THE VALUE OF ECONOMIC STUDIES IN DETERMINING
THE USE CAPABILITIES OF LAND CLASSES

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The Purpose of Land Classification
by Public Agencies. The purpose of public agencies in undertaking land classification is to so influence the choice people make in their activity toward land that it will be in the interest of the general welfare.

Land classification will in some instances be undertaken to influence the choice made by individuals in their use or selection of land, in favor of those uses or that land which will return them the greatest reward for their labor.

Quite as often, however, land classification will be undertaken to guide or influence public agencies which are faced with problems of choice in their activities toward land. Certain public agencies, for example, will be concerned with the problem of deciding which land is desirable to drain or irrigate with the help of public funds. Other agencies have the problem of deciding which land is most desirable to acquire for public forests or some other public uses. Still others, charged with the provision of public services, are interested in seeing that such services, notably schools and roads, will be located in accordance with a desirable pattern of population and land use. Again public or semi-public agencies extending credit are faced with making choices as to which properties they will extend credit and in what amount.

Indeed, in very many instances, land classification will be undertaken by public agencies primarily to answer specific questions of choice with which they are faced. In almost every case, the answer to such problems of choice will depend in considerable degree upon the probable economic returns from the use of land.

In what manner may land classification be expected to influence the choice those who must exercise choice, even of the use capabilities of the different bodies of land with which they are concerned. This evidence may consist in a description of certain land characteristics which influence use, systematically arranged through classification, so that the significant characteristics of any given body may be readily known; or it may consist of actual records of the rewards which people have received for the uses by using these bodies and types of land in particular ways.

Study of Use Capabilities Economic in Purpose. The objective of any classification concerned with the capabilities which land possesses for human use is invariably an economic objective, since the use of land for production by the application to it of labor and capital is an economic process. Insofar as it is carried on to serve an economic objective, all studies of land, all classifications of land, are economic studies. For studies are concerned with land, not as a physical mass, but as the environment, the "milieu," in which production takes place. The Soil Survey is therefore in this sense an economic study.

This paper is concerned however, not with all studies of land which have an economic objective, but with studies of certain types of evidence which refer more directly the use capabilities of land, namely the evidence of economic or monetary returns from use.

It should be recognized, of course, that any determination of the capabilities of land for use is in the nature of a forecast. Being such, it is not subject to formal proof. We cannot prove what is going to happen in the future. What we actually do in determining the use capabilities of land is to adduce and study evidence of the probable economic returns from use.