil, then surely the public, through tax dollars and governmental agencies, have an obligation to help pay the bill. And that has nothing to do with government handouts or special treatment or anything else that smacks of favoritism.

Our land tenure system allows farmers to own their land, but it really makes no provision for its continued preservation.

In the early days of this country, farmers would till the soil until it was "worn out" and then just move on. And that was what helped settled this great country.

But then we figured out how to save those worn-out farms and get them back into production. Now it

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