



Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition and Forestry
United States Senate

A Statement By
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Washington Representative
Soil Conservation Society
of
America

April 19, 1983

Mr. Chairman, I am Norman A. Berg, Washington Representative of the Soil Conservation Society of America. Mr. Walt Peechatka, Executive Vice President of SCSA, with headquarters in Ankeny, Iowa asked that I present this statement.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry we appreciate this opportunity. The SCSA intends to increase its visibility in our Nation's Capitol and we will seek out the chance to be heard on soil and water conservation issues of concern to our 13,000 members.

The thrust of S. 663 represents one of those areas wherein SCSA will offer its knowledge and support. In the interest of your time, Mr. Chairman, and with your permission, I would ask that the full text of SCSA's statement be inserted in the record of these hearings. This describes the mission of SCSA and

reflects our long standing concern for and dedication to the science and art of good land use. As a Charter member and Fellow of the Society and former Chief of the Soil Conservation Service I learned long ago that the task of combating soil erosion, or any soil and water conservation problem, is a complex challenge with no fast or simple solution. It is also a never-ending task that needs constant care, maintenance and updating for new conditions.

Therefore, we commend those who have elevated the problem of soil erosion-caused by Federal government programs-to this level of concern. Denying federal economic incentives for crops grown on newly plowed land that should remain in grass or trees because of its limited capability for intensive agriculture has had our support for a long time.

The Administration's "National Program for Soil and Water Conservation" presented to Congress on December 22, 1982 by the President as the blueprint for the future for soil and water conservation has this statement on page 33 under improved program management.

" -- Increasing consistency between USDA programs and conservation objectives. -- All the Department's programs will be evaluated for their consistency with conservation aims. For example, USDA will assess the effects that production adjustment and agricultural income support programs have on soil and water conditions. USDA will change programs that tend to condone or subsidize land uses that deplete resources. USDA's Natural Resources and Environment Committee has the leadership for ensuring that USDA programs support the Department's objectives for resource conservation".

We commend this USDA statement of good intentions, and feel that S. 663 will help them do their job. In fact, without this legislation very little will happen in program and policy change to solve this matter within USDA.

Subsidies take many forms. Cash payments, tax breaks, below market credit, providing goods and services below market prices, buying goods and services above market prices, and regulatory actions that alter market prices or market behavior. The specific reasons for the existence of subsidies would fill volumes but all subsidies have two things in common. First, the government does not expect to be repaid. Second, there is a quid pro quo, that is, a change in market price, in the quantity of a good or service, or in market behavior that is expected to result from the subsidy. These changes may or may not come to pass, but change is nonetheless part of the reason for the subsidy.

Subsidies are not necessarily bad although the term is pejorative. A subsidy is bad only if it is not what the public wants or if the quid pro quo is "hollow", that is the subsidy promises a change that it cannot deliver.

We feel it's time to stop the federal farm program subsidies that have helped to make unwise land use decisions profitable. We know that nearly 41,000,000 acres of highly erodible land -- contributing 23% of the Nations annual soil loss -- will be "grandfathered in" and remain eligible for farm program benefits. These problem areas need to be dealt with soon in a broader context as the Nation examines the total soil and water conservation effort.

However, the U.S. should not continue to add to an already serious problem. The potential for more of these type acres to be plowed out is substantial.

I've attached three figures to my statement that show:

Figure 1 -- The use of non-federal land in the U.S. including the Carribbean area (1977).

Figure 2 -- The land capability percentages for non-federal rural land (1977).

Figure 3 -- The percentages of soil in capability classes I - VIII, by farm production regions.

Projections of future U.S. land for crops depends on several factors including:

- the growth of food demand including foreign trade;
- the prospects for improved yields including rate of technology growth and adoption;
- the condition of the resource base including soil and water;
- the price of agricultural products; and
- the tradeoffs of converting land now used for grazing and trees including the impact on the quality of the environment.

Estimates of the additional cropland that will be needed under a worst case scenario by 2000 range from 26 to 113 million acres. Total land suitable for continuous cultivation (Figure 2 - Classes I, II and III) totals about 200,000,000 million acres more than the 413,000,000 acres now identified as cropland (Figure 1).

However, (Figure 3) shows that the 10 regions are not equal in physical capability. Perhaps a total inventory of about 540 million acres of arable land is a more reasonable estimate. The USDA/RCA grassland and forestland (for potential cropland acreage) is actually less -- around 127 million acres. This estimate will be improved with the 1982 NRI data.

Therefore, we do not need the highly erodible land for cropland now and should not subsidize land use conversion in those capability Classes IVe, VIe, VII and VIII. S. 663 has the unqualified support of SCSA.

As I prepared this statement I was reminded that on February 15, 1951 USDA Secretary Charles F. Branman issued Memorandum 1278. It proved to be an important action needed to solve organizational problems that has plagued the Department since the beginning of the federal soil conservation programs. It gave each of the key USDA agencies a share of responsibility for soil conservation, while allowing each to retain its historic identity. That historic action stated:

"The basic physical objective of soil conservation activities by Department agencies shall be the use of each acre of agricultural land within its capabilities and the treatment of each acre of agricultural land in accordance with its needs for protection and improvement."

Early enactment into law, policy and the necessary follow through for implementation of S. 663 should be in total harmony with that bold objective of over three decades ago.

Thank you for the invitation to this hearing. SCSA will help you in any way we can to make the "Sodbuster Bill" a reality.

The Soil Conservation Society of America is a nonprofit scientific and educational organization founded in 1945. SCSA is dedicated to promoting the conservation of land and water resources to the end that these resources may be used and enjoyed by mankind forever.

Our membership worldwide, now totaling more than 13,000, includes researchers, conservationists, educators, technicians, legislators, farmers and ranchers, local conservation officials and many other disciplines.

SCSA is governed by a Council consisting of seven officers and 10 councilmen. Our 1983 officers come from Oregon, Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas, and Ohio.

Periodicals published by SCSA include the Journal of Soil and Water Conservation and the "Conservogram." The Journal is a source of continuing education and technical information for members and nonmembers alike, including general interest articles, articles on policy matters, research reports, guest editorials, and commentary.

SCSA also publishes a variety of other materials. These include books, such as Soil Conservation Policies, Institutions, and Incentives, Remote Sensing for Resource Management, and the third edition of our Resource Conservation Glossary, as well as a series of educational cartoon booklets for students in the upper elementary grades.

When appropriate, SCSA develops position statements on timely, pertinent conservation subjects. Over the years, the organization has expressed its position on water resources, soil erosion and sedimentation control, land use, wildlife, conservation research, and a number of other issues. Currently under development is a position statement on acid precipitation.

The strength of SCSA exists within its 165 chapters throughout the United States and Canada. These chapters elect their own officers, create their own committees, and sponsor annual meetings, workshops, and numerous other conservation projects. SCSA is truly a local grassroots organization.

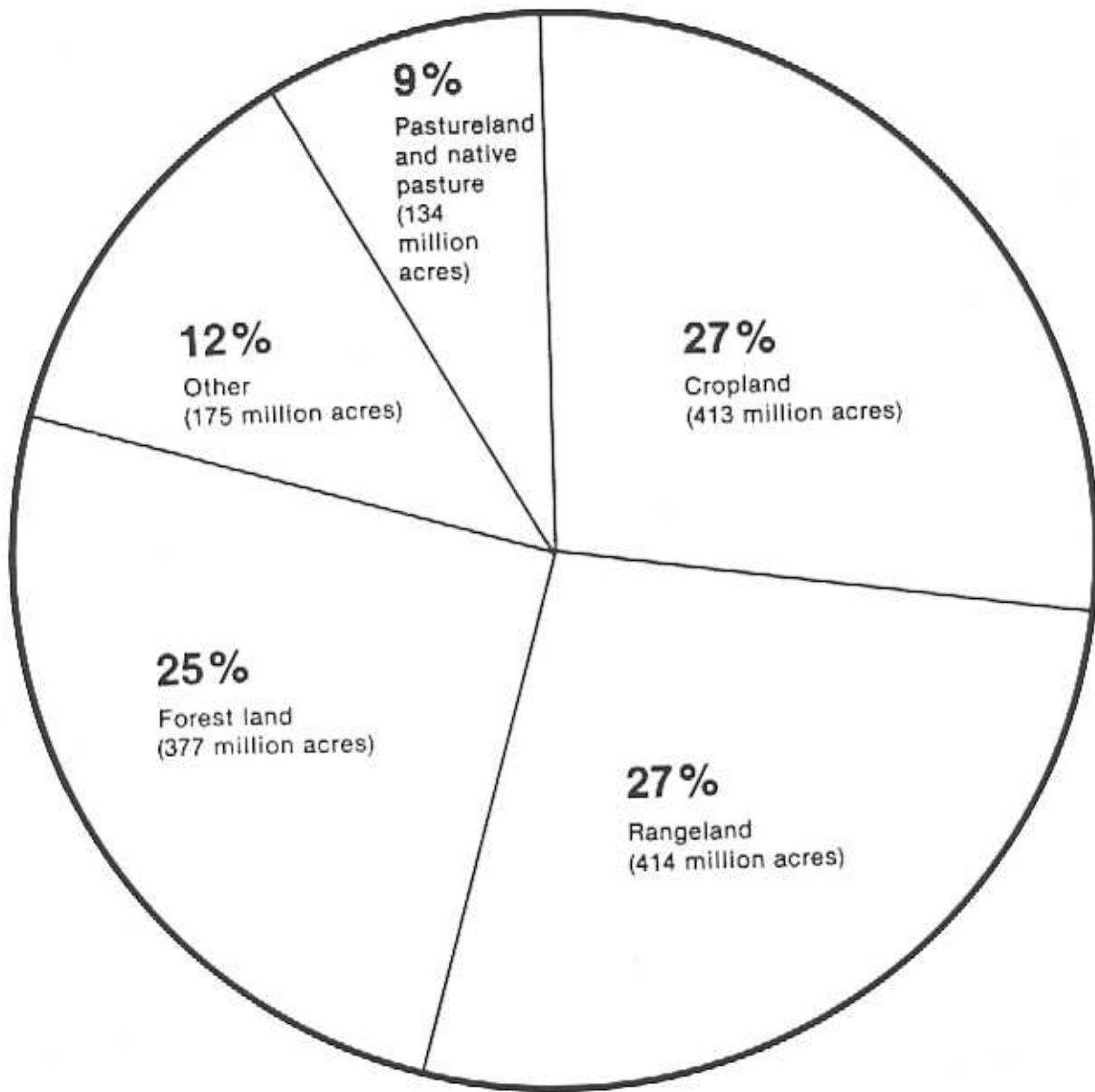


Figure 1.--Use of nonfederal land in the United States and the Caribbean, 1977.

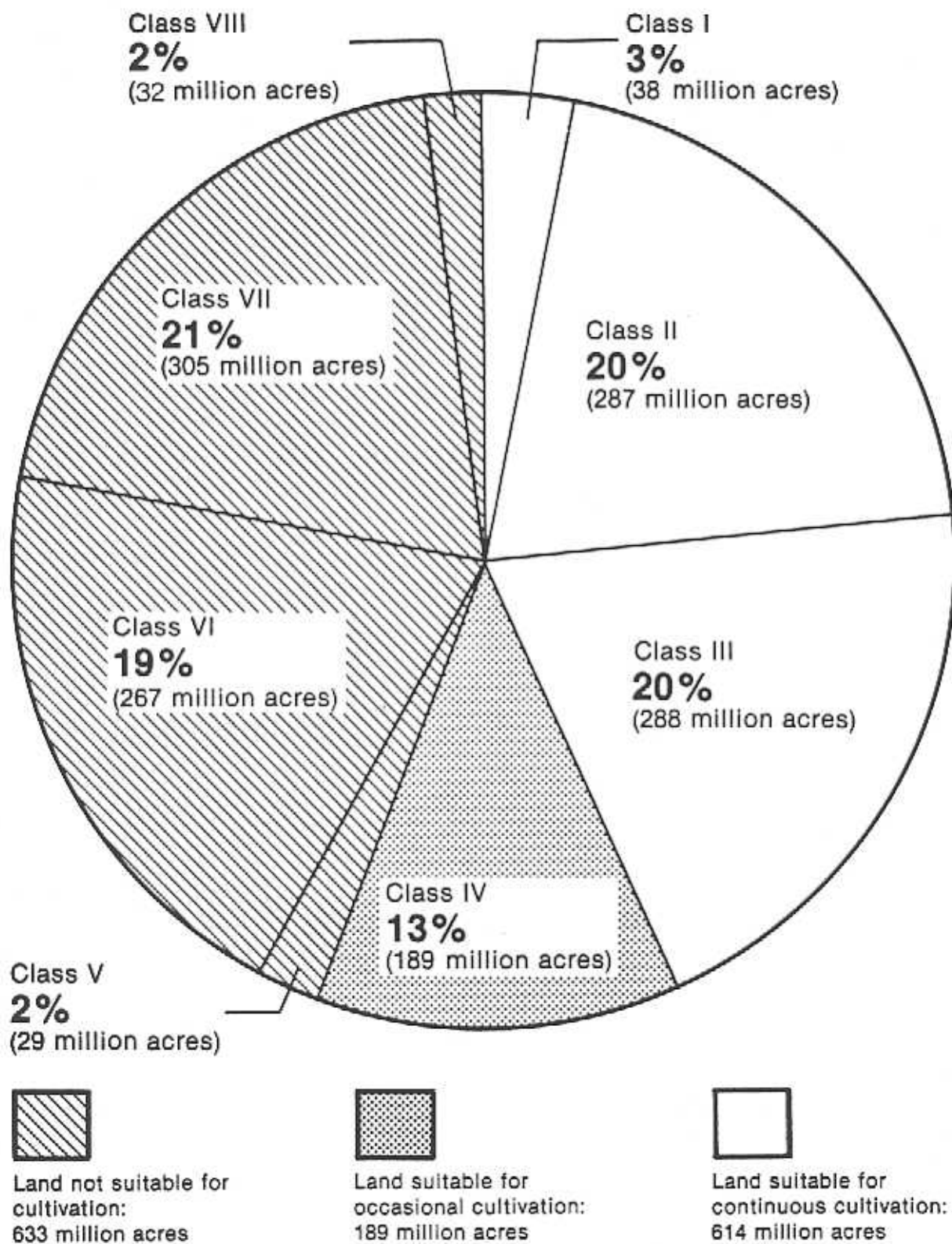


Figure 2.--Land capability percentages for nonfederal rural land, 1977.

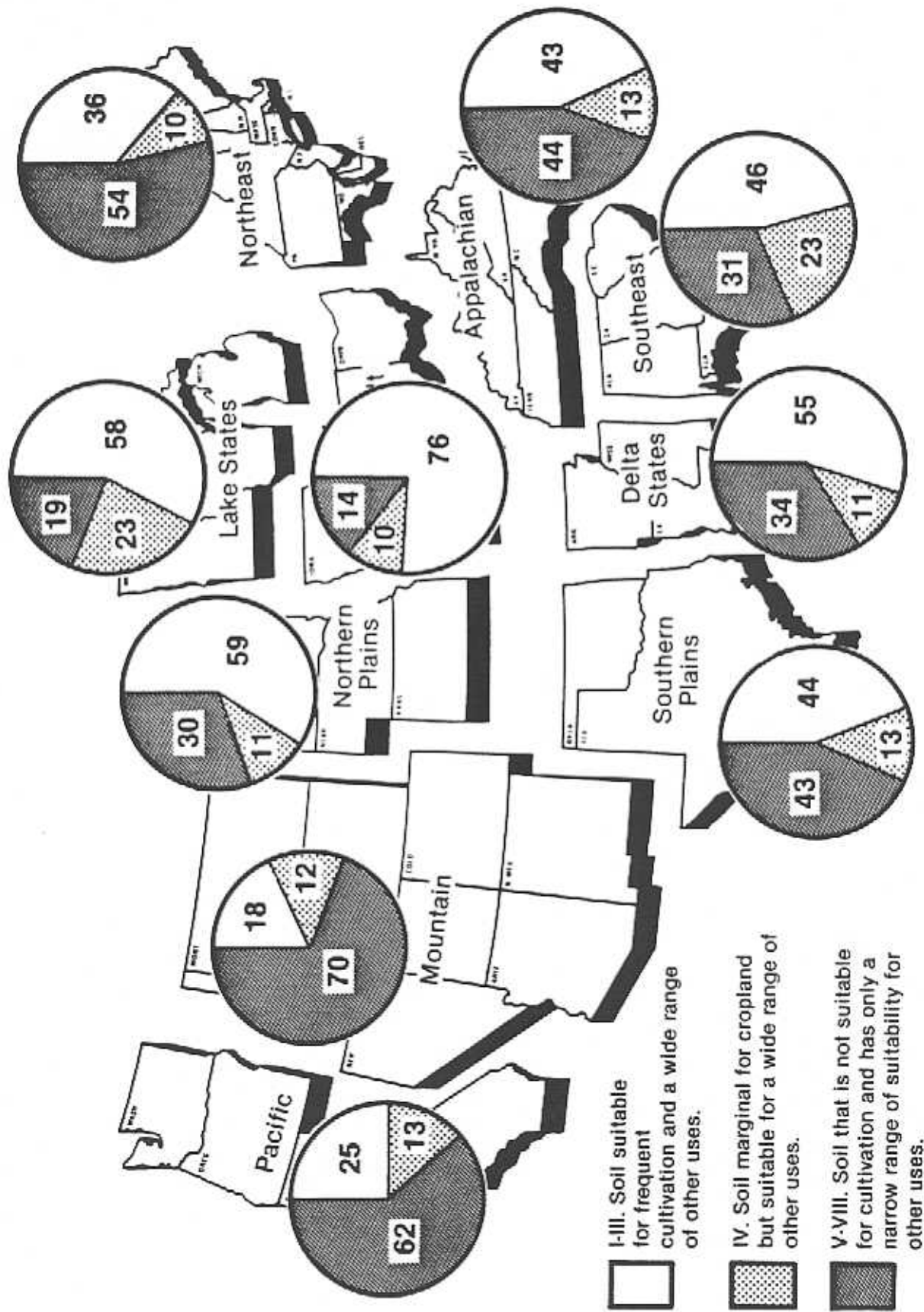


Figure 3.--Percentages of soil in capability classes I-VIII, by farm production region.