



OKLAHOMA'S NEED FOR A STATE LAND POLICY

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Oklahoma has never had a land policy. We consider this one of our greatest needs. When the state was settled the land was divided into sections or quarter-sections. One hundred sixty acres was a homestead. This was regardless of how good or how bad the land might be. In some localities 40 acres would have been sufficient for a good homestead and in other areas at least a section of land would be required to produce an adequate standard of living for a farm family. Without regard to the nature of the land and the fertility, or the possible use, 160 acres was a homestead. Since the settlement of the state, readjustments have gradually taken place. In the eastern part of the state the size of the farm has gradually decreased and in the western part of the state it has gradually increased. These adjustments have been slow and expensive, and they have not been satisfactorily worked out in many sections yet.

We have taken our land for granted in Oklahoma. It has been difficult for farmers who see the field every day to realize that erosion is becoming a serious factor. It is not greatly different today from what it was yesterday, and few people realize in the beginning that we had a soil

which naturally eroded very badly. As a result, erosion has taken a tremendous toll in Oklahoma.

The recognizance survey made in 1930 revealed the fact to us that of our 16,000,000 acres of cultivated land more than 13,000,000 acres had already been seriously eroded. A careful check of several analyses of soils from different parts of the state revealed the rather startling information that since our farms were put into cultivation we have lost more than 40 per cent of the organic matter and nitrogen from our land. This 40 per cent of nitrogen at the present commercial prices would cost us \$2,000,000,000 to replace, and represents an average annual loss of approximately \$50,000,000.

The effect of this loss is becoming apparent in the yields of crops. Of the two major crops, the average yield of cotton has declined about 40 per cent. The average yield of wheat has declined about 16 per cent. Wheat protects the soil against erosion much better than cotton. Erosion has been much less serious in the wheat section, due partly to the topography of the land and partly to the nature of the cropping system.

There is not only the loss of nitrogen and organic matter but we have had a heavy loss of other plant foods, particularly lime and phosphorus. These must some day be replaced in the form of commercial fertilizer, and this will cost the State of Oklahoma eventually hundreds of millions of dollars.

There is still another loss which many of us do not realize and that is the loss due to the increased cost of production of our crops. Based on land estimates we find it is now costing us approximately \$40,000,000 more to produce the crops we now grow than it would cost if our land was yielding at the rate of virgin land. Many people have been inclined to push aside the seriousness of soil erosion on the ground that we have an over-production of farm crops already and it made little difference if yields did decline. There are several by-products of our lack of land policy, however, which will begin to affect not only people who live on the land but others. In the first place, if our land declines in fertility the people of our towns and cities will have to pay a higher price for their food and clothing and will get inferior products. In addition to that, the people who live on the more seriously eroded sections of the state will no longer be able to support themselves and will find it necessary to be carried on the relief rolls. Now and in the future it is going to cost the state many millions of dollars to provide even food and clothing for the people in these more seriously eroded areas, to say nothing of supplying them with schools, roads and other public services.

Still other by-products of our lack of land policy is the effect that erosion is having on floods in our major streams. An enormous amount of water runs off our land so rapidly following big rains, which is heavily loaded with soil from the cultivated areas and becomes a serious problem in the stream channels lower down. Good land is being covered up. Stream-beds are being filled. This produces overflows. Dykes and levees are being built to retain the water within the stream channels, and the government within recent years has spent millions and millions of dollars for protection from floods which would never have been necessary had Oklahoma and other states of the middle west conserved their water and kept it on the land where it originally fell.

The clearing out of our timber, the regular burning of woodlands and pastures have increased erosion enormously.

Another serious feature of our lack of land policy has been the disappearance of our underground water table in recent years. Our underground water table has been dropping steadily since the land has been put into cultivation. During the severe drought of last summer many thousands of wells in Oklahoma went dry. Livestock had to be moved

and water had to be shipped in to supply people with drinking water. The water situation is acute all over Oklahoma. We find that where the land is properly protected against erosion the streams begin to flow again, the wells again have water, and the runoff into our streams is minimized.

The State of Oklahoma at present owns a large acreage of school land and other lands acquired since statehood. There is no law whereby this land can be protected against erosion. None of the income from this land can be used to protect the land, and there is no legal way of requiring tenants to protect it. The result is that the state-owned land is eroding more and is protected less than any other land in the state. The state has no law to require borrowers of school land money to protect the land which is offered as security for the loan from this erosion. Oklahoma needs to become LAND CONSCIOUS, to begin to appreciate the value and importance of this land, not only for this generation but for future generations. We need to develop proper sentiment which would make it impossible for a man to let his farm wash away without receiving the condemnation of his neighbors. Certainly we need a land policy which would enable the state to protect its own investment in land against complete loss.

