

# Our Land Policy Takes Shape

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THE American record of land misuse is almost unparalleled. Perhaps only the Chinese can match it. But they have been on the job longer than we have. It has often been remarked that the Chinese are the greatest individualists on earth. They cut their forests, silted up their streams, and destroyed millions of acres of their land by erosion. Their soil, shorn of its cover, fed countless dust storms. Again and again their individualistic handling of the land has exposed millions of Chinese to flood and drought, to famine, pestilence, and death.

During the past 150 years in the United States we have managed our lands in ways that indicate even more destructive possibilities. Over large areas the American record is worse than the Chinese, for we have made no real effort to restore to the soil the fertility which has been removed. We have permitted the livestock of the West to overgraze the public domain and so expose it to wind and water erosion. We have seen the grass lands of the Great Plains plowed and exposed to terrific wind erosion. We have seen stand after stand of virgin timber cut down without provision for seed trees and without regard for the consequences in terms of erosion, floods, and struggling communities. Year after year we stood by while our public lands were despoiled. What happened to privately owned lands, meanwhile, was literally nobody's business. All of this has been careless, thoughtless, wanton, and to the disadvantage of nearly every one.

It would not be correct, I suppose, to say that there was no land policy in those days. We wanted to settle the continent; men were land-hungry; in the midst of labor agitations and industrial depressions, the land became the national safety-valve. It was easy, with these pressures at the boiling-point, with much land available, to assume that the operation of individual self-interest through private ownership would bring about a maximum production of wealth, satisfactory distribution, sound methods of land use, and a wholesome community life. Our land policy therefore became one of encouragement, even to the extent of subsidy, of getting every last acre of publicly owned land into private ownership.

We almost succeeded, perhaps would have but for two or

three factors. Private enterprise couldn't find any profitable use for some of the public domain; areas that had been used and discarded left a residue of ghost towns, tax delinquency, erosion and water problems too plain to be ignored; and the national conscience began to awaken to what had been happening when the conservation movement got under way under the powerful leadership of Gifford Pinchot and Theodore Roosevelt. The fears of the conservationists of that day may have been somewhat exaggerated, but at bottom the movement was surely justified and the results plainly in the public interest. For it led to the reservation of 160 million acres of



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public land in the West for administration as national forests, and the reservation of other areas of unusual scenic, scientific, or historical interest as national parks and monuments.

This was a significant reversal of our traditional land policy. It was likewise an admission that individualistic land management, free from the checkrein of a social conscience, does not always add up to the common good. After that it was not long before professional foresters began asking why remaining areas of good timber should likewise be wrecked and thrown back for public to salvage. Public sentiment for a new deal in the use of our natural resources, whether owned privately or publicly, was becoming irresistible. It even became possible, in 1933, for a public agency to submit a report (the Copeland

Report) recommending the ultimate acquisition, by local, state and federal governments, of 234 million acres now in various stages of private ownership.

Important as the results of this conservation movement were, they involved non-farming areas primarily. We were at last concerned about our timber resources, and about our reserves of oil and minerals below the surface of the land, but we had not yet become very much concerned about the land itself. Unlike European nations, whose agricultural policies have rested on land policies, we have traditionally devised agricultural policies without much reference to land policy, which accounts, in some measure, for the frequent conflicts in past policies toward agriculture and toward land.

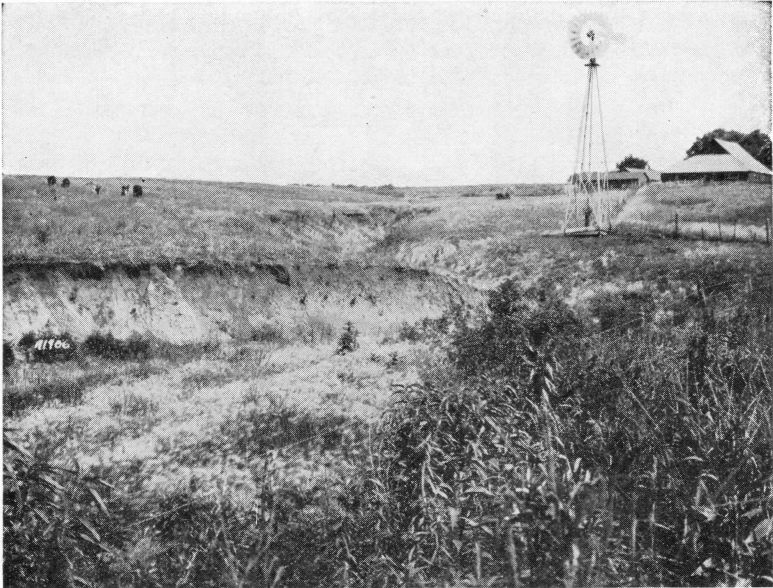
The conviction that there were land use problems in farming as well as in non-farming areas found expression a number of years ago in the Department of Agriculture and in several of the state agricultural colleges and experiment stations. Finally, in 1919, a committee appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture recommended the organization of a land economics division in the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, then known as the Bureau of Farm Management and Farm Economics. In the same year Dr. L. C. Gray was appointed economist in charge of land economics, and in the administration of Henry C. Wallace the division of land economics was established.

The organization of the land economics division in the Department of Agriculture, the researches in land utilization and tenure carried on by it and by many of the States, many of them cooperative state-federal projects, have helped set the stage for action. The national land use conference in 1913, and the work of committees springing from it, gave further impetus to the movement. But the most impelling forces have been those growing out of the problem of the agricultural surplus, the plight of the submarginal areas, and the burden of relief for the unemployed.

When this administration came into power, it was no longer possible to content ourselves with research and hopeful advice; there had to be action. Partly as a result of drought, partly as a result of adjustment programs, the surpluses have been in most cases disposed of, and that problem now becomes one of controlling expansion; on the problem of submarginal areas, on the necessity for providing new opportunities for the unemployed, we have taken certain tentative experimental steps.

Most of the activities now under way can be summarized about as follows: First, we are inducing producers of major crops to keep some of their land out of production temporarily, but we are encouraging them to use this opportunity to build

up fertility on these idle acres; second, we are buying several million acres of submarginal land (submarginal for farming, that is) to be kept out of commercial production permanently; third, we are offering thousands of distressed families, both rural and urban, an opportunity to relocate in areas where they can at least produce their own food, and eventually obtain their cash income from industry; fourth, we are trying to make secure our vast assets in publicly owned land, not only because of the effect on that public property itself, but also



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because of the effect on private property with in the sphere of influence.

Agriculture's stake in these activities is obvious. Our hopes for an agriculture properly balanced in relation to industry and to the world market, are in large measure bound up in this land program. Even now many are asking, "When the emergency task of keeping good farm land out of production is finished, will our land policy be such that it can serve as the foundation of our whole agricultural program?" For our new land policy will not be concerned merely with conserving; it will have a great deal to say, I take it, with wise utilization of our lands; it will affect not only the public domain, but the private domain as well.

We are of necessity proceeding under a handicap; we do not yet know the answer to one fundamental question. We do not know whether our agriculture and our industry are to move toward nationalistic self-sufficiency, toward internationalism, or to some planned middle course. America has not yet chosen. The administration is doing everything in its power to induce a choice, but as yet the answer is fragmentary and confused. The efforts of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration are, as you know, an attempt to hold the fort for agriculture until some decision is made by the people themselves. If consumers and processors dislike the motive-power of the Adjustment Act, the processing tax, are they ready to admit imports from abroad in sufficient quantities to restore the foreign purchasing power for our farm product exports?

Until the answer to that question comes clear and loud, agriculture cannot say for sure whether it needs 325 million or 375 million acres in cultivation. No one expects, of course, that submarginal land purchases alone will keep farm production in balance with supply, but these purchases in conjunction with other elements in a national land program can be determining over a period of years. Pending this fundamental choice, we can of course advance a good distance in a land program, as we are advancing now, but I hope the people realize how tentative all our plans must continue to be until America makes up its mind which way it prefers to go.

The formation of the National Resources Board, and the publication of its report, are among the most significant steps taken recently in our progress toward a national, unified policy of land use. At last we are accumulating a body of knowledge upon which intelligent action may be based. If the recommendations contained in this report are put into effect, there is every reason to believe that the untold waste of our natural resources will cease, and that on the contrary we shall see these national treasures enriched and enlarged as time goes on. Surely this is a shining goal to fight towards, and one which will enlist the support and services of thousands of young men and women who today are groping for just such an incentive.

