

## Agriculture by Susan B. Cohen

### Soil and water conservation

*The administration fails to see it's an economic and not an environmental problem.*

At a press conference before Thanksgiving, Agriculture Secretary Block told reporters that once the farm bill is finally out of the way, soil and water conservation will head the U.S. Department of Agriculture's list of legislative priorities. A month earlier the Secretary appeared before the Senate Agriculture Committee to present the outlines of the department's proposed program, a sharp departure from current policy.

USDA estimates that America is losing about 5 billion tons of topsoil every year to water and wind erosion. The erosion affects both cropland and rangeland, estimated to be producing forage presently at about 50 percent of capacity. Approximately one in four acres of cropland is affected, and USDA estimates that failure to halt the resulting productivity loss will mean giving up 75 million metric tons of grain production every year—equivalent to half last year's exports.

The problem is real. But the remedies advanced so far, whether from the environmentalist camp or the USDA, are unlikely to do anything but make matters decidedly worse. environmental lobby's pet issues. They have harped on it to bolster their assertion that there are "limits" to growth. The National Resources Defense Council and Council on Environmental Quality identify "overproduction" as the

cause of the problem, and attack the federal farm programs for encouraging "high-cost cultivation methods."

In line with this, NRDC has mounted a campaign to hinge eligibility for participation in the farm programs by an individual producer on his implementation of a specified set of conservation measures. Since producers don't have the capital to invest in conservation measures to begin with, this proposal is a prescription for squeezing farmers out of business at an even faster pace than recent years.

Instead of building soil fertility the environmentalists would cut back production to conform to growing infertility.

But Secretary Block's program will create the same result by a different path. The program outline he presented has two main features. First, it will establish specific national priorities for the conservation effort starting with soil erosion. (Proponents contrast this with the first-come-first-served "cafeteria" approach of existing programs.) Second, and further-reaching, the program will shift responsibility for funding and direction to the states, transforming current federal program funds into matching block grants to states already undergoing a fiscal crisis. The plan, which will require legislation and cannot in any case be implemented before 1983, has caused a fracas within USDA. Knowledgeable individuals both in and outside of the

soil conservation service are hard-pressed to find any merit or logic beyond crude budget-cutting.

Technically the proposal was made in response to requirements of the Resource Conservation Act. But what RCA specifies, one source pointed out, is that such proposals be based among other things on a thorough review and evaluation of existing programs. This, they insist, was not done. Indeed, the program evaluations cited in USDA's 1981 Program Report are either outdated or have not yet been completed. The claim that the proposed program will be more effective than existing programs is questionable.

It is likely that the plan did not in fact originate in USDA at all. It is widely rumored that the plan was a surprise to Block himself, who is reported to have been handed the program and ordered to go with it by David Stockman's OMB. The plan is frankly based on the assumption that its aim cannot be achieved—that any program that would actually reduce soil degradation to tolerable limits would be "prohibitively expensive."

Nowhere is the real cause and solution of soil erosion in the U.S. addressed. The simple fact is that producers have been forced at an accelerating rate to forego capital investments in the maintenance of their soil—just as they've been forced to forego capital investment in machinery—under circumstances of a cash flow squeeze.

Soil erosion is the hidden price of operating at below the cost of production for more than 30 years. Only a parity price for American farm products, based on the profit necessary to assure reinvestment for future production, will solve the problem.