AGRONOMY

Soil Erosion Shown As Manifold Menace

SOIL erosion by running water works mischief far beyond visible effect in gullying and wasting good farm, grazing and forest lands, bad though that is in itself. Some of these less obvious harms of erosion were pointed out by Dr. W. C. Lowdermilk, vice-director of the U. S. Soil Erosion Service, in the course of an address before the recent memorial meeting at Iowa State College, Ames, Iowa.

Soil erosion not only takes good soil away from where it is wanted, but frequently dumps it where it does millions of dollars' worth of damage. As an example, Dr. Lowdermilk pointed out the case of the rapid silting up of the irrigation reservoir at Elephant Butte, in New Mexico.

When the Elephant Butte dam was constructed, a survey made on the basis of the inflowing water's silt content indicated that the reservoir would not be silted up to the point of uselessness in less than 233 years. Surveys since then indicate that its life has been shortened, by silt from eroded lands, to 110 years. Even more disquieting, said Dr. Lowdermilk, is the fact that in about 60 years the capacity of the reservoir will be only that required for one season's use, leaving nothing in reserve for years of short rainfall and high water requirement.

Corking the Reserves

Another invisible damage wrought by erosion is the "corking" of underground reserves of water. These have been very heavily drawn upon by heavy pumpage during recent years, the speaker stated, and they are very much in need of replenishment by the downward movement of surface water. But when the water bears too heavy a burden of erosional mud, the "spreading grounds" become sealed up, and the water, no longer able to sink, flows off uselessly to the ocean.

Dr. Lowdermilk proposed, as a part of the answer to the deadly challenge of erosion, that the national readjustment of agriculture aim at the maximum possible use of good level lands, and that hilly lands be withheld from plowing until we can afford to work their sides over into great stair-steps of level terraces, as the Incas of the Andean highlands did with their mountainsides.

Fertilizing and liming soil pays not only in increased crop yields but indirectly in decreased losses of top soil due to erosion. This point was stressed in an address by R. E. Uhland, of the U. S. Soil Erosion service.

Comparative Runoffs

Mr. Uhland told of experiments conducted under his direction at a soil erosion station near Bethany, Mo. Here strips of sloping soil are planted in various crops, with and without fertilizer, and the losses in runoff water and eroded top soil are kept accurately checked. Unfertilized land under corn lost soil 300 times as fast as did the comparison strip under the much closer-growing alfalfa, and had nine times more loss in runoff water.

The use of fertilizer greatly increased the contrast between "close" crops like alfalfa and grass and "open," vegetation-free soil. From areas cropped under a three-year rotation of corn, wheat, clover and timothy the loss of soil where neither fertilizer nor lime was used was at the rate of little less than 12 tons per acre, as compared with only 3.74 tons per acre, where lime and fertilizer were applied and the same rotation used.

Salvation of the soil from destruction by water erosion is wrought by the meekest of plants as well as by conquering grasses and towering forests of trees. Mosses, the Cinderellas of the plant world, play their disregarded but none the less effectual part in balking the "soft insatiable tooth" of soil-stealing water. Prof. Henry S. Conard of Grinnell College reported on the various ways in which these seemingly insignificant plants operate in checking surface soil losses.

Obviously, mosses are not equipped to check the heavier, undercutting types of erosion, as do the massive-rooted trees and other larger plants. Their hold in the soil is not deep enough for that. But mosses can and do work powerfully against the surface waste known as sheet erosion. This is the even washing away of the top layer of soil, that comes before runnels and small streams start cutting deeper. Mosses accomplish this in several ways, Prof. Conard said.

For one thing, a dried mat of moss can soak up water like a wick. In several experiments performed in his laboratory, bunches of dried moss absorbed from two to over five times their own weight in water before they were wet enough to let any flow away. This would mean that in the field a dried moss sod would catch and hold all the drops from a shower for an appreciable time before even the smallest flowing trickle could start.

Even when water is flowing over the ground surface, if it encounters a bed of moss it is immediately slowed down. Furthermore, if it is carrying a load of silt which it has stolen from the soil, the moss takes it away again. Prof. Conard reminded his hearers of the crystal clearness of water that drips from wet clumps of moss, and pointed out instances where piled-up borders of sphagnum moss form the only confining barriers that hold in check accumulated masses of black muck in bogs. He also described places where sods of moss formed the only, but adequate, protection against gullying on steep banks.

Science News Letter, February 2, 1935

ENGINEERING

Soviets Plan Establishment To Capture Power From Sun

SCIENTISTS and engineers of Soviet Russia are rushing experiments in which the heat of solar radiation may be turned into usable power on earth. In keeping with its program to duplicate the work of Western civilization in every form of technology Russia is now tackling the century-old problem of how to run steam engines by the energy from the sun.

At the Helio-Technical Institute of Samarkaland (Central Asia) a solar air heater is in operation. It dries vegetables and fruit in a few hours where older methods required days.

At Tashkent, also in Central Asia, in what used to be Turkestan, research for several years has been progressing on solar energy plants. A kitchen is being operated. Food is cooked, water boiled and water pumped up to a small water tank.

So hopeful are Soviet engineers of solar energy that a power plant of 30,000 kilowatts capacity is to be

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