

IDENTIFICATION AND CLASSIFICATION OF PRODUCTIVE LANDS

A major portion of the papers you have before you and much of the discussion at this Seminar is an attempt to organize thinking around the need for, methods in, and contents of a system for identifying and classifying the productive lands of this country. Although some of the authors indicated that a need does not clearly exist at this time, we think that there is an urgent need to move forward with this task. Let me just mention a few reasons for this.

In October of 1973, Secretary Butz issued Secretary's Memorandum 1827, the USDA policy on land use. It says the Department will "adapt present pertinent programs to help enhance and preserve prime agricultural, range, and forest lands for those uses." Since it is obviously impossible to carry out this policy unless these lands are identified and defined, the memo goes on to pledge the Department to "expand at the earliest feasible time its surveys and studies to include: ...Identification, location, and productivity ratings of farm, range, and forest land."

Other policymakers are considering this need as well. H. R. 3510, the "Udall" Land Use Bill now under House consideration, would require that each state land use program "include policies and procedures to identify prime food and fiber producing lands...and promote their continued use and productivity to meet long-range food and fiber requirements." The policy

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direction seems clear. If this bill--or one like it--passes the Congress, 50 states will be pressing the Department for assistance in dealing with the question of prime lands. If it does not pass, the policy of the Department, coupled with the existing concern for this subject already in the states makes it imperative that a system for identifying and classifying productive lands be established as rapidly as possible.

Many of the papers provide added points of view as to the need for moving forward. Tom Fenton points out the need to develop a national land classification system to define that land that provides our present and future food and fiber base. This will be necessary, Jim Anderson argues, in order to achieve an orderly stabilization of the nation's farmland base, and provide a tool to be used in the consideration of local, state, and Federal needs. Mel Skold notes that such a classification system would serve to (1) appriase production capacity and (2) provide a basis for decisions on allocating limited resources. Steve Smith reminds us that the ad hoc, piecemeal manner whereby land changes ownership and use makes it difficult to monitor what is happening or to get a full picture of the resulting land use pattern as it emerges. Bill Matuszeski highlights the need for a classification system to serve as a tool in what he calls the "gut issue"--how to decide on a parcel-by-parcel basis whether to preserve current land use or let the market convert the land to other uses.

We still have the long-standing problem of determining just what a classification system is, who decides what goes into it, who participates in its utilization, and how it is to be used in the decisionmaking process. Fenton points out that, although we have had capability systems, Storie indexes, and corn suitability indexes around for years, there is still debate around the subject of land classification. Today, as in 1940, we are still asking whether classification is simply a ranking based on physical facts or whether it should also include other factors. A 1940 conference agreed that there could be different kinds of land classification systems according to the objectives undertaken. We appear to be at that same crossroads today, seeking agreement on objectives as a basis for establishing some kind of classification system for prime farmland.

If this Seminar determines that retention of prime land is a problem and that a classification system is indeed needed to identify and locate good lands that should remain in production, one hurdle will be history. Several others remain, however. What is classification? How can we agree on a balance of physical factors and the socio-economic and political elements that are involved? Bill Johnson suggests that a classification based directly on soil properties as identified in the soil survey is an adequate beginning point since the behavior of soils can be predicted accurately through the extension of research and field experience. Applying definitions couched in terms of suitability or capability for certain uses to individual tracts of land would be too cumbersome to be practical, he asserts. Several authors point out, however, that prime lands need to be defined according to several criteria, and physical characteristics are only one part of that mix.

A major question seems to revolve around the concept of "prime" itself. Is this workable--to identify lands basically into two categories--prime and nonprime? Johnson says that, given the current level of concern at the national level, this is probably adequate at the moment, but that local considerations might require a further refinement of these categories. Bill Wood challenges this concept, pointing out that any decision to place some soils in a "prime" category is, at its roots, a political decision rather than a technical one. He urges us to consider separating the technical from the policy aspects of the issue by developing some kind of ordinal ranking of soils so that their characteristics can be rated on a neutral, numerical scale for public decisionmakers at any level of government to consider in determining those lands that deserve special attention.

Other problems with the "prime" concept include the idea that there is no such thing as an "exclusive" prime. Many lands are "prime" for several land uses, creating conflict as to what is the "highest and best" use. Johnson points out that, at a minimum, any scheme for classifying and mapping farmlands should be able to provide an insight into other capabilities. Jay Hughes suggests that "prime" be viewed as an ephemeral index--land considered especially important for any particular use, at any given time.

Maybe what we are really looking for is a measure of the threatened prime lands. Bob Honea proposes that we consider "critical" lands--those that are both high quality and also under immediate pressure from competing land uses.

Already, of course, it is recognized that the concept of "prime" leaves out many lands that are highly valuable, but do not fit in a national criteria. These have been labeled as "unique" lands to allow a broad range for identification. It is noted by many authors that this is a necessary, but not very "neat" or "uniform" classification. Thus, it would appear, a major question that this Seminar could well address is: What definitions and concepts should a productive land classification system be based on? What is "prime," and how should it be used and defined? Is "unique" a useful category? What about the idea of "critical" lands? Will the system need to also indicate some measure of those lands that are prime for several land uses?

Assuming that these questions can be resolved, we are left with another set of questions about how such a system should be used. We are reminded throughout these papers that this system must first of all be relevant to the needs of the people who will be using it. Smith, for one, reminds us of the pitfall in excessive data collection that can bury decisionmakers rather than help them. Who are the decisionmakers here? Dick Chumney says they're mostly at the state and local level, and that any system must be useful at that level. Fenton points out that it should not be our purpose to classify land to be "frozen" in agriculture in any area. Several authors keep us aware of the distinction that must be maintained between identifying prime lands and determining the public priorities as to what lands should be set aside or specially protected. We are reminded that any system is simply a tool--a means to an end--a part of the whole planning process.

This opens the question of who will set up and use the prime land classification system. Smith argues throughout his paper that the important thing is the process of doing it and the people who are involved. We are reminded by one reviewer that the values we seek may not be in the answers we get, but in the quest itself. Chumney makes an important point when he urges that any system be kept simple and flexible enough to be both used and understood by the people involved. Unless this whole idea is understood and accepted by landowners, he points out, these people will never take the next step and actually develop programs to protect their prime lands.

So we are left with still another set of questions. Just as definition must precede classification, so also must a clear vision of the objectives and utilization of the classification system. It is relatively easy for us at the national level to rationalize the need for a national definition and classification to provide the information needed on national supplies of productive land. We deal with those questions daily, and they are important ones. But time and time throughout these papers, we are reminded that they are not the only questions involved in the prime lands issue, and that they may not even be the principal ones. We must, it would appear, face the difficult question of devising classification and information systems that are useful at all levels of land use decisionmaking. That may--or may not--be one single system. It may need to be two systems--or one system so flexibly drawn that getting national answers does not preclude usefulness at other levels. These are important questions that this Seminar must attempt to answer.

As you are all aware, the Land Inventory and Monitoring Division of the Soil Conservation Service has proposed a definition of prime and unique lands. It was discussed at length in the papers by Fenton and Johnson and several of the reviews. This is not an attempt by SCS to preclude discussion or development of another definition, approach or classification system. It is simply an attempt to demonstrate one way of going about the task and testing the feasibility and utility of this one way. It is, perhaps, what one author called a "necessary but not sufficient" approach to the job. Having such a proposal does, however, provide a focal point for discussions at this Seminar. We urge you to get the theoretical questions out of the way as soon as possible and dig into the real world problems facing any agency in developing and utilizing any system for classification and identification. Maybe the "trial-and-error" method that this suggests lacks academic purity, but it seems an essential recognition of the realities involved in establishing any new, important and controversial system.

The LIM definition is based on the characteristics of soils, to take advantage of existing soil surveys and begin an inventory of prime lands immediately. Johnson demonstrates how this inventory could be undertaken and shows some of the products it will produce. He suggests that such a system will show both actual and potential prime farmland, but that prime lands already committed to another use should be eliminated from the inventory for practical reasons.

It is generally agreed that a classification of prime lands should start directly with soil facts and not try to build upon another classification such as the old land capability classification. Some cautions about the LIM proposal were received, however. Ernest Hardy noted that, although the soil survey was the best tool available to us in delineating prime lands, we should not rely on it to such a degree that the selection process is limited or blinded as a result. Other observers claimed that the soil survey is too agriculture-oriented, too crop-oriented, lacks productivity indexes, or has other limitations. Wood suggested that the LIM proposal may be entirely too narrow for adequate consideration of specialty crop agriculture, although it was not clear whether that criticism considered the unique lands category.

Variables not identified in soil surveys may be so important that they must be considered. Among those suggested were crop adaptability, crop exclusiveness, proximity to market, pattern of parcel size, relative scarcity, and others. The problem becomes: How could you take all these factors into account in a meaningful way on a national basis? Johnson suggests it would be too cumbersome to be practical. Maybe we need more than one classification system--a national system based on information sources available and practical, supplemented by state and local systems that build from that basis into classifications that meet the needs of decisionmakers there.

Several reviewers noted that there would be great difficulty in getting a single scientific definition of unique lands that would be desirable or practical. Perhaps that is true of prime lands as well, particularly at the state and county level. We are also reminded that important lands from an agricultural production standpoint need not always be croplands, particularly in urban fringe areas.

So where does this leave us? Fenton suggested some changes that might improve the LIM criteria, but Dideriksen replied that most of these changes had been recognized in the continuing evolution of the LIM proposal. Some appear to think that this is not a sufficient system, so the question now appears to be: Are there practical ways to make it more sufficient and useful? If so, how can they best be incorporated? If not, how can the limitations of the classification be clearly recognized and explained so that neither the people generating the data nor the people utilizing it are misled about its potential utility?

In summary, it appears that the papers on identification and classification have opened some important areas of discussion that need to be continued and, to the extent possible, resolved at this Seminar.

As you consider and debate the questions on identification and classification, I would urge you to keep in mind the need to state clearly the objectives of any system you propose, to define clearly what kinds of land are being identified, and why, and to constantly think of the needs of the users of the information that will be produced. This is a national meeting, discussing a national issue, and providing recommendations for

national programs and policies. But let's not forget Dick Chumney's plea that any system developed be kept simple and flexible enough to relate to the needs of states, localities, and private land users. To quote him, "To do less would make such proposals unacceptable to the public and the definitions and criteria for identifying prime and unique lands would simply be a paper exercise." I share his concern, and make it your challenge. We can't afford, nor can the nation, a "paper exercise" on this important issue.