DIVISION VI—SOIL AND WATER MANAGEMENT AND CONSERVATION

Crops and Soils in Conservation

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Conservation in relation to crops and soils is an especially timely topic for your golden anniversary meeting. It also was just 50 years ago that we might say the seed of the modern soil and water conservation concept was planted.

That was when President Theodore Roosevelt, whose centennial next year is being observed with particular reason by agricultural and forestry people, warned in a message to Congress in 1907: “To skin and exhaust the land will result in undermining the days of our children.”

Washington, Jefferson and others had voiced similar warnings a century before, but they had gone largely unheeded as colonial and pioneer Americans busied themselves developing the agricultural economy of a new land. Even this early 20th Century conservation seed was slow to germinate, but it has grown in 50 years to bear sound fruit of today’s conservation harvest.

The impact of the soil and water conservation concept on applied soil and plant technologies already defies accurate measurement. Many tillage, cropping and related techniques that today are becoming conventional in American farming practice were unheard of 50 years ago—or even 25 years ago.

Through research and experience there has been remarkable development or adaptation of introduced and native plants alike for soil and water management purposes.

We have learned much about the engineering aspects of soil-plant relationships—how physical soil conditions help govern the capabilities and performances of field crop, pasture or other plants.

And practical soil information in relation to erosion, climatic and other factors he has to deal with has become an everyday working tool of the up-to-date farmer, with his soils map as easily understood as tomorrow’s weather forecast.

The significance of such developments can be better understood and appreciated, perhaps, if we first review briefly the history of the growth of the soil and water conservation idea and consider the results obtained so far:

President Roosevelt followed words with action, by appointing a Country Life Commission in 1908. It was made up of Dr. L. H Bailey of New York as chairman, Henry Wallace of Iowa, Walter Hines Page, Gifford Pinchot of forest conservation fame, and Dr. Kenyon L. Butterfield of the Massachusetts Agricultural College. In its 1909 report, the Commission said in part of the loss of the Nation’s soil resources through “poor farming”:

“It has now become an acute national danger, and the economic, social, and political problems arising out of it must at once receive the best attention of statesmen. The attention that has been given to these questions is sheet erosion in Louisa County, Virginia, the Department recognized soil erosion in 1911 on the soil survey of Fairfield County, South Carolina.

National Soil and Water Conservation Program Development

In the years that followed, some of the age and related measures now identified as soil and water conservation technology were developed through the experiment stations and agricultural colleges. But it was in the late 1930’s that a national action program of soil and water conservation began to take shape under concerted attention and efforts of responsible state interests. Some of you from the college and experiment stations had a hand in that more recent soil conservation history.

You will recall that 10 erosion control experiment stations were established, starting in 1929, with a resolution of Congress in the agricultural appropriations bill for the 1930 fiscal year. Their work, carrying out cooperation with the state experiment stations, was in much basic information that was needed—soil and water losses, mechanics of erosive, tillage and other methods of controlling land use.

This work was followed by a nationwide soil erosion survey in 1934 which showed the problem and its severity in a general way. Public thinking and action progressed meanwhile. As Secretary of Agriculture Henry C. Wallace emphasized at the May 1932 annual meeting of the American Forestry Association in Baltimore, “it was time to give serious thought, from the standpoint, to the land.”

“A sound national policy of land utilization and erosion control is a vital part,” he said, “a solution of our major agricultural problem lies at the base of major problems—social, political and economic.”

You remember how cooperatively and control demonstration and Civilian Conservation Corps projects were set up in representative areas of the country. Technical and other help was given to farmers and ranchers in the project areas through the Erosion Service, which became the Soil Conservation Service as a permanent agency in the Department of Agriculture when Congress enacted the Conservation Act. That period also saw the establishment of federal cost-sharing with farmers for applying state and locally determined conservation practices on their farms.