

Land Values in Relation to Soil Conservation

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Land values reflect man's appreciation of the privilege of using, controlling and owning a particular part of the earth's surface. Theoretically, this ownership extends upward and downward as far as he chooses to use it. However, for practical purposes the use is generally confined to a comparatively thin layer of soil. It is upon this layer of fertile loam that our existence depends. It sustains all life as we know it, and is, therefore, the most important of our resources. Its value to mankind transcends any monetary standard. If this thought is kept in mind, it will help to explain the public interest in conservation. Whether you or I own land or not, or whether we ever produce any of its sustaining growth, is immaterial. Our interest in its conservation as a means of perpetuating the human race and our civilization is the same.

But for convenience in trade there is established a more or less flexible consideration expressed as a price which willing buyers and sellers accept. This price is a measure of the value of its use and control, subject, however, to such restrictions and privileges as the public may from time to time impose or reserve. These values may, therefore, be affected by many changes, including monetary standards, economic conditions, etc., but chief of these is an alteration in the manner of its use. In the Northwest we are particularly susceptible to this change for a number of reasons. Ours is a comparatively new country across which settlement proceeded mainly without scientific guidance and with the ever-present thought of limitless opportunity. Pioneers approached the agricultural problems of new homes with established habits of

land use. Their conceptions of soil and climatic responses reflected former environment. It may be said also that pioneer stock is less conservative and more given to speculation and expansion of operations than are those who stay in the ancestral homes. It is these characteristics which impel pioneers in their quest for new locations with wealth untouched by the hands of man. The more easily converted resources of a new country tend to stimulate and distort figures as to its normal ability to produce a dependable income without depreciation. Under the impulse of the profits of this conversion, depreciation is capitalized, values rise, money flows freely and credit for further exploitation is extended upon a liberal basis. As resources are exhausted, or it becomes more difficult to convert them, periods of stringency and readjustment are inevitable. Depleted fertility, exhausted mineral resource, denuded timber lands, ever increasing flood hazards, vanishing water supply, and other evils, due to lack of proper use, begin to become apparent in diminishing returns, lower standards of living, and hastening poverty, both for the owners of the land and those who supply them with goods and services. Enterprise is starved and general bankruptcy may ensue. Our land has been a long time in the making. The process of ages has depended upon continual balance between plant and animal life. Over-use or abuse of the land quickly resulted in elimination by starvation to the point of balance. We have every reason to observe this inexorable rule of nature. Any definite progress must result from the establishment and maintenance of this balance. A great national interest exists, for it is a fact that in the long

run citizens maintain about the same relationship with a government and its institutions which they enjoy from the natural resources of a country. To strengthen the foundation of these resources, particularly agriculture, is to stabilize society.

Conservation may be defined as intelligent use, and in the case of our land resources, carries with it the implication that such use should leave the land improved, or at least unimpaired. This is a point which gives our Land Bank Appraisers much concern. In the making of long-time loans upon land, some of which run for a period of 33 years, it is of the greatest importance to be able to discern with a degree of accuracy, the productive capacity of the security during that period. The extent to which the owner is selling his farm when he hauls his wheat to the warehouse or delivers his live stock to the buyer must be considered.

In order to apply the conception of intelligent use, it is necessary to limit its use in such a manner as will curtail the profits of exploitation. In the case of an ordinary farm, a well conceived plan of conservation usually implies a diversification and balance in operating detail which not only tends to stabilize the operation financially, but very often increases the immediate cash income. Were it possible to discuss conservation in terms of an individual farm, its effect upon values would be simple for the reason that most individuals readily translate so evident a form of permanent security and independence into that relationship between life and environment which is measured in values. But the problem is not so simple.

A given problem in conservation may involve a farm, a local community, an area of similar soil types, a watershed, or a region subjected to common climatic conditions. It follows then that

the individual may be affected to various degrees by all of these problems. The extent to which we may be brought to realize this interdependence of intermingled groups will measure the scope and force of our efforts. Conservation of land resources on a national scale is a long-time program with an intricate and complex pattern and cannot be viewed as a temporary problem which will yield to the application of haphazard remedies. It is a healthy sign to find an awakening national interest in this subject and I am glad this scientific body has deemed it of sufficient importance to merit its active study and consideration. A proper public participation in conservation requires the coordinated treatment of entire regions affected by common problems. It may best be effectuated under our democratic system of government by the creation of autonomous legal machinery under which the necessary leadership and management will develop. National conservation must be inculcated in our laws, institutions, and habits.

Now the point this paper is supposed to treat, is the effect which conservation has or will have upon land values, and I presume this means as they are reflected by our present conceptions which I think I may state, are far from clear. This effect, I think, may be measured approximately by two factors. First, the extent to which our present conception is based upon an excessive and improper use of a land resource, and second, the extent to which we may restore or create a greater degree of usefulness consistent with the maintenance of a natural balance. To illustrate the first factor, if our conception of the value of grazing land is based upon an assumed carrying capacity which will eventually eliminate palatable and nutritious grasses, our value is too high. If we value wheat land for its ability to produce one crop after another, while

the essential ingredients of fertility are diminishing and erosion is hastened, that value is too high. If timber land is valued for what can be immediately gained by destructive methods of logging, rather than upon a plan of sustained production, it is too high. In all these operations we make the common mistake of capitalizing depreciation, but the greatest mistake is doubtless the lack of appreciation as to the effect this will have upon our future operations. It is a fair assumption that as a nation, we are now being brought to a realization that in such cases of abuse balances must be restored, that nature's methods of retaliation are certain and inexorable in relation to disturbances which result from exploitations of this character. So long as we had seeming limitless room for expansion the difference between development and exploitation was not so clearly apparent but having observed these evils we must now be definitely committed to a program of better use and conservation of all natural resources. It is the policy of the government in the public interest to retire in excess of one hundred million acres of land from private ownership and subject it to restorative treatment. Much of this land has been settled upon the mistaken assumption that the soil and climate were sufficiently favorable to support crop production. In the correction of this mistake the land must be put to other uses so that a natural balance will be established and maintained. The real value, therefore, of this land may be considerably less than that which has been commonly accepted. While the losses in dollars, which have been and will be sustained by this necessary change in land use, amount in the aggregate to a tremendous sum, they are as nothing when compared with the human disappointment and suffering inflicted by the chronic maladjustments which have re-

sulted from its misuse.

The second factor, however, in which conservation may change values, presents a more hopeful picture. This contemplates the extent to which we may create a greater degree of usefulness consistent with the preservation of a balance. And the field for such development seems almost unlimited. In fact, most of the processes which are essential to the removal of former abuses seem to be identical with a type of conservation which must be employed in the reclamation and development of still greater usefulness. This type of development should be expanded to its limit. As an example, let us consider the proper storage of water and its diversion for irrigation of arid land. This storage does not involve dikes and dams alone, in fact these may be considered of minor importance as compared to the restoration of vegetative covering which has a tendency to fill that greatest of all natural reservoirs, the soil.

To the people of the Northwest, this type of conservation leads in importance. But I think we should realize the breadth of the problem. Many instances have come to our attention where the developers of irrigation thought that they had concluded the project when the diversion dam had been built and the ditches dug, only to be confronted later with a diminishing water supply, silting of their system and in some cases disastrous floods. The permanency of better uses established in this manner, therefore, depend upon the maintenance of the water table in the entire shed. To restore and maintain a supply of ground water is chief among our problems, and this restoration and maintenance involves many forms of conservation not yet generally realized or practiced. In a broad general plan to reestablish and improve this resource, it may seem to some individualists that legitimate opportunities are restricted.

But these interests must give way to general welfare in furtherance of the entire scheme, to the end that, fertile soil, wherever available, may be brought to its greatest ability to serve our long-time needs.

I feel therefore, that we may conclude that land values in relation to soil con-

servation depend for their permanence and stability upon the degree of accuracy in our conception of the best use of the land and the extent to which such proper use affects the ability of the land to serve the needs of men in a sustained and balanced program.