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Article Summary: Much Nebraska land was in continuous production during the war. In the post-war period it was essential to encourage farmers to return to a normal system of crop rotation.

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# Conservation of Nebraska's Agricultural Resources \*

ABNER K. CHESTEM

Conservation of Nebraska's Agricultural Resources is a subject which should be of interest to every person in Nebraska. This is an agricultural State. In effect, it has been, in several years, one of the leading producers of agricultural commodities.

Nebraska farmers, as well as farmers in other States, faced a serious situation shortly following the First World War. Production had expanded and, as a result, burdensome surpluses were accumulating and the situation had reached the point where many farmers were faced with ruinous prices for those commodities which they produced. As prices for those commodities continued downward, naturally the reaction was to attempt to produce more in order to secure an adequate living income. It is obvious that this affected not only farmers but businessmen of the State also, because quite generally they are dependent upon the farmers receiving an adequate income in order that their business might in turn be profitable.

As a result of this situation, our agricultural land in this State was—to use the term—“mined.” In other words, every acre of crops it was possible to produce was raised, with little regard for the conservation of the soil and with little attempt to establish the proper rotation system for the land.

Another factor which entered into this, of course, is the fact that we have a high degree of tenancy in the State of Nebraska; and naturally, establishment of rotation systems which would protect the soil was the exception rather than the rule.

This economic situation which prevailed after the First World War was something which the individual farmer could

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\* Address read before morning session of Nebraska State Historical Society and Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska, September 30, 1944.

do little to combat. It seemed necessary, if the position of agriculture was to be maintained and farmers receive an adequate income, that the problem must be viewed from a larger than local standpoint. Too much of our eastern land has been handled similarly to the manner in which Nebraska land was being handled; and today, we find whole areas in the eastern part of the United States which can no longer be farmed profitably—the land having become exhausted by the type of farming used. Various organizations had seen this problem, studied it, and suggested various remedies; and eventually, soil conservation laws were passed which had for their purpose the conservation of the agricultural resources of the nation. I need not review the various acts which were passed but take up only the Act of Congress under which the present programs for the conservation of agriculture's resources are being operated.

The authority under which the Agricultural Adjustment Agency now operates is contained in what is known as the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938. The specific purpose of this Act, as contained in the preamble to the Act itself, states that it is "to provide for the conservation of national soil resources and to provide an adequate and balanced flow of agricultural commodities in interstate and foreign commerce and for other purposes." Contained in this Act is the Declaration of Policy, and I quote from this Declaration of policy as follows: "It is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress to continue the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, as amended, for the purpose of conserving national resources, preventing the wasteful use of soil fertility, and of preserving, maintaining, and rebuilding the farm and ranch land resources in the national public interest; to accomplish these purposes through the encouragement of soil building and soil conserving crops and practices." That is the end of the quotation. It is from this statement of policy that the Agricultural Adjustment Agency's programs have been developed.

Before taking up the different practices which have been used to carry out the policy as established by Congress, it is appropriate that you should have a brief picture of the organization

designed to carry out this policy, especially as it affects the State of Nebraska and the individual communities in our State.

Provision is made in the Act for an administrative committee to consist of three farmers in each precinct or minor subdivision in each State, to be elected annually by their neighbors at a meeting held solely for that purpose. These three men constitute the administrative body to carry on the activities in that community. In order that their work may be coordinated with the work of the other communities in the county, a county committee consisting of three farmers is also elected by representatives of the farmers from the county as a whole. The members of the county committee are also elected on an annual basis. These three members, commonly known as the county Triple-A committee, carry on the administrative work in the county having to do with the Agricultural Adjustment Agency programs, together with programs assigned to this committee by other agencies of the Government, especially during the war period. In order to further secure coordination of effort, there are also three members who constitute the State Triple-A Committee; and, in turn, the States are grouped into regions, over which is a Regional Director. These men are also farmers and, in turn, are responsible to the Chief of the Agricultural Adjustment Agency, who administers the program nationally.

This is probably one of the finest examples of a working democracy, when we see approximately 100 thousand committeemen, elected by the farmers themselves, administering a program for farmers and responsible to farmers in their activities. It seems fitting that I should call attention, too, to the possibilities of this organization — that is, that it represents an avenue of information to the Secretary of Agriculture from the farmers out on the farm, through these community committeemen, county committeemen direct to the Secretary's Office; and, in turn, information of vital importance to farmers can be very quickly gotten to them through this same avenue within a very short time. This has been particularly important during the war years when the needs of agricultural commodities have changed so rapidly and it became necessary to ask farmers to alter their plans on very short notice in order to secure those things most vitally needed in the war effort.

For ten years, this organization of farmer committeemen has been the mainspring of agriculture's action programs. Having been elected by farmers themselves, the county and community committeemen's standing job has been to help their neighbors work together on problems that could not be handled by individual farmers or communities. When unmarketable surpluses threatened to drive agriculture into bankruptcy, committeemen apportioned acreage allotments among farmers so that farmers could team up in making necessary production adjustments. They helped farmers to divide up the available markets fairly by using marketing quotas.

The problems of agriculture in the 1930's, like those of the rest of the world, were many and varied; and farmers through their committeemen used a variety of measures to meet them—conservation practices, crop insurance, crop loans, and the like. It may seem to you that I am departing somewhat from the topic on which I am supposed to be talking—"Conservation of Nebraska's Agricultural Resources"—but to me this seems very pertinent because it was during the 1930's with the programs then in operation that our resources were so conserved that when maximum production, using all of our resources, was needed because of the war, agriculture was ready to produce to the utmost. I believe there is no question but that conservation practices did promote larger and more efficient production. Unprecedented demands for food and fiber necessitated practices that would bring immediate higher yields per acre, and requirements made a bigger job for the local committeemen because the program of conservation practices had to be tailored for each area and sometimes for each farm, because they knew the problems of their own communities and knew what practices to encourage. Committeemen consequently were given great latitude in determining practice specifications and payment rates.

Special attention was given to practices that prevented wind and water erosion and, incidentally, that is one of the big problems in this State of ours. There is probably more variation in the weather conditions for producing a crop between the eastern part of this State and the western part than in almost any other similar area in the United States.

In addition, attention was given to increasing range and pasture forage to make possible the best use of water supplies



and save and improve the soil. Many such practices had been built up extensively in previous years. Since the conservation program was put into operation in 1936, yields have increased. Speaking now for the country as a whole and not just Nebraska: In 1937, for example, yields were 18 per cent higher than the ten-year average, 1923 to 1932; in 1938 and '39, the yields were 14 percent above the average; with a further increase to 20 percent above the average in 1940; 22 percent above, in 1941; and 37 percent above the average, in 1942. We believe a large part of this increase can be traced directly to conservation methods of farming.

Now for the specific practices we have carried out in Nebraska to accomplish the purposes which I enumerated previously . . . . We have had a very definite plan of improvement of range pastures through the practice of deferred grazing; and by this I mean withholding from pasturing some portion of the area commonly used by an operator until such time as the seed formation has been completed. As the result of the practice, the grazing capacity of a large amount of our range area in this State has been definitely improved. Not only has the grazing capacity been increased, but by reseeding of such areas the damage caused by wind erosion has been materially lessened. In 1943, the amount of land on which such deferred grazing practice was carried out amounted to 2,160,000 acres within the State of Nebraska.

Another problem which occurs in the range is that of sufficient water in locations which will provide the maximum amount of grazing over an area with the least amount of damage. In other words, if the location of wells or dams is not made to the best advantage, some portions of the pastures will be overgrazed, while others too far from water will not be grazed at all. Through a practice in our programs of making a payment for putting down additional wells at advantageous points, the acreage of pasture per well has been materially lessened with the result that more uniform grazing is possible. In 1943, about 800 such wells were constructed in the range area of Nebraska.

There is another source of water for which a practice has been provided, and that is dams for the retention of water for livestock. These dams, in many cases, are two-purpose dams. Not only do they provide water for livestock but they also pre-

vent erosion from excess water. In 1943, there were built some 2500 such dams. If all these dams had been concentrated into just one dam, I assure you it would have been a sizable dam, because they involved about 1,800,000 cubic yards of material.

I have spoken primarily so far of our range area. The farming area of the State has needed and does need conservation practices to prevent erosion. As one means of combating this erosion, the practice of contouring crops has been used. Erosion is especially bad with our row crops where they are planted up-and-down-hill, providing for a perfect means of washing the dirt down the hill causing flooding and silting in many cases in the bottom land and, if continued, results in a bare clay hillside upon which very little can be grown. The practice of contouring intertilled crops as well as small grain crops on the contour has proved very popular. It is estimated that we will have in 1944 some 700 thousand acres of intertilled crops planted on the contour in Nebraska. In addition, several thousand acres of contour seeding of small grains will also be carried out. This practice not only tends to lessen the amount lost by erosion but, because it tends to retain the water on the hillside, has definitely increased the yield per acre of these crops; so it has accomplished two purposes with one practice.

In connection with contouring, I might also state that we have a practice very closely related to it, and that is the establishment of permanent sod waterways. These sod waterways provide an outlet for the excess water and, if properly sodded, lessen the amount of erosion in getting rid of this excess water.

Another practice which has proved of distinct value to the western Nebraska wheat farmers is that of protected summer fallow. In the western part of this State, with limited rainfall, it has been found over a period of years that it paid to summer fallow the land which was to be seeded to wheat in the fall. This summer fallow has tended to retain the limited moisture and store it up so that in the succeeding year there will be sufficient moisture to produce a better crop than would otherwise be obtained through a practice of annual cropping of such land. This practice not only tends to conserve the water available but prevents weed growth which, in turn, would waste such moisture as might be in the soil. About thirteen thousand farmers availed

themselves of this practice in 1943, amounting to 870,000 acres. While we do not have the exact figures for 1944, our estimate so far indicates that there will be probably a million acres summer fallowed during this year.

In the area where wind erosion is especially severe, another practice has been developed which farmers think is of material value, and that is what is known as stripcropping. This practice consists of growing alternate strips of intertilled crops or fallow with sown, close drilled or sod crops. The strips are laid out at right angles to the prevailing winds or in a continuous "S" shaped so that winds cannot blow parallel to the rows of crops. These strips will vary from three rods wide to as wide as 20 rods.

A closely related practice which prevents wind erosion on bare ground provides for winter crops to be grown, and this practice has been extensively used in the wind erosion area of the State.

I don't want to bore you with too many figures, and have chosen instead to mention some of the other practices which are contained in our Triple-A program which have to do with conservation of Nebraska's agricultural resources. Some of these are: partial seedings on depleted pastures where it is not necessary to reseed the whole pasture but simply to do what we might call a little "patching"; provision is made for payment for plowing under green manure crops — this practice, of course, is very widely used in the eastern part of the State because it is a means of retaining the fertility of the soil and preventing erosion through the addition of humus to the soil; and on some of our particularly hilly land in the State, terraces have been built to decrease the enormous erosion from heavy rains.

Nebraska, of course, has done her share in the production of agricultural products during the war period and, as a result, has overworked the machine. A large acreage in this State has been in continuous production which, in normal times, would have probably been rotated in with some of the more conserving crops, and this has not been done. We believe through the Triple-A program that considerable encouragement can be given to farmers as soon as the emergency is over to get this land back into a normal system of rotation to conserve our resources



and rebuild some of the damage which may have been caused by the excessive cropping during the war period. Certainly, to accomplish this purpose, the continued use of conservation practices will be of material advantage. Not only must farm operators be given every encouragement to conserve the soil, but land owners must also be made to realize that soil will wear out — that the only way to continue an income from the agricultural land of this State is to practice the proper rotation system and carry out such conservation practices as are adapted to each particular farm.

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