

More erosion control still remains

NEWARK, Del. — "Fifty years of erosion control work has helped shape Delaware agriculture, but there's still too much muddy water leaving our fields. And there's still too much dust and sand riding the winds, headed for the Delaware Bay," says William H. Mitchell, retired University of Delaware agronomist and professor emeritus. The muddy water and dust represent the life of the soil — its precious topsoil, which is being lost on Delmarva and all over America at an alarming rate. "A society that lets its soil erode

and deteriorate is headed downhill," the agronomist warns. "Here on the peninsula, we're too often lulled by the flatness of our coastal plain. But our flat sandy soil has all the ingredients of a first-rate wind erosion disaster. Forests are being turned into fields and hedgerows are being bulldozed in the interest of production efficiency, giving the winds a bigger playground."

Economics have pushed growers to the brink, and to get by, some have turned to short-range solutions. In response to the

financial squeeze, some have dropped cover crops and rotations in favor of intensive cultivation, Mitchell says. Soybean acreage continues to rise, making this the most commonly grown crop in the state. It's also the crop that contributes most to soil erosion.

Looking on the brighter side of this picture, the agronomist points out that Delaware now has the highest percentage of cropland in no-tillage of any state in the U.S.

"No-till mulch cover crops are blanketing the land, shutting down the erosion process," he says.

"Legumes like hairy vetch and crimson clover are adding nitrogen to the no-tillage system, thus helping solve our energy problems in addition to boosting yields."

Mitchell credits private industry as well as soil conservation district workers for helping convince farmers to adopt conservation tillage. But he says it's too soon to relax the effort. "Not enough people, urban or rural, understand the seriousness of the erosion problem. They don't see it as the

concern of society - of all of us - that is really is."

Most people close to the issue agree that more emphasis should be put on education. "Action projects are needed," says the agronomist, "to show what erosion is, what it's costing us, and how to go about correcting it."

The technology is in place to reduce critical soil losses from agricultural land. But to succeed, the effort must have the full cooperation of farmers and their city cousins in both the public and private sectors.

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