

These issues evolved around the following:

1. There was some resistance to any program that would mandate as much as 70 percent of the prime farmland in any municipality into an agricultural open space preserve.

2. In view of the tight state fiscal situation, the cost of the program, \$1.4 billion (if all easements were purchased on the first day, and \$7 billion to \$8 billion if easements were purchased over a 20-year period), was too much to be funded from a new tax source at this point in time.

3. We simply did not know enough about the particular expertise of determining land values that would be needed to carry out a specialized farmland preservation program of this type on a statewide basis.

While all this was happening, Gov-

ernor Brendan Byrne appointed a special Capital Needs Study Commission, headed by Donald McNaughton, chairman and chief executive officer of the Prudential Insurance Company of America, to make recommendations to the governor on the state's future capital needs and how such revenue might be raised. As a part of these deliberations, Secretary Alampi presented the findings of the blueprint commission and progress to date.

The report submitted to the governor by the capital needs commission recognized the fact that the proposed blueprint commission's farmland preservation program was simply too complex, massive, and costly to be implemented with a new tax source. It recommended that a "pilot farmland preservation demonstration project" be devised that would be acceptable to

landowners and that could be funded from some existing source of revenue.

Designing a Pilot Project

With this new challenge, staff within the State Department of Agriculture's Division of Rural Resources again analyzed the problem and recommended that a pilot farmland preservation demonstration project was feasible. The staff suggested that the pilot program be funded with a portion of the \$200 million Green Acres bond issue that had been approved by the state's citizens in November 1974. Department officials further recommended that the program be voluntary and encompass the other basic concepts of the original blueprint commission report.

Since the authority for spending Green Acres funds rested with the

THE NATION'S AGRICULTURAL LAND BASE

The retention of prime lands in production, while not the only land-use issue needing attention, is clearly one issue of increasing importance. We need to explore how this might best be accomplished.

Let's begin by looking at our current situation and briefly examining some of the history behind it. The United States has about 2.25 billion acres of land. According to a 1969 report by USDA's Economic Research Service, 58 percent of that land is privately held. Of the private land, 21 percent is used as cropland, 27 percent as grassland, and 32 percent as forestland. These percentages have changed very little over the past 20 years. The remaining 20 percent is used for all sorts of purposes, including urban and transportation, recreation and wildlife, or scenic and wilderness areas. Some of this other land is virtually barren, with soil and climatic conditions that preclude economic use, but much of it has been set aside for special purposes. These reserved lands, while not contributing directly to the production of food and fiber, are important elements in the quality of life.

But let's focus for a moment on the croplands of this country, and see what we can say about their status. At the outset, I'll caution that numerical estimates must be carefully examined to see what lands are included in the estimate. Some estimates include cropland pasture, while others do not.

The total U. S. cropland figure, as reported by ERS, has hovered around 400 million acres for many years, declining very slowly. This estimate masks significant land shifts, however. The 400 million acres of cropland in 1976 are not the same acres that were farmed in 1949. Cropland has been abandoned in some regions at an average rate of 2.7 million acres each year, while in other regions new cropland has been developed at the rate of about 1.4 million acres annually. The point I

want to make is that the cropland in the United States is a dynamic land base. Even though the total acres remain roughly the same, many changes in the use of land have occurred and continue to occur.

In a recent estimate of potential cropland carried out by the SCS, several other interesting factors have been brought to light. Using the definition of cropland employed in the 1967 Conservation Needs Inventory and testing a selected sample of the 1967 CNI plots, this new study indicates a significant decrease in cropland acreage between 1967 and 1975. This decline, from 431 million acres to around 400 million acres, appears to fly in the face of the "fence-to-fence" planting trend observed since 1973. Closer examination may, however, reveal some possible answers. The CNI definition of cropland includes land in rotation hay and pasture, conservation use, summer fallow, and temporarily idle cropland. In 1967, 301 million acres out of 431 million were actually harvested. That left 130 million acres that were either in other uses or suffered crop failure. Moving to 1975, the SCS cropland estimate indicates a reduction to about 400 million acres of total cropland, while the estimate of acreage harvested increased to around 330 million.

Thus, cropland harvested may have increased 10 percent in the past eight years (accounting for the fence-to-fence planting), while the total supply of cropland declined almost 10 percent in the same period. This could indicate that, rather than adding new cropland to the inventory, farmers responded to the need for increased production by planting cropland normally held in rotation hay or pasture, summer fallow, or conservation use.

Indications are that much of this land was marginal cropland and that bringing it back into production has resulted in intensified erosion problems. If this is true,

New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, it was necessary that Secretary Alampi work closely with Commissioner David Bardin to develop a pilot farmland preservation program acceptable to both agencies. This work culminated in December 1975 and was followed by proposed implementing legislation (Assembly Bill 1334) that was endorsed by Governor Byrne and introduced on January 19, 1976. This act earmarked \$5 million for the purchase of development easements in a four-township pilot project area in the center of Burlington County. The area, which has a total farm acreage of about 41,000 acres, was selected after a careful review of the entire state. The municipalities involved are Lumberton, Medford, Pemberton, and Southampton.

While the legislation was being de-

bated and public hearings conducted, an information and education program was begun among landowners in the pilot project area to be sure they understood the issues. A local steering committee comprised of representatives from interested groups in each of the municipalities was organized. This committee has proven most helpful in giving direction to the format of the program to be followed.

Regional meetings were also held across the state to inform the general public of the nature of the pending legislation and to solicit advice and guidance.

A Law Is Passed

The final legislation to implement the pilot project was passed by the New Jersey Assembly (48-9) and the Senate (31-0). The governor signed

the bill on July 22, 1976.

With the availability of \$5 million for the demonstration proposal, a project manager, with adequate supporting services, will be hired immediately to implement the program. The next action will be to ask each farmland owner in the demonstration project area that has land under the Farmland Assessment Act to submit offers on the value of his development easements. This will be that value representing the difference between what the land is worth for market versus farming purposes.

Whether or not a landowner submits an offer to the State Department of Agriculture for consideration is voluntary. The offer will be binding only for a limited period of time if not accepted by the state. Each landowner will be asked to obtain his own official

it means that U. S. farmers have used up much of their readily available "expansion" acres and now have less flexibility than ever before. It also means that our current expansion has not been without its environmental costs.

Meanwhile, if these are accurate interpretations, what about all those other acres of potential cropland? The 1967 CNI identified a total of some 631 million acres of Class I, II, and III land. This indicated at least another 200 million acres above the 400 million being cropped. Why are these acres still in grass or trees? The answers are complex, of course, but it is obvious that economic factors play a heavy role in whether or not private owners decide to go into crop production. Good land may exist in small units, or small ownerships, or in areas where the agricultural infrastructure does not exist. It may be held for other important land uses, or by owners who have no intention of using it for crop production.

About 2 million acres of farmland are being "irreversibly" lost each year to urban buildup, with an additional 1 million acres going under water in ponds, lakes, and reservoirs, according to the potential cropland study.

We learned some other interesting things in our potential cropland study. There may be about 385 million acres of "prime farmland" in the nation. Of that total, about 250 million acres are currently cropped, leaving roughly 135 million acres of land that rate as prime farmland, but are not now being farmed. Why is this in light of apparent demand for food? We asked SCS field people to identify these reasons, and their answers provide some important new insights.

Twenty-four million acres were said to have no apparent reason for not being farmed. No significant development problem could be identified. In addition, 45 million acres were estimated to be committed by the landowners to noncropland use. If these estimates are

accurate, they indicate a whopping 70 million acres of prime farmland that are not being cropped simply because the current land users do not see it to their advantage to do so.

What does this tell us? Do we really have over 200 million acres of potential cropland that can be fairly rapidly brought into production if needed? The answer appears to be that we do not—that an estimate somewhere around 100 million acres is much more realistic.

First, 24 million acres of "prime farmland" could be converted simply by beginning tillage. These soils would require little or no protection from erosion and, with normal rainfall, should produce high yields.

Second, there are an additional 54 million acres of "high potential" land that would require some soil and water management to prevent erosion and sedimentation or to dispose of unwanted water.

Finally, there is another 33 million acres with "medium potential" for conversion to crops. These acres pose more serious erosion hazards and water disposal problems and would cost more to convert. Nevertheless, soil conservationists see no reason why, with application of current technology, these acres could not be used for crops if the need arises.

This still sounds like a lot of land, but keep in mind that almost half that amount has been added to the cropland harvested in just the past four years. So while it appears that we still have an ample land base for the reasonable future under normal conditions of climate, demand, and foreign trade, it is equally obvious that the days of complacency about America's cropland supply are over. Prime land is no longer a surplus commodity, if indeed it ever was. It is time to rethink programs, policies, and priorities? — *NORMAN A. BERG, Associate Administrator, Soil Conservation Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture, speaking at SCSA's 31st annual meeting on August 3, 1976, in Minneapolis, Minnesota.*