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SOIL CONSERVATION POLICIES, INSTITUTIONS, AND INCENTIVES

HAROLD G. HALCROW, EARL O. HEADY, and MELVIN L. COTNER,
Eds.

Ankeny, Iowa: Soil Conservation Society of America. 1982. Pp. 330. \$6.00.

Traditionally, soil erosion has not been an issue which stimulated much public debate or even concern. Over the past several years, however, questions of disappearing farmland and increasing agricultural exports have become topics of widespread public discussion. More recently charges of the Reagan administration's politicization of the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) and plans to shift funding priorities away from conservation programs have raised widespread alarm among farm interests and resource managers. Within this environment, the publication of this book fills an important void, providing a broad overview of soil conservation strategies in the United States, critiquing the success and failure of current practices, and, most importantly, suggesting alternative strategies for improving soil conservation.

This book is a compendium of papers developed out of a May 1981 symposium sponsored by the Natural Resources Economics Division of the Department of Agriculture (USDA). The authors are a distinguished group of agricultural and resource economists, with an occasional sociologist or political scientist. As with most books resulting from symposia, one of the strengths of this effort is the wide array of opinions and divergent approaches offered to the problem of soil erosion and conservation. One common theme sounded throughout the 14 chapters and 11 discussions is the failure of existing soil management practices and policies to meet conservation goals. Yet having agreed that there is a problem, the authors set off in different directions. What are the causes of this policy failure? What represents the most effective response to it? What alternative policies represent the best hope for implementing soil erosion goals? The answers vary dramatically, ranging from the liberal to conservative. For the reader, the result is a wealth of information which involves and stimulates.

The most serious weakness afflicting books of this genre is that they can be repetitious and disorganized, covering basic introductory materials repeatedly while exhibiting a distinctive lack of direction and purpose. To their credit the editors have saved this effort from such a fate. On the first count, most individual chapters build on the preceding discussion and therefore avoid reiterating material. While some overlap is evident in Chapters 1 and 2, and between Chapter 3 and 4, the nature of these essays requires it. Organizationally, the book is superbly arranged fol-

lowing an evolutionary approach around the theme of soil erosion and conservation, with five complementing subsections.

Part I, containing the first two chapters, presents a historical and conceptual perspective on soil conservation programs in the United States. The presentations by Rasmussen and Batie are particularly valuable in putting into context the varied programs grouped under the guises of soil conservation. Clearly, program goals in many instances encompass a broader range of economic and social objectives than simply soil conservation. This is a serious problem with the current programs. The first section is followed by three chapters focusing on the RCA soil conservation policy process, the USDA's on-going attempt to assess and project national needs for soil conservation. The essays by Leman and Allee provide a keen insight into this disastrous effort. Students of the public policy process will find their discussion particularly interesting.

Part III shifts direction examining individual attitudes and behavior toward soil conservation. There are three chapters in this section. Each provides a differing perspective on the theme: the sociological-perceptual, the economic, and, finally, the futuristic. Part IV, titled "Socially Preferred Trade-Offs in Soil Conservation," is perhaps the most amorphous section of this book. Included in the four chapters are topics ranging from a treatise on property rights and environmental economics to the presentation of a conceptual quantitative model for determining the optimal levels of conservation. Individually, several of these chapters are among the best in this book. However, treated as a unit, they lack any clear-cut connection.

The final parts draw together the earlier discussions in an attempt to evaluate alternative strategies for soil conservation. Easter and Cotner provide a detailed review of existing soil conservation programs with suggestions for improving on the present practices. Unfortunately, the last essay by Brubaker and Castle on alternative conservation policies is less specific and tends to draw only vague conclusions.

This book offers the reader an excellent analysis of the complex economic, social, and political issues underlying our soil conservation policies. One can only think that as the debate over soil erosion and management intensifies, with the increasing recognition that the issues involved transcend "farm problems," this book will be viewed as a seminal effort.

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