

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOIL LOSS

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Erosion is older than human kind. It has helped shape and form numerous landscapes on the planet. However, erosion is detrimental to agriculture, the environment, and the economy. In the 1930s the damaging effects of soil erosion were felt in Washington DC, bringing the attention of government officials to this problem. This awareness of soil erosion's negative impacts, both on- and off-farm, was key for establishing new programs to address the issue. Wisconsin played a crucial role in the fight against soil erosion in the United States. In 1933, the Coon Valley Watershed Project became the first watershed conservation project in the nation. The site was selected due to the interest of many local farmers in stopping rills and gullies from ravaging their fields. Many conservation practices, such as contour planting and strip cropping, were established and implemented for the first time in multiple farms in a single watershed. Not only was progress monitored at the field and farm level, but benefits to local streams and wildlife were also studied. This watershed project was so successful that it led to the establishment of the Soil Conservation Service (currently Natural Resources Conservation Service). Awareness of soil and other natural resources gained significant attention during this period and the decades that followed. Although great advances have been made in the area of soil and water conservation, the need for this work continues. Many fields still have erosional losses well above soil tolerable loss values, and these are much greater than soil formation rates. Recent changes in climatic patterns, including droughts and severe rainfall events, have created more stress on soil resources. Further, high grain prices have placed incentives on farming marginal and fragile lands. All of these factors have generated greater risks for soil erosion. Can we learn any lessons from history to protect one of our most precious and important resources?

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