PUTTING THE SOIL SURVEY REPORTS TO WORK

by

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One of the important problems connected with the soil survey project is that of bringing the information that the survey affords to the attention of farmers and others for whom it is intended. Following is a brief account of how we are attempting to solve this problem in Illinois.

We have enlisted the interest of our Extension Division in this connection and a plan has been developed whereby the introduction of the Soil Survey Reports, as fast as they are issued, becomes a regular Extension project, working in cooperation with the Farm Bureau organization.

When a new county soil report is issued, our soils extension specialist proceeds to get in contact with the county agent or farm adviser of that county and in conference they arrange for a series of meetings or “Soil Report Schools” as we sometimes call them. A meeting is held in each of several districts in the county. The county agent calls the farmers together and takes care of the necessary details for the meetings. The invitations are open to the public and are not restricted to Farm Bureau members. In some cases arrangements are made to visit a high school where the matter is presented to the class in agriculture.

The soils specialist constitutes one member of a team, from the University to attend these meetings, the other member being one of the men who has had an active part in the survey, either as a field-party leader or as regional inspector and thus has a first-hand acquaintance with the soils of the region.

In conducting the meeting, the county agent introduces these men whereupon they proceed to discuss different aspects of the soil report.

Usually the survey man leads off with a somewhat general discussion of soils and their formation and then he takes up something on the technical methods of the soil survey. This leads up to some practical instruction in the use of the map where he explains how any farmer may locate his own land on the map and learn with what soil types he has to deal.

A supply of the printed reports are taken to the meeting, but not until about this point in the discussion are they distributed lest they might divert attention from what the speaker is saying.

The speaker then calls for the location of some individual farm in the audience and upon consulting the map proceeds to describe his soil and perhaps other features on his farm, such as a creek, or a ditch or a hillside, usually to the amazement of the farmer and his neighbors. Usually a profound respect for the knowledge of the speaker immediately develops and interest from now on waxes warm. The land on different farms is then discussed and an effort is made particularly to point out differences in the predominating soils occurring in the neighborhood where the meeting is being held.

The Extension man then takes the floor and brings out some of the general principles involved in farm practice as they affect the maintenance and improvement of the soil. The reports include results of experiment fields located on soil types similar to those occurring in the county under consideration, or perhaps a University Experiment Field may happen to be located within the county itself. Data from such fields are drawn upon to illustrate the principles involved in the management of various soil types.

Such matters as the practice of liming, growing legumes, application of special fertilizers are then discussed.

In this manner the soil survey reports are introduced to the farmers whom they are intended to serve. After these special meetings the reports are distributed generally throughout the county from the Farm Bureau offices as well as from banks and elevators.

What are the Results?

Our people who have taken part in these meetings have come to regard the “Soil Report School” as one of the most successful extension endeavors of any yet attempted, the opinion being based upon interest manifested. It not only gives opportunity to present the particular information contained in the Soil Survey Report, but it makes individual farmers conscious of the fact that each one has his own special problem to deal with in the handling of his soil, and at the same time it awakens interest in the community to soil improvement which crops out sooner or later in tangible results.

It is of interest to note in passing that besides this distribution among farmers we are meeting a growing demand for the soil maps from loan appraisers connected with banks, insurance companies and other loan agencies. Real estate agents are likewise coming more and more to recognize the value of the soil maps in their business. Many honest real estate agents keep a file of the Soil Reports, their office using them as a basis of selling, and numerous requests for reports are received from people who have been referred to them by real estate agents.