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PROCEEDINGS

of the

WESTERN FARM ECONOMICS ASSOCIATION

Fifteenth Annual Meeting

June 24, 25 and 26, 1942

Stanford University
Palo Alto, California

Stephen N. Wyckoff, Director,
Pacific Northwest Forest and Range Experiment Station
U. S. Forest Service
Portland, Oregon

Of the total area of the 11 western states, slightly less than one-third is in farms, one-third is in forests, and a little more than one-third consists of open grazing lands, semi-desert and mountain tops. Of the forested area, slightly less than one-half bears forests of commercial value. The balance is principally useful for grazing, recreation and water conservation. The forests of these 11 states produced in 1940, 13 billion board feet of lumber out of a national production of 29 billion. Their range lands provided much of the forage for 11½ million cattle and 22½ million sheep. This is no small contribution to the national production.

By such developments as new irrigation projects, the area under cultivation can be slightly increased, but all authorities agree that this increase would be relatively small. In planning for the future, the Far West must recognize that approximately two-thirds of its total area will remain uncultivated. Plans for intensive use of any significant part of this two-thirds will be unrealistic, and not conducive to prosperity.

The history of the Far West has recorded the development of three great industries--farming, livestock production, and lumbering--that are based upon the renewable resources, soil, forage, and trees. It is unthinkable that all three should not continue permanently, and post-war planning must include maintenance of the natural resources which make them possible. It must be recognized that these resources are renewable under good management, that they are not inexhaustible under poor management, and that failure to maintain them by constant renewal through good management will have economic repercussions of serious effect on the region and on the nation.

Past years have seen numerous attempts to extend intensive agriculture to wild land areas not suited to such practices because of unfavorable topography, climate, lack of water, low soil fertility, and other factors. The price paid in social and economic wastage has generally been high. Great areas of untilled and public land will always constitute a challenge to people who are land hungry. In far too many cases those who accept this challenge are the least experienced or able, and therefore least apt to succeed in a pioneer farming venture. When an experienced and successful western farmer wants to extend his operations he is much more likely to buy land of proven agricultural value than to undertake a battle with the desert or with some isolated mountain valley. Everyone directly or indirectly concerned loses when land is put to a wrong use. Is it too much to hope that in the post-war world some means can be devised to prevent those experiments in human misery which inevitably accompany the misuse of lands?

One of the basic concepts now arising out of the great mass of present-day thinking on post-war planning is that of maximum production, with attendant full employment, to result in adequate food and shelter, greater security, and a higher standard of living for all. Agriculture, here and throughout the

world, has its great part to play in achieving this goal. Farms, forests, and range lands must do their share. But is it not the particular duty of those of us who are trained in the use of these resources to extend this concept so as to include a time element? In the field of land use, maximum production must mean permanent maximum production, not merely that which might be secured for a few years at the expense of the resource upon which it is based. Cultivated lands must be protected from misuse resulting in erosion and loss of soil fertility. Similarly the uncultivated lands, from which we derive wood products and much of our livestock must be managed so as to preserve for long-time use the forest and forage cover. The concept of maximum production necessarily includes conservation of the basic resources.

Before the uncultivated lands of the Far West can play their proper part in the maximum production called for under post-war planning, some intelligent decisions regarding their ownership will be necessary. A considerable portion of these lands is now in some form of public ownership. The principal reasons for this public ownership are three in number. The largest portion, the public domain, is still unappropriated because during the past years no one considered it sufficiently valuable to acquire under the various federal laws in force. A second portion consists of land once in private ownership but now reverted to public ownership because of nonpayment of taxes. The third and smallest part is that which has been purchased or in other ways acquired by some level of government. In many places the pattern of public and private ownership is so mixed as to make proper management difficult. Objection to the extent of public ownership is frequently heard. But this objection is without force so long as many thousands of acres of wild land continue to pass out of private ownership each year because taxes are not paid. Most of these tax-reverted lands are depleted and subjected to the deleterious effect of improper management. But under stable ownership and the right kind of management they can become again social and economic assets rather than liabilities.

Greater rather than less public ownership, with due provision for financial help to local units of government, seems to be the answer based on past experience. In most instances private enterprise has not demonstrated either its ability or desire to manage them with proper regard for the public welfare.

Tax delinquency and reversion to public ownership have been particularly acute ills in the forest lands of the Far West. Recent studies by the Pacific Northwest Forest and Range Experiment Station^{1/} in four counties of western Oregon and western Washington indicate a striking condition. Of a total of 2,432,700 acres of private commercial forest land in these counties, 51,700 acres had reverted in 1932 to public ownership--to the counties for unpaid taxes. In 1941, this had increased to 342,500 acres. During the same period the amount of land of this class tax delinquent 3 years or more increased from 216,300 acres to 461,600 acres.

We are prone to think of this process as being limited to logged-off lands, but this is not the case. These studies showed that in the four counties concerned 124,600 acres of land bearing saw timber and pole-piling stands, considerable portions of which now have or will soon have commercial

^{1/} Wilson, Sinclair A. Comparative tax delinquency and reversion in selected counties of the Douglas-fir region, 1932-33 and 1940-41. 7 pp. June 1942. (Processed)

value, were tax delinquent 3 years or more or had reverted in 1932. In 1941, this had increased to 353,800 acres.

In all too many cases, counties of the western states are poorly equipped or financed to protect and manage wisely lands which come into their possession through tax reversion. Forest lands bearing merchantable timber growth are frequently sold by the counties for less than the value of the timber they bear, only to return to county ownership after the values have been removed. In many cases these are lands of high productive value and ready accessibility. The welfare of the region demands that they be managed ably for permanent production. If private enterprise or the lower levels of government cannot or will not do this, such lands should be placed in state or federal ownership where competent stewardship can be assured.

In the final analysis, the welfare of a region or nation is derived from its natural resources. In the western states a considerable portion of these natural resources are in the form of lands which cannot be subjected to intensive cultivation. Their relatively low per acre dollar value is deceptive because it tends to divert attention from their aggregate production value, and the part which this production plays in the economy of the region. Any plan for post-war western agriculture which does not provide for their continued productivity is faulty. Right use, wise management, and stable ownership are necessary to this continued productivity.