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Agricultural Lands Conference

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AGRICULTURAL LANDS CONFERENCE

This fall, the United States Department of agriculture will be holding ten farm policy dialogues scattered around the country on the structure of agriculture. These one-day meetings have received substantial publicity and most farm leaders are aware of them.

About the same time, and less well known, another series of meetings of interest to a wider audience will be held. These have been labeled Agricultural Land Conferences. These conferences are designed to explore the attitudes of the public on issues affecting agricultural land.

The agricultural lands conferences are a part of an overall National Agricultural Land Study. On June 14 of this year this study was initiated under the co-chairmanship of the Secretary of Agriculture and the Council on Environmental Quality.

Eleven Federal Agencies are participating in the study which is to be completed by January 1, 1981. At that time citizens' viewpoints and the findings of scientists and researchers will be submitted to the President. The results of the study will no doubt be used to help shape our national policy as it relates to agricultural land in the future.

At the present time, the nation is losing about 2.7 million acres of cropland annually to various non-agricultural uses, most of which are irreversible or extremely costly to reverse. This loss is partially offset by the addition of about 1.3 million acres of new cropland being brought into production through such projects as irrigation and land clearing, which leaves a net loss of just under 1½ million acres per year.

Not everyone believes this is a problem. Currently we are using for crop production about 385 million acres, although this figure fluctuates from year to year. Ten years ago total crop acres dipped to 333 million acres but has been rising since then despite urbanizing pressures. During 1961-72 from 37 to 65 million acres were diverted under farm programs. There is a limit to how much land can be brought into production. Some of the land presently under cultivation is fragile and cannot be put in sustained production without its destruction for agricultural purposes.

People generally agree on the above mentioned facts, but disagreement lies in predicting future needs of land, an area where reasonable people can be expected to differ. We don't really know, for example, how much land will be needed to grow agricultural products for export purposes in the years to come. Other unanswered questions include: "How will the energy problem affect agricultural production?", and related to this, "Will agricultural products be converted to energy fuels?" "If so, how many acres will be devoted to this purpose?"

Seventeen Agricultural Lands Conferences will be held across the nation before the end of the year. The one closest to South Dakota people will be held in Moorhead, Minnesota, November 13, 14 and 15. People in western South Dakota might find it more convenient to attend a similar meeting in Denver on the same dates. At these conferences, state and local government officials, representatives of various interest groups, farmers and interested citizens will be asked to share their knowledge, experience and viewpoints on such questions as:

-What is being done to retain farm lands for agricultural use?

-What state and local programs have been successful, and what programs have failed in slowing or preventing the conversion of agricultural lands to urban use?

-What factors have contributed to the failure or success of the various state and local efforts to protect agricultural land?

-What impact do Federal programs and policies have upon the conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural use?

-What are the economic, social and aesthetic gains or losses that result when farm land is shifted to non-farm use?

-If beef production is to meet our needs, what steps must be taken to retain our prime range lands?

-What must be done to protect our prime forest lands from encroachment?

-How long will we be able to produce sufficient food to meet domestic and foreign needs?

The nation does not presently have an agricultural lands policy, but it isn't because of lack of interest. There are currently 63 congressional committees and subcommittees and 49 public and private organizations concerned with land use planning, management and control matters. Perhaps this is why the study group is asking for your opinions.

Anyone interested in attending one of these conferences may contact this writer for details and I will see that they get an invitation and more information about the conference.

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