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Cover: The sands of Snow Canyon, Utah, remind one of the importance of water. SWCS’s 45th annual meeting, “Water Futures,” takes place in Salt Lake City, Utah, July 29-August 1. Soil Conservation Service photo by Ron Nichols.

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Government meddling

In their recent excellent, historical account of agricultural soil degradation in the Palouse [JSWC, January-February 1990, pp. 75-803], Jennings, et al. properly noted the culpability of the summer fallowing practice, which typically is executed through multiple soil- and residue-pulverizing and aerating tillage operations. They neglected, however, to point out with appropriate clarity and force that destructive summer fallowing continues to be widely practiced in the higher precipitation eastern portion of the Palouse region not for reasons of agronomic considerations, such as soil-water supply management, but rather in response to the requirements of government crop acreage control and commodity price support programs. The federal government either should cease meddling in agricultural production decisions or else make soil conservation an imperative policy determinant. Presently, soil conservation needs are made hostage to short-term economic profitability demands. Perhaps the politically powerful grain growers’ associations could effect some constructive changes in USDA conservation and price support program policies were they to give soil conservation as much emphasis, even for a few years, as they do production technology and marketing strategies.

Leonard C. Johnson
Troy, Idaho

Uncertainty and the USLE

Uncertainty appears to be difficult for many people to deal with. We like to appear confident, knowledgeable, and “in control.” An admission of uncertainty often is seen as a failure or weakness. Life appears to be so much simpler if we ignore uncertainty.

There is considerable uncertainty in soil erosion estimates calculated by the universal soil loss equation (USLE). I think it is in the long-term interest of society and soil conservation professionals to deal honestly with the uncertainty of the soil erosion estimation and its implications for conservation. Through the Food Security Act of 1985, the U.S. Congress decided that it would no longer subsidize crops grown on soil that is eroding greater than replacement levels as determined by the secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) using USLE factors. Soil erosion is a complex process and the USLE is the most extensively researched and readily available erosion estimation method. The USLE quantifies soil erosion in a statistical manner and appears to be accurate on average. But at any single location it underestimates or overestimates erosion by an uncertain amount. By applying the USLE, society’s desire to conserve soil is promoted; however, individual landowners will be assessed inaccurately for erosion. Consequently, some landowners will continue to receive federal program benefits even though they are eroding soils faster than replacement rates, and some will lose federal program benefits or be required to change farming practices even though their land is not eroding greater than replacement. This appears contrary to our commonly held notions of fairness, equal treatment before the law, and presumed innocence until proven guilty.

In implementing the policy, SCS has allowed landowners some leeway for the uncertainty of the USLE. However, the uncertainty of a USLE erosion estimate for a given location is unknown. Therefore, it is still possible that landowners who are not eroding the soil greater than tolerance will be denied program benefits or forced to change practices due to the scientific uncertainty of the USLE. Furthermore, the allowance for uncertainty reduces the protection of the future productivity of the soil. Is this fair to future generations or to the individuals who
must deal with the sediment from government subsidized crop production? Society is often faced with choices between promoting the common good and protecting individual liberties. There are precedents for policies that provide for the security of society at the expense of the individual. The military draft is an example of a policy motivated by society’s desire to preserve itself that also limits the rights of individuals. The draft is generally accepted as fair, perhaps because the same rules are applied to all individuals more or less equitably. These rules appear unfair, unjust, and costly and are sometimes legally challenged when they are inequitably administered or when the rules conflict with other values.

The question of fairness of the conservation compliance policy should be decided by the public at large through its elected and appointed representatives. Soil conservation professionals can make an important contribution to the public debate by providing accurate information on soil erosion and conservation, including the uncertainties.

We can also conduct research that quantifies and reduces the uncertainty of soil erosion estimates. However, given the nature of science and soil erosion, the uncertainty in estimating soil erosion may be reduced by improved technology but it will never be eliminated. Therefore, the question of fairness in implementing conservation compliance or enforcing other nonvoluntary soil conservation programs will not go away when the USLE is improved or replaced.

By failing to acknowledge and educate ourselves and the public about the uncertainty of the USLE, soil conservation professionals may be misleading themselves and the public. I believe it is crucial to the credibility of soil conservation professionals to provide expert information on soil erosion, fully aware of the limits and uncertainties of that knowledge and unbiased by their opinions about the fairness of the compliance policy.

Gregory McIsaac
University of Illinois
Urbana, Illinois

Savoring Savory

J. Bartolome’s review of Holistic Resource Management’’ by Allan Savory JSWC, [November-December, 1989 pages, 591-592] was both interesting and amusing. The reviewer, a range scientist with the University of California, was troubled by Savory’s apparent lack of respect for the underpinnings of range science in the United States. He also worried that Savory “claims to have been the first to discover holistic resource management.” Most disturbing to the reviewer was the fact that these ideas are “becoming popular with federal range managers,” whom he aptly noted are “frustrated by conventional management options.”

Having some 20 years of experience in teaching “conventional” range science in two Montana universities, I am familiar with the old/new contrasts that so upset Dr. Bartolome. I believe that he is so afraid of the seemingly “new” ideas that he can’t relax and grow beyond his current limited perspective of resource management. Why does he suppose land managers have become frustrated with conventional management options? Is it because conventional management isn’t working very well? Several faculty in MSU’s College of Agriculture use Savory’s book as a text. Students, unburdened by the need to protect conventional/traditional science and its baggage, are enjoying the book. They receive ample opportunity to blend the old with the new and draw their own conclusions.

Your book reviewer brought to mind a favorite quote from Will Rogers, who said, “It isn’t what we don’t know that gives us trouble, it’s what we know that ain’t right.”

Brian W. Sindelar
Department of Animal and Range Sciences
Montana State University
Bozeman, Montana

No progress with FSA

As a Society member, I do not share our organization’s optimism over the 1985 FSA. The reason being, that farm programs have a 50-year history of failure. I believe we are deceiving ourselves and the public.

A history of loopholes in legislation, the nonenforcement of program provisions, politics, and the rewarding of soil abusers is well documented. These items, coupled with the voluntary approach to which we give much lip service, have been unable to produce results, on the ground, that will sustain the resource.

Consider these facts:

1. After 55 years of the conservation movement’s voluntary efforts and farm programs erosion is at an all time high in many areas, as is environmental degradation.

2. We concern ourselves with water quality, yet the greater issue goes begging—the issues of erosion and resource management, which in turn
impacts water quality. Programs, but look at the facts. They were designed to (a) control production—failed—drought was much more effective; (b) save the family farm—failed—farmers are leaving the land in record numbers; (c) protect the resource—failed—resource degradation is evident everywhere; (d) cheap food—failed—food is very expensive when we add program and cleanup costs; (e) preserve rural America—failed—its drying up.

It would seem that with this record the question should be asked: Do we want or can we afford more of the same? Even more important, can our resource base stand another 55 years of this kind of progress?

A five-year farm program is short sighted. The Iroquois Indians had a policy that decisions their government leaders made must be evaluated to the seventh generation. I doubt if ours are evaluated beyond the next election.

It is easy to be critical unless you have something better to offer. Consider this. The bottom line of farm program, after all the rhetoric by agencies, politicians, farm organization and commodity groups, is income subsidy. Therefore, let’s simplify the process by (a) direct payments to producers on April 15th, based on his past payment history; (b) let the producer farm the farm rather than the programs; (c) require erosion control, mandated by state laws and administered by local soil conservation districts with penalties being the motivating force.

Most will say this is too simple, and they are probably right; however, the complex has not worked either.

It is time for change! Our resource base is too precious to continue on our present course, which generates much activity but little accomplishment.

Herb T. Mittelstedt
Mandan, North Dakota

Drought and farm sustainability

May I ask the same question regarding the absence of any mention of the superiority of alternative methods at carrying crops through long and serious droughts as I asked the editor-in-chief of the recent National Research Council book, Alternative Agriculture?

Certainly drought is a major cause of the elimination of high percentages of family farms. Certainly the $20 billion doled out for drought-disaster aid in 1988 adds to the cost of the “low-priced foods” U.S. consumers supposedly enjoy. The 1988 drought disaster payments covered 9 million acres; only 1 million fewer acres chalked up disaster crops in 1989.

There is another serious block to gaining adequate on-farm research information that neither Neil Schaller
nor any of the other contributors to the January-February 1990 JSWC issue mentioned: Many states, including my native state (Montana), Wisconsin, and others enforce laws that essentially deny the supplying or obtaining of any potentially useful soil-building materials other than “unmanipulated manure and liming materials.” Thus, only on-farm research of the “manure, rotation and tillage variations” of age-old organic farming is allowed in those states. Essentially, the Wisconsin law breakers who snuggled the materials necessary for building drought resistance into their soils were the only Wisconsin farmers who had profitable crops in 1988. In February 1989, Wisconsin newspaper headlines announced, “Wisconsin dairymen must import 500,000 tons of hay,” and “Wisconsin farmers have long wait for drought-disaster checks.”

Much of the content of the January-February issue could have better served us members by having presented “case histories” than so much of the “philosophy” being developed to camouflage the floundering efforts to rationalize the use of a basically misleading buzz term: “Sustainable Agriculture.” If the term had been limited to “sustaining the family farm” (which conventional agriculture certainly has not done—5,900,000 farms at end of World War II; down to 2,078,000 by 1987), the term would be acceptable.

The multiplied flood of chemical propaganda shows that “sustaining agribusiness” is the major interest of that industry and of the publications which survive from agribusiness advertising.

Farmers, scattered from California to Delaware, throughout the past 23 years have increasingly demonstrated, and within the limitations of any or all of the three definitions repeated by Dr. Schaller for organic farming, that conforming to the stipulations for agricultural research stated in Alternative Agriculture overcomes not only drought but has also solved many of the production problems of modern agriculture.

Leland B. Taylor
Albuquerque, New Mexico

“Pen Points” is a forum for comment on published material or land and water management issues in general. Readers are invited to express their views in a letter to the editor. Letters are judged on their clarity and pertinence. Long letters may be shortened.—Editor.

Eventually is not now*

If it isn’t profitable, it isn’t sustainable.
How profound.
Someday alternative will be high on the dow.
Eventually is not now.

Perhaps, subsidized crops discourage alternatives.
How profound.
Someday subsidies may run afoul.
Eventually is not now.

If economics favors it, the soil can be restored.
How profound.
Someday is soon enough to give back the land worm chow.
Eventually is not now.

If alternative possessed proof, it would be conventional.
How profound.
Someday, Pierre’s nose will surely tempt a pow.
Eventually, shoot, why not now.

*JSWC, January-February 1990, p.38

Dale Marsh
Madison, Wisconsin
The most significant findings and recommendations in the report include the following:

- Agriculture is too important a topic to be taught only to the relatively small percentage of students considering careers in agriculture and pursuing vocational agriculture studies.
- Agricultural literacy should be the goal of education about agriculture.
- Beginning in kindergarten and continuing through twelfth grade, all students should receive some systematic instruction or courses about agriculture.
- Administrators of teacher education programs and schools of education should offer units of instruction or courses about agriculture.
- The Future Farmers of America (FFA) should change its name and revise its rituals, contests, awards, and requirements for membership consistent with all applicable federal and state laws to reflect a contemporary image of agriculture and a broadened and improved agriculture education program.
- A private national foundation, partially supported with public funds, should be established to produce and disseminate instructional materials on agricultural topics.
- "Ag in the Classroom" state coordinators should build new linkages with science, mathematics, and vocational agriculture teachers; state departments and colleges of agriculture and education; agribusinesses; farm groups; and 4-H and other Cooperative Extension Service personnel.
- Agricultural courses sufficiently upgraded in science content should be credited toward satisfying college entrance and high school graduation requirements for science courses in addition to the core curriculum.
- Schools should consider providing on-site laboratory facilities for Supervised Occupational Experiences (SOE) that can be undertaken after school without interfering with other instructional programs. School land laboratories, greenhouses, nurseries, grounds, and agricultural mechanics laboratories can provide opportunities.

In summary, the committee's findings point to two basic challenges: First, agricultural education must become more than vocational agriculture. Second, major revisions are needed within vocational agriculture. —CLYDE W. HIBBS, Department of Natural Resources, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana.

General


War on Waste: Can America Win Its Battle with Garbage? By Louis Blumberg and Robert Gottlieb. 301 pp., tbls., index, 1989. Island Press, Covelo, Calif. 95428. $34.95, cloth; $19.95, paper; plus $2.00 for shipping and handling.


Soils