

# AGRICULTURAL PROGRAMS FOR HIGH-RISK AREAS OF THE SOUTHERN GREAT PLAINS

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In discussing the programs that might be adopted for use in the high-risk areas of the Southern Great Plains, we assume acceptable measures can be taken which will give greater stability to agricultural production and income in the area. This is an approach which can be used in discussing with farm people alternative programs that might be adopted.

## THE PUBLIC INTEREST IN THE GREAT PLAINS

The Great Plains occupies parts of ten states and extends into Canada as well. The Great Plains states are: Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, and Wyoming. The American area contains about 600,000 square miles, or about one-fifth of the nation.

The most characteristic feature of the Great Plains is its extremes of climate. Most of the area averages 20 inches or less precipitation annually. Much of it would come close to being desert were it not for the fact that the limited rainfall often occurs in the most favorable growing season.

The variation from the annual average is wide. For consecutive years over long periods rainfall will be substantially above average, creating strong inducements for landowners to plow out the sod and extend their operations. The area is also given to long periods of below-average rainfall, resulting in drastically reduced crops and often complete crop failure. Similarly, the range dries up and overgrazing often results.

One writer has described the Great Plains as being recurrently burned by drouth, beaten by hail, withered by hot winds, frozen by blizzards, eaten by grasshoppers, laden with dusts, exploited by non-residents, and cozened by politicians.

The population of the Plains states is about 19 million. The population within the Great Plains proper, however, is only about 6 million. Thus, the population in the Plains is a minority in each of the states. In fact, some people have thought that being a minority group has accounted for the lack of unity and organized effort of the people of this great geographical entity. Indeed, one author writing recently of the Great Plains stated that the area has never been allowed to become

an economic, social, or agricultural unit because the non-Plains people have dominated public affairs.

## TWO KINDS OF RESOURCES

What is the real nature of the public interest in the Great Plains? Essentially, it must either involve human resources or natural resources.

First, let us examine the natural resources. The fertile soils over much of the area become subject to severe wind erosion when drouths occur. Dust storms of recent years are familiar to most people and the "dust bowl" of the 1930's is remembered by many.

No economic way has yet been found to prevent during extreme drouth the blowing and erosion of some of these soils now under cultivation. On the other hand, our range scientists say that when this land is wholly in grass and properly managed, little or no erosion will occur even during periods of extreme drouth.

The public in this instance would seem to have an interest in seeing that these particular soils which create the worst wind erosion hazard are reverted to grass.

For those soils on which erosion can be controlled by known and economic techniques, such as stubble-mulching, deep plowing, and cover crops, the public would seem to have an interest in seeing these techniques practiced.

Irrigation, of course, is a means of overcoming the effects of drouth. The public similarly would seem to have an interest in wise use and conservation of water resources.

On the human side, the public's interest would seem to be primarily in the prevention of distress. The Great Plains is an area where the ebb and flow of weather has recurrently caused widespread financial disaster. When distress comes, the public is concerned. This has been manifested in the drouth aid programs of recent years. The real nature and effect of drouth may best be observed from the experience of a particular area.

## EFFECTS OF DROUTH ON A SPECIFIC AREA

From about 1947 through 1956 conditions which are normally associated with the Great Plains area spread over the entire state of Texas. Before discussing specific programs that might be used, I think it might be well to look at the effects of these conditions upon the people and resources of the area.

All of the western part of Texas, which is devoted primarily to ranching, had below normal rainfall for almost 10 years. As a result

of this lack of rainfall, range conditions declined to less than 40 percent of normal. The area lost almost 40 percent of its cattle and approximately 38 percent of its sheep.

In a group of ranches studied in the area from the period from 1950 to 1955, the ranchers had lost approximately 38 percent of their net worth. A study of 97 ranchers who obtained emergency loans to feed their livestock revealed that they had short-term credit outstanding equal to 206 percent of the value of their livestock.

Business suffered from the drouth, too. During this period almost 18 percent of the wool warehouses in the area were closed and the remainder operated at much below their capacity.

Most farmers and ranchers in the area had to seek outside employment to avoid losing their operations.

### **EDUCATION IS NEEDED**

What can be done to prevent these hardships from recurring?

Assuming that the public has an interest in the Great Plains, what type of program would best achieve the public's objectives? First, let us look at the extremes of methods.

One extreme would be an exclusively educational approach. Idealistically, this approach has considerable appeal. It conforms with American tradition.

Proponents of this approach would point out that the individual owner is able to cope with the problem. The individual who owns the land has sufficient interest to practice good conservation. After all, present-day farmers are in better financial shape than those of the past. Credit is much more readily available than in by-gone days. The fact that the area is just emerging from the most severe and protracted drouth on record without widespread foreclosures attests to the ability of individuals to sustain themselves through lean periods.

"Let us step up our educational campaign but keep the government out of action programs," the proponents of this approach would say.

### **GOVERNMENT OWNERSHIP**

Another program that we might follow is government ownership of those areas in the Great Plains which are hard to control under private ownership.

Certainly this is an extreme measure, but it should not alarm the people of the area since we have a long history of government ownership of land and other natural resources. At present federal, state, and

local governments own between 25 and 30 percent of our land. Management of natural resources is so important a function of federal government that we have a Department of Interior, whose head is of cabinet rank, to perform the job.

The federal government already owns several million acres of land in the Great Plains area which they acquired during the 1930's.

This land was acquired under Title III of the Bankhead Jones Farm Tenant Act. Under this provision, "the Secretary of Agriculture is authorized and directed to develop a program of land conservation and land utilization including the retirement of lands which are sub-marginal and not primarily suited for cultivation, in order thereby, to correct maladjustments in land use."

The land in the Great Plains acquired under this act is administered by the Forest Service. Most of it has been put back to grazing and is used under a controlled grazing program.

Such a program: (1) might be the most economical way to stabilize the agriculture of the area and (2) might be doing farmers a favor by giving them the opportunity to move from the area to a better location.

Disadvantages of such a program are: (1) less intensive use certainly means that the area will support a much smaller population, and (2) moving some of the people from the area creates social problems, particularly for the businesses and the people left in the towns.

### **PRESENT PROGRAMS**

We have looked at two programs which seem to be extreme. Let us look at what we are doing now.

We have not limited our program to either of the extremes which we have just discussed, at least for many years. Extensive governmental programs designed to improve conditions in the Great Plains area are already in effect. Foremost among present programs is the Agricultural Conservation Program administered by Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation. Under this program the government subsidizes several conservation practices.

The more recent Soil Bank program has contributed to conservation objectives in the Great Plains. Under the Soil Bank, farmers can shift cropland to grass and receive payments from the government as compensation.

Also, emergency programs have been in effect for the area during the drouth. Farmers in designated counties were eligible for feed at

reduced costs. In addition emergency credit has been available from the Farmers Home Administration.

### GREAT PLAINS ACT—PUBLIC LAW 1021

In August of 1956 Congress passed a law known as the Great Plains Act, which establishes a program for the Great Plains area. The program deals primarily with land-use adjustment in the Great Plains area.

The estimated cost of the over-all program is approximately 150 million dollars. Congress appropriated 10 million dollars for the fiscal year 1958. The program provides assistance to farmers and ranchers in the Great Plains area who want to change their land-use practices.

It differs somewhat from previous programs in that it requires a farmer or rancher who participates to make a complete plan for all of his farm or ranch, showing specifically what changes he plans to make in a period not to exceed 10 years.

If his plan is approved by the Soil Conservation Service, then the program provides assistance in making the changes that he desires. Farmers and ranchers who live in selected counties within the ten state Great Plains area are eligible to participate.

The Soil Conservation Service is responsible for administering the program; however, all government agricultural agencies will cooperate. The Great Plains Act does not replace other programs now in effect; it supplements them.

Some of the advantages of the program are: (1) it takes a long-run approach in an attempt to solve some of the chronic problems of the Great Plains area; (2) it will retire unsuitable cropland and return it to grass, and (3) it will bring about change gradually and thus avoid working a hardship on the persons participating in the program.

Some of the disadvantages are: (1) we cannot be sure that the farmers and ranchers will continue conservation practices after the program is terminated, (2) it is difficult to be sure what practices are best in each area and for each individual farm and ranch, and (3) 10 million dollars will not go far in establishing a program of this type because of the vast area to be covered.

### CONCLUSION

We have looked at some programs that are being followed in the Great Plains area and some programs that might be followed. What can we conclude from this information?

Man can destroy the source of his existence. Baghdad for several centuries now has stood in a desert. Yet not far from modern Baghdad stand the ruins of the grand and ancient culture which once was Babylon. In its heyday, this land from the Tigris to the Euphrates supported the Babylonian civilization with food and fiber from its verdant hills. Then the historical cedars of Lebanon towered a hundred feet. Today only traces of the forest remain, and the fields of waving grain have been transformed to a near-lifeless sea of shifting land burying 100 dead cities.

We may not agree on what actually caused the fall of Babylon. It is really immaterial. We do know that erosion in the Great Plains can reduce its productive capacity. We also know that erosion can be controlled.

The problem seems to resolve itself, then, into one of alternative approaches.