

# Outstanding conservationists

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look to the future, Gray reviewed what happened to conservation farming during the past 20 years. He noted that during the 1960s, surpluses created the atmosphere which led to farmers being encouraged to keep land out of production. Then, in the 1970s, an increased export demand set the pace for fencerow to fencerow farming.

"During the 1970s, one out of every ten acres of crops was exported. Today that figure has jumped to one out of every three acres. And in ten more years, there won't be any surpluses because of the growing world-wide demand for food," commented Gray. "As a result, there'll be tremendous pressures put on our land base."

Along with the increased production occurring on the nation's cropland, Gray also expressed his concern that erosion has been increasing.

"During the past five years the erosion rate in the U.S. has been greater than it's ever been since the Dust Bowl," he remarked. "Today we're losing 5 tons of soil on each acre — that's more than 1/2 of our cropland."

Erosion is not the only problem threatening the nation's farmland, according to Gray. Land conversion also is of grave concern. He cited the exodus of people and industry from urban to suburban and rural areas which has increased competition with farmers for land.

Gray estimated that 1 million acres of cropland are taken out of agriculture each year through conversion. An additional 1 million acres is lost through soil erosion. He stressed that these figures represent the loss of prime

agricultural land — if all the land lost to erosion and conversion was tallied, the figures would be considerably higher.

"The U.S. has 2.2 billion acres of cropland within its borders, but only a small chunk of that is productive land — about 20 percent. This prime agricultural land is not a big amount, but it's important because it is the underpinning for our nation's economy."

"If farmers can't make a living on good land, they certainly won't be able to make anything on marginal land."

To help save the best farmland, Gray recommended that farmers work with local officials and land development organizations to deflect population and industrial growth away from these key areas. He encouraged legislation to provide legal protection of farmland at the local, county, and state levels.

In his work with the American Farmland Trust, Gray explained this private, nonprofit organization is working towards finding solutions to the nation's erosion problems. He noted that his group is not hobbled by the bureaucracy and red tape that ties up government progress in finding the needed answers.

"It's still going to take time," Gray admitted. "There's no magic wand. But erosion and conversion of our nation's farmland will continue unless we find solutions to turn these problems around."

What's important is that we figure out which solution — ag districting, tax credits, or combinations of these ideas — works best in any particular area."

In closing, Gray shared with the

group the wisdom printed on a plaque in his dentist's office — "Ignore your teeth and they'll go away."

Paraphrasing this idea and molding it to his conservation sentiments, Gray concluded, "Ignore your land and it will go away."

# USDA welcomes

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Agriculture Richard Lyng's optimism following the symposium.

Lyng, who chaired the first-day activities, said he was "quite pleased," with the interest exhibited by more than 250 people that attended.

Those attending represented a cross-section of the dairy industry

across the nation. Feed dealers, producers, co-op leaders and handlers arrived with the same attitude, said Lyng. All recognized that a problem existed and the proposals that followed indicated that a solution could lie with the people that know the industry best. — DT

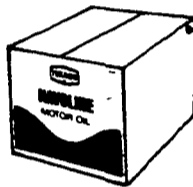
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