

Prairie as a Land Use Issue

I'm pleased to join in your fourth Midwest Prairie Conference and to do my best to substitute for Congressman Mark Andrews. You've had a varied program with some very fine and very technical papers about the characteristics and the residents and the uses of prairie.

I'm not a plant scientist or a range conservationist, so I wouldn't feel comfortable giving you a technical presentation tonight in and around dessert. You have had several SCS people speak at your conferences, including Chuck Schumacher this week suggesting that proper grazing use and range seeding are compatible with preserving the prairie ecosystem. He, and Bob MacLauchlan last year, pointed out that the Soil Conservation Service since its beginning in 1935 has been interested in improving prairie or rangeland for many uses.

We share your concern that prairie has many values that are worth retaining in the American landscape:

- Scenic beauty and open space;
- Protection of the soil;
- Control of quality and movement of water;
- Food for animals, both wild and domestic; and
- Opportunity for studying and gaining an understanding of the natural environment.

We try to recognize all these values as we work with farmers and ranchers to improve their land.

Material for talk by Norman A. Berg, Associate Administrator, Soil Conservation Service, at the fourth Midwest Prairie Conference, Grand Forks, N. Dakota, August 21, 1974.

In some cases this means helping them locate areas of native prairie that might be set aside for wildlife or study areas.

In other cases it means helping them manage their prairie to provide more livestock products and at the same time protect the land. We recognize that a lot of prairie land has been abused over the years and doesn't resemble prairie very much any more. Our objective in working with farmers and ranchers is to restore the original prairie composition as much as possible to yield the most forage, best wildlife habitat, and best conservation of soil and water resources. Our work at several of the 20 SCS plant materials centers indicates we can re-establish vegetation that retains many of the prairie characteristics. We feel that you can graze it and preserve it, too.

In other cases our work with farmers and ranchers has to do with helping them stop farming on land that is much better off under grass than under the plow. Over the years we've helped convert more than 27 million acres from cropland to grassland.

In some other cases, we are helping farmers and ranchers re-establish prairie vegetation on land that has been surface-mined. Here, of course, the land disturbance has been severe and sometimes extensive. With America's great need for energy resources, it's likely that this kind of reclamation assistance will increase. There are vast areas of land in the Dakotas and southward that are underlain by thick seams of coal. If that resource needs to be harvested, SCS will work to help restore the land and in many cases will be recommending planting native mixtures to approximate the original prairie plant communities.

Our experience with prairie in grazing use and during shifts of land to urban uses such as highway and utility rights-of-way is valuable in meeting this new challenge.

Basic to all of our assistance with prairie are the soil survey and improved plant materials. SCS and cooperating agencies have been gathering information about soils for many decades, and detailed information is available in some form for about half of the Nation. Knowledge of the soil patterns under the prairie is important in knowing what kind of prairie you have and in deciding what to do with it.

We have been testing and improving plant materials since the 1930's, and in that time more than 100 plants have been selected and introduced into the soil and water conservation program. More than 50 million pounds of seed of these are on the market. We've also developed planting and management techniques and in the 1940's developed a special native grass seed drill that is still widely used.

In Iowa, for example, soil conservationists and farmers in soil conservation districts are testing switchgrass, indiangrass, big bluestem, and other warm season grasses native to Iowa. In combination with cool-season grasses, they hold promise of a steady year-round diet for cattle and significant help in stopping overgrazing and leaving a more protective canopy on the ground.

In Texas, SCS plant materials center at Knox City has a working arrangement with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to help in revegetating park lands with native plant species adapted to each park area.

They have great interest in the native forbs, legumes, and woody species we're evaluating there. And for many of the plants the SCS center is about the only source for seed. Among the species being tested and increased at the center are several that are considered rare and endangered, such as the Englemann's Daisy.

Working with landowners and other agencies and organizations to protect rare and endangered species of plants and animals is a growing SCS activity and one in which we invite your participation, too.

You represent all possible uses of the prairie. We encourage you to carry on with your interests and to communicate with the Soil Conservation Service. We'd like your help in improving SCS programs, and we want to make available to you any knowledge we have that may be beneficial.

This is a time when we need to work more closely with many organizations to help America make decisions about land-use patterns.

Virgin prairie begin plowed up for corn or soybeans..prime grazing land being turned upside down for coal or covered up with houses or highways...these and many more are symptoms of growing conflict in the use of land. In every State there is growing discussion and legislation relating to land use.