

The Erosion Problem of Steep Farms  
in Central Wisconsin

by

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A Report Prepared for the  
Wisconsin State Soil Conservation Committee

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Summary: Findings and Conclusions

This survey covered 348 farms in southern Ia Crosse County, aggregating 53,965 acres.

Of these, 44 farms, or 12%, now have less than 30 acres of safe cropland and hence cannot control soil erosion under existing procedures.

The owners of these problem farms are cultivating unsafe slopes to make a living.

As erosion progresses, the percentage of problem units will increase.

The average problem farm values its land at \$1500, its buildings at \$1400, total \$3000.

\* \* \*

Of the 44 problem farms:

30% exist as isolated units

25% exist as pairs

45% are grouped in blocks up to 740 acres in size.

It would cost about \$10,000,000 to buy out the problem farms of southwestern Wisconsin.

Administration of these farms as public properties would entail either:

(a) High costs due to their scattered location, or

(b) The purchase of additional connective areas.

Public administration would yield valuable wood and some public recreation as well as soil conservation for the areas acquired.

Some wildlife species would decrease if the problem areas were converted to solid timber.

\* \* \*

We recommend public purchase of some of the larger blocks as county forests, but for the bulk of the problem units we recommend:

- (a) Public purchase by a land readjustment board;
- (b) Partitioning and merging into new agricultural units of safe size and composition;
- (c) Resale under land-use contract, limiting the land-use to safe practices. Each contract should contain suitable recapture clauses. If the purchaser is an adjoining farmer, extend the contract, if possible, to his old land as well as to the land purchased.

The revolving funds used for each partition and merger would, of course, have to take a loss on buildings rendered obsolete.

The land readjustment board should be attached to the County Soil Conservation District, and should use its technical personnel.

Such a procedure, gradually applied to problem units, would lay foundations for eventual land-use regulations applying to all units.

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Comments on "The Erosion Problem of Steep Farms  
in Southwestern Wisconsin"

by  
Prof. Geo. H. Krumm

I want to compliment you on an excellent report. The data in the appendix are excellently presented and certainly represent much careful work. It was very illuminating to note the game, the amount of hunting, trapping and "bounty paying" in Southwestern Wisconsin.

I think your proposal to set up local readjustment boards to facilitate the merging of farms is sound. It may take time to get farmers to accept the idea without fearing that coercion will be used. I think you are right in concluding that public forests are not the solution, although there is room for forests, parks and other public lands in the region as elsewhere in Wisconsin.

The difficulty, of course, is the loss which must be borne by some one in the "writing off" of farm buildings. However, since farms have consistently been growing larger in this area some of this "writing off" has already been going on. It would be interesting to trace the history of these mergers in the past and see what has happened. If it is true that in some cases the "salvage value" is 33% of the purchase price, this presents a real problem. As you suggest the chance to sell or rent the buildings separate from the farm is pretty small. There would be less difficulty in eastern Wisconsin or the Fox River Valley.

I found an interesting parallel to the problem in Ocean Bluff, Massachusetts. This recreational village had grown up without a plan, with small lots, poor street layout and many private streets. A fire wiped out most of it in 1941, and plans were immediately made for the purchase of practically the entire burned area by the Town. The plans called for a rearrangement of

the lots and streets, and then resale of the enlarged lots to the original owners if they wished to buy. However, the Town also passed a zoning ordinance which will prevent the cutting up of the lots in this area and keep subdividers from making new lots below the minimum. Building by-laws regulate construction and, since the Town was granted the power to sell the lots with deed restrictions, the Town insists that buildings shall cost at least \$1000 to \$2000 depending upon the location of the lots. The Town used its power of eminent domain to acquire the land promptly. A copy of the Rehabilitation Plan is enclosed for your files. I have extra copies.

The problem in Southwestern Wisconsin would be solved if the same legal instruments were available in rural areas and if people were bold enough to use them. Erosion may be worse than a fire in the long run, but fire has a very effective way of getting people to act "right now"!

The Urban Land Institute has been studying the blighted areas of cities and is suggesting that the federal government buy such areas and with planning agencies remove the buildings, clear the ground and resell the land at such a figure that dwellings can economically be placed thereon in place of the present abandoned factories, apartments, etc. This will mean "squeezing the water" out of present values with the federal government absorbing the loss. This loss will be small compared to the benefits that will accrue to the city and state in again having the land on the tax rolls and providing homes within the city. It will be important to prevent a resurgence of high land values and public controls will be necessary to keep the area in the use it is intended for.

The point I want to make is that the same principle could be applied to "rural blighted areas." A price could be offered to the present occupant to cover the value of land and buildings. The land could be sold minus the

value of buildings and even a little below current values for the land itself to make it worth while for the neighboring farmers to add all or part of it to their existing units. Again the "loss" to the government would be small, especially if all the usual "benefit payments," "free" line fencing, etc. could be eliminated. Many a northern Wisconsin county had to write off values when they took land by delinquency and tried to sell it again and finally had to keep it as county owned land.

Deed restrictions might scare the average farmer but they would not be complicated or drastic in this case. However, with a reduction in price as "bait" he might easily be induced to accept restrictions as part of the bargain. The enforcement will offer a real problem and I doubt whether it could be left entirely to local officers. Legally, violation of private deed restrictions can involve the loss of the property itself or injunctions to enforce the restrictions with fines. Should the money for the purchase and resale of farms come from the state or federal government these governments should insist on having a definite part in the administration of the funds. This would strengthen the arms of the local officials in their work of enforcing the restrictions.

Sincerely,

*George S. Wehrwein*

George S. Wehrwein

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