3A. SOIL DETERIORATION AND PUBLIC LAND POLICY

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For many years have the destruction and exhaustion of the soil been deplored by agriculturists and conservationists. In fact in 1791 George Washington wrote to Arthur Young a letter which stated the case for the American type of agriculture then and even to this very day,

"The aim of the farmers in this country (if they can be called farmers) is, not to make the most they can from the land, which is or has been cheap, but the most of the labour, which is dear; the consequence of which has been, much ground has been scratched over and none cultivated or improved as it ought to have been: whereas a farmer in England, where land is dear, and labour cheap, finds it his interest to improve and cultivate highly, that he may reap large crops from a small quantity of ground."

At the Conference of Governors held 17 years ago some excellent papers were given calling attention to the disappearance of the soil's fertility and the excessive erosion of the land. Little was offered then in the form of a public policy to stop this waste of natural resources. However, Van Hise in his book the Conservation Of Our Natural Resources goes so far as to say, "As rapidly as a sentiment can be developed for their enforcement laws should be passed which will prevent the neglect of the land. The precautions necessary to prevent excessive erosion may be enforced by law since they vitally concern the common welfare not only of this but of all succeeding generations."

In this statement Van Hise suggests a policy of public control over private farms that is far in advance of public opinion even at this time. On the other hand, we exercise a certain and increasing control over urban land through the various ways in which the police power manifests itself, but even in the case of urban land this control is not nearly so intensive as that suggested by Van Hise.

A glance at our past land policies will show that Van Hise's suggestion would have proved utterly useless in the past. Throughout our whole history, certainly up to 1900, the policy of the federal government and the individual states was to make land a free good. It is true that at first the federal government charged a nominal sum but this plan soon gave way to the "credit system," then came the

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