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Environmental Blues

John Miles

In the second presidential debate, President Reagan was asked a question that caused him to reflect on the population problem in Central American and other parts of the world. His response was instructive. There is no population problem, he suggested.

"Scientists" have clearly indicated that there is plenty of land for the world's peoples. Thus, he dismissed one of the most perplexing problems of our times.

This response is symptomatic of the Reagan administration's response to most environmental problems during the past four years. It has always been able to find some expert to reassure it that environmental problems are not what some "haysayers" claim that they are. The administration has done as little as it could get away with in regard to environmental matters. Regulations, after all, might be an undue burden on business.

One goal of the Reagan administration, cited endlessly, has been to reduce government interference in the lives (and business) of American citizens. In doing so, it has made the environment a more partisan issue than it has been in almost a century of government action on environmental matters.

Many examples can be cited of Reagan administration tactics for reducing regulatory burdens at the expense of environmental protection. The Clean Air Act of 1977, for instance, mandated air pollution standards for many industries. Thirty seven such



Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert....Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

—Percy Bysshe Shelley

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Attention

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Be more than an armchair environmentalist! The Environmental Center needs your ideas and your energy. We've got ideas too but your involvement is the important element. Action is what changes this world and you can help us to heighten awareness of environmental issues on our campus and in the community. Want to bring a speaker, coordinate a program? Visit us. We also urge you to visit the Resource Library on the fifth floor of Huxley College. We're located in the Viking Union in room 113 or call us at 676-3460, ext. 20. Laurie Stephan, Coordinator
Roger Taylor, Asst. Coord.

To Our Readers

The *Monthly Planet* is a publication that strives to inform, entertain and stimulate thought on environmental issues. We, the *MP* staff, know that environmental interest and concern is not confined to just the experts and the radicals. By broadening the focus of the *Planet* we hope to appeal to a community-wide audience. Let us know what you like or would like to see in the *Planet*, reader participation is invited in all aspects of its publication.

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Reagan's New Dustbowl

Florence Caplow

The Reagan administration is known as one which places economic concerns above environmental ones, and this attitude extends across the whole spectrum of current domestic policy. In agriculture, the question of how Reagan's short-term economic policies are affecting the soil that our children and grandchildren will depend on has been largely unasked. Yet the problems of steadily increasing rates of soil destruction and topsoil loss are long-term and of grave significance. Neil Sampson, the executive vice president of the National Association of Conservation Districts, writes: "The rates of land damage inflicted today as farmers fight for survival using their high-input, big machinery technology are more serious than any time in history." Some soil scientists are calling the current levels of soil erosion "the beginnings of a new dustbowl." It is important to examine the effects of agricultural policy over the last four years. Has it hastened an ecological disaster?

On good agricultural land it takes 1000 years for an inch of topsoil to form. The average field has 6 inches of topsoil, but under current conditions that field will lose 1 inch of topsoil in 20 years. A 1961 U.S.D.A. report found that 10% of U.S. farmland loses more than 100 tons/acre per year ---- levels which would effectively remove all the topsoil in a few years. Our farmers are still wealthy enough to continue applying resource-wasting additives to the soil, but additives from scarce minerals won't last forever, and eventually the soil will be beyond repair. Jonathon Harsch of the *Christian Science Monitor* writes that we are literally "mining our soil." A person sensitive to the future

could see this as a national catastrophe.

There is disagreement over what kind of public policy would most encourage farmers to conserve their soil. The Soil Conservation Service and liberal environmentalists maintain that farmers who own relatively small, family-run farms are the most enthusiastic and eager to implement soil conservation techniques. Unfortunately, the measures which will reduce erosion are prohibitively expensive for middle-income farmers. A study done by the University of Iowa found that for the average farmer, "the cost of reducing soil erosion to a tolerable level is three times the immediate economic benefit." Liberals argue that the only hope of slowing soil erosion lies through government support for those concerned most about maintaining the health of their land.

The conservatives who favour Reagan's policies are adamantly against either government support or regulation of conservation practices. Pierre Crosson of Resources for the Future, believes, "Soil conservation will be undertaken by farmers when it is in their economic interest, when high yields make their fields so valuable that they will want to keep their soil." Other Reaganites argue that past government support of small farmers has kept down productivity and produced an unrealistic farm economy. This implies that the sooner agriculture is dominated by successful corporate farms and is released from government control the better off it will be. Common sense seems to tell us that conservation will never be in the economic interest of those who can simply sell their stock and reinvest somewhere else when the land is worn out. However, we have now had four years under the conser-

Environmental Blues

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facilities needing work.

There is another side to the park story, however. In 1980, the National Park Service published results of an extensive study of the condition of the national park system. It described and documented thousands of problems faced by the parks, some of which were with facilities maintenance, most of which were not. Most problems involved threats to park resources like scenery, wildlife, water and air quality from rapidly increasing over-demand, development, mining and other activities adjacent to the areas protected as parks. While caring for facilities, this administration has avoided dealing with such resource-based problems. It has skimped on research to study how such problems can be addressed, and has in some cases even made them worse by allowing damaging activity in the vicinity of parks.

The park system has been further hurt by the administration's unwillingness to purchase additional lands for national parks, lands necessary for filling out established parks and for establishment of new parks where unique resources need protection as at Mono Lake in California and tallgrass prairie remnants in the midwest. Land that is needed has been lost forever to development, despite the fact that Congress has authorized expenditure of monies, and that money is present in the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

All of this dereliction of duties relative to parks is in the face of increasing demand by the public for park resources. Park visits rose from 30 million per year in 1950 to 300 million per year in 1982. Until James Watt, all Secretaries of the Interior, regardless of party, favored adding to the park systems and had the means to do it.

The story of the Reagan administration's environmental

record can hardly be fairly told in a short piece like this. The consensus of those who watch government efforts for environmental quality is that there has been a retreat from commitment and progress in this arena in the past four years. New environmental problems emerge constantly as research progresses, but the priorities of the Reagan administration have been elsewhere. Full consequences of this are difficult to assess in the short term. The long view may show that significant opportunity for environmental protection and improvement has been lost.



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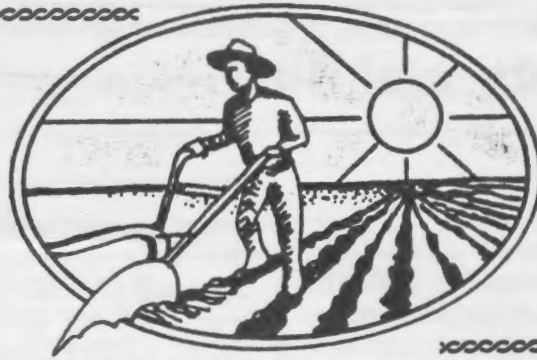
vatives. Have erosion rates improved? The evidence suggests that the problem may have gotten much worse.

By both economic and ecological standards the Reagan administration has responded poorly when faced with agricultural problems. The administration came into office decrying Carter's huge expenditures on agricultural subsidies, yet Reagan has toted up the largest agricultural subsidy bill ever (18.9 billion in 1983). Despite subsidies, rates of bankruptcy and foreclosure have reached highs unequalled since the great depression. Farmers, traditionally staunch Republicans, are beginning to waver in their support of the administration. A lot of attention has been focused on Reagan's economic policies, yet economic damage can be repaired. Environmental damage may be permanent.



At the core of Reagan's policies is commitment to the big businessmen of agriculture. Deregulation, cuts in enforcement agencies, and economic policies which drive out family farmers all serve to benefit the rapidly growing corporate farms. The top 12% of the farms in this country now receive 90% of the income. This means that the family farmers who are most concerned about conservation are unable to afford improvements. Meanwhile, large corporate farms are free to do whatever they consider profitable with no restraint by the government, no matter how damaging their quest for short-term profits may be to the soil.

Reagan's cuts were devastating to the US Soil Conservation Service. The USSCS has been the mainstay of government support for



conservation measures since the 1930's. The budget for USSCS was drastically slashed in 1982, and money for farmers doing soil conservation work on their land was cut from \$ 219 million to \$56 million. Conservation officials figured that the combined cuts would cut down soil protection projects from 10.7 million acres to 2.5 million acres.

The PIK (payment in kind) program was initially heralded by the Secretary of Agriculture as a great new soil conservation measure. Actually, the PIK program was conceived as a solution to the overproduction which was driving down world prices, and also as a way to get rid of huge government surpluses. Under the PIK program farmers were rewarded for taking their fields out of production. They were given commodities (corn, wheat, etc.) which equalled up to 30% of the crops they would have harvested if they had cultivated the idled land. Tragically, it widened the gap between struggling farmers and an increasingly successful agribusiness, while increasing the already dangerous rates of soil erosion.

The government has a general policy that no government program can award an individual farmer more than 50,000 dollars in support. John Block, Reagan's secretary of agriculture (and a millionaire farmer himself) managed to take the \$50,000 ceiling out of the PIK program. Some corporate farms in California made over 3.5 million dollars on the PIK program, while many small farmers actually lost money by participating in PIK. Incidentally, the large California landholders are

among the most generous and faithful of Reagan's supporters.

The PIK program, far from being a conservation measure, dealt a powerful blow to soil conservation. 82 million acres were withdrawn from production, but millions of acres were left barren instead of being sown with grass or legumes to protect the soil. The USDA ordered conservation practices but left incentives and enforcement up to individual states and counties. No conservation funds were provided. Predictably, when state conservation officials examined the fields at the end of 1983 they found that only 10% of the fields had been properly protected from soil erosion. "A lot of it came down to the philosophy of the individual farmers," said William Brune, retired USSCS conservationist, "Many felt that if they couldn't harvest the crop, then they weren't going to spend the money (to protect the fields)." American agriculture was in trouble long before 1980, but the Reagan administration has accelerated the changes facing US farmers. No one can really measure the effect this administration has had on our farms and fields. Nonetheless, small farmers are suffering all over the country. Services designed to help farmers maintain their land have been cut. Corporate farms are on the rise. Reagan's policies may be permanently changing the nature of American agriculture, and the environmental effects of those changes may be disastrous.

