

Where are the farmlands of the future?

DENVER, Colo. — Where are the farmlands of the future? The western states are running out of water; the Northeast hasn't much farmland left, and the Midwest is already at maximum production of grain. However, throughout the Southeast, vast acreages of prime agricultural land are not being used.

"We have potential that hasn't even been tapped yet," said Michael Sprott, director of the Alabama Cooperative Extension Service. "The South is the largest pool of Class 1 and 2 land in the world."

Some of the land belongs to rural people who inherited their land but cannot afford to farm.

"There are a lot of people who own 25-40 acres which do not produce income so they work in town," according to John Brown,

Jr., Director of the Southeast Alabama Self-Help Association. In Alabama, property taxes are so low land owners have little incentive to make their land produce an income.

Much of the South's best farmland is in pasture, depleted by a century of cotton production. These grazing lands have made the Southeast a major beef producer; but the land is becoming overgrazed; there is a drought, and the beef market is down. With the promise of wheat sales to Russia, some farmers are plowing their pastures this spring to plant wheat; others are putting in soybeans.

Timber companies are also beginning to realize the potential of their forests to produce crops other than pulpwood for paper. In southern Alabama, timber com-

panies have clear-cut some of their forest land and leased it to tenant farmers for row crops. After 10 years, the land is to be returned to the companies to produce another crop of trees.

The South's best land, the bottom lands along rivers, is under water. In Alabama, the Tennessee Valley Authority dammed every free-flowing river in the 1950's, flooding huge tracts of land.

Prime farmland which is under water, under forest, or simply under-utilized, is termed "in reserve," available for agricultural production should the need or the economic potential arise.

Already a need is arising. A migration of northerners and northern industry to the South is increasing local demand for food. At present, nearly all vegetables

sold in southern supermarkets are trucked in from Texas and California. With transportation costs rising steadily, the increasing demand for food in the south may make it economically feasible to grow vegetables there once again.

Even if growing food does not become as profitable as growing pulpwood for paper, some agricultural experts think that timber companies would be wise to take a portion of their land out of forest to grow field crops.

"I'm afraid that we're getting into the same situation with timber that we had with cotton," said Wade Hurt of the US Soil Conservation Service in Auburn, Alabama. When the boll weevil came along, it not only wiped out all the cotton, it destroyed the South's cotton-based economy as well.

The agricultural potential of the South as a food producer is already being challenged by industrial growth. According to Robert Gray, Director of the National Agricultural Lands Study of the US Dept. of Agriculture, the land issue is "Most acute in the South and

Southeast, partly because of population migration from the North, but also because of growing industrial activity in these areas."

The conversion of agricultural land to industrial purposes has been most extensive in Alabama's most productive county, in the Tennessee River Valley. An area of small farms, it has been bought up because of the availability of cheap water.

A drought, now in its second year with summer '81 forecasts indicating hotter and drier weather than normal, also threatens to force small farmers to sell their land.

"We still have a plantation system," said Duna Norton, of the University of Alabama's Program for Rural Services and Research. "But now it's the corporate plantations that are controlling the land."

Some experts are not at all sure that the South can preserve its agricultural lands, but others feel certain that because of its resource of prime farm land, the South will rise again as the agricultural center of the US.



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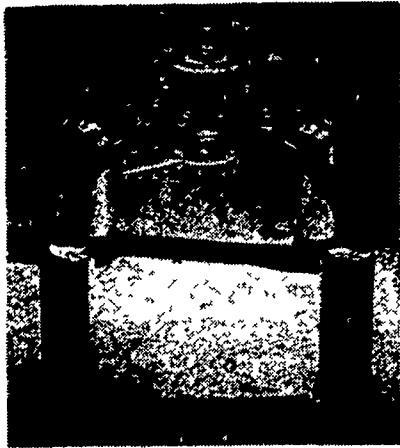
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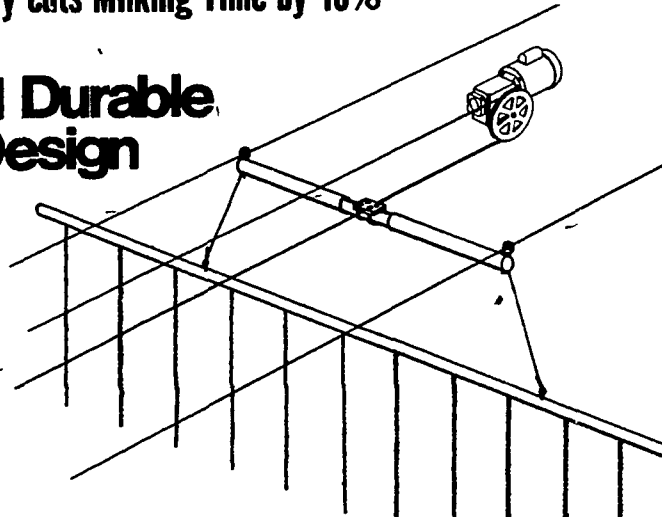
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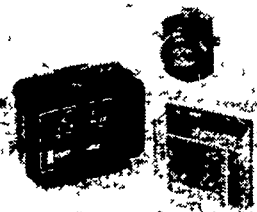
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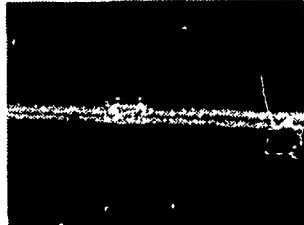
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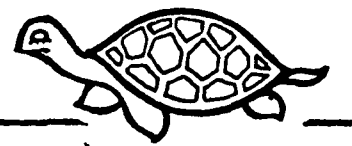
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