

SOIL conservation

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Land Use Planning ?

Look at the LAND First

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The United States is among the richest nations on earth in terms of its land resource. And the future of this resource is in the hands of millions of people who daily make decisions—good or bad—on how it is used.

Over half of the American land is in private hands—owned by individual farmers, ranchers, businessmen, and industry. It is this land that produces most of the food, fiber, and timber we consume and export.

One-third of privately owned land is in forests. One-third is in pasture and range. And a little less than a third is in cropland.

Despite an almost 200-percent increase in population since 1900, these proportions in land use have changed very little. The primary reason is technology. Our crop production per acre continues to exceed our increase in population.

The second largest amount of land is federally managed. This includes 34 percent of our total land area, or 759 million acres, most of it located west of the Mississippi. Of this, 187 million acres are managed by the Forest Service, including 14.5 million acres that have been set aside as wilderness and primitive areas. Timber will not be harvested there.

Much federally owned land is under multiple-use management, and recreation is one of the major uses. With more spendable income, increased leisure time, and greater mobility, the demand for outdoor "sun and fun" use has grown rapidly. Recreation is a possible land use on 447 million acres under federal management, 40 million acres under state control, and 3 million acres in county hands.

Much private land is also used for recreation, especially hunting and fishing. The majority of upland small game finds its home on privately owned farm and ranch lands.

Finally, about 5 percent of the American land is in state or local ownership, while 2 percent is Indian land.

Much of America's land has been well used by its farmers, ranchers, and other landowners. But this has not always been true. Poor land use practices have cost us dearly, both economically and esthetically.

Some farmers still attempt to cultivate soils that are too steep and erosive, or grow row crops on the high risk land in parts of the Great Plains.

Some landowners needlessly burn forests. Some owners or

users contribute to flooding problems for themselves and their neighbors through unwise land use practices. Fifty percent of the nation's annual flood damage comes from small upstream watersheds where both public and private property are destroyed.

Unsightly scars have been created on 2 million acres of land through strip mining and the mine acid that leaches out of the spoil banks and pollutes streams for miles around.

Solid waste is another byproduct of our affluent society. We discard 250 million tons of waste each year. Two-thirds of it goes into 40,000 open dumps, mostly in rural areas where it pollutes air, water, and land.

Animal waste has a serious negative impact on the environment. Large concentrations of beef cattle—feedlots with as high as 50,000 head at a time—produce hundreds of tons of manure a day. This not only pollutes the air, but the runoff can accelerate eutrophication and destroy streams, ponds, and lakes.

By volume, sediment is our most costly water pollutant. About half of it comes from cropland erosion while the other half comes from highways, stream-

banks, public lands, and suburban developments. Sediment yields on a single acre of land can skyrocket from 50 to 25,000 tons a year when land is converted from rural to urban uses—and more than 1 million acres a year are being converted to homes and businesses and roads and airports and reservoirs.

In the next 10,000 days, we will build in and around our metropolitan areas the equivalent of everything we've built since Plymouth Rock. A staggering amount of needless damage will result. Not just from sediment, but also from ignorance of the land's capabilities. Roads, homes, and other buildings will be constructed without checking as to whether the soil is suitable for the type of construction used. As a direct result, many houses will crack or slip downhill, or avalanches will slip down on *them* if housesites are chosen without considering that factor.

The costly and ugly misuse of land is distressing to more and more Americans, because soil and water are national resources. To despoil them is to show contempt for our heritage and an inexcusable disregard for our future.

In many cases, the man in the middle of all this is the farmer or rancher. Unplanned, checker-board development puts a tight economic squeeze on him that can't be ignored. His land becomes a valuable commodity as suburbia comes closer. His taxes increase and quite often he is forced to sell before developers are ready to build. Then the speculator takes over from the cultivator.

But proper land use planning can help protect and develop natural resources in rural and suburban areas.

Soil and water conservation practices can greatly reduce erosion and flooding on agricultural land. Strip mine spoils can be reclaimed and revegetated. Sub-

urban sediment can be drastically reduced by adapting the proved practices that farmers and ranchers have used in protecting their farmland over the past 30 years.

And land capability can be determined long before urban construction work is started.

Americans today are insisting on a high-quality environment where they live, work, and travel for outdoor recreation.

They want attractive homes and new urban communities in an attractive environment.

They want a high-quality food supply at reasonable prices, which means that land use planning must adequately consider

the needs of an efficient and productive agriculture.

And they want space and facilities for outdoor recreation, and for fish and wildlife.

All of these needs should be considered in setting land use policies and making land use plans. The individual and his community have everything to gain if land use is properly planned. They have a great deal to lose if it isn't. ♦

