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Wins regional contest

Doug Engstrom, a sophomore at Washington High School is flanked by his parents Mr. and Mrs. Dean Engstrom of rural Garrison after he won the Region 7 Soil Conservation District Speech Contest Thursday in Amana. Engstrom had earlier won the local contest and will now compete in the

State Contest Nov. 28 in Fort Dodge. Second Thursday was Peggy Bhalla, Johnson District winner. The text of Engstrom's speech on soil conservation can be found inside today's Times.

Engstrom's winning speech

EDITOR'S NOTE: Following is the complete text of a speech on soil conservation given by Doug Engstrom Thursday night in the Region 7 contest. Engstrom's winning speech will be given in statewide competition Nov. 28 in Fort Dodge.

By DOUGLAS ENGSTROM
Garrison, Iowa

Opinions on soil conservation seem to go through three stages — (1) it can't be done, (2) it can be done but it's not practical, and (3) I always said it was a good idea. Mankind seems to have spent most of his history in the first two stages of thought, and it has not been a happy story.

The people living in modern Palestine, known Biblically as the land of Canaan, were probably the first people to deal with severe soil erosion. Previous civilizations had been founded on level plains or in river bottom land that did not experience serious erosion. When the people of Israel first moved in, it was truly a "land flowing with milk and honey." Today, much of it is, and probably will remain, useless desert. There is water, but the precious topsoil is gone; and with it, the magnificent cities of ancient Israel. Only recently, and with agonizingly slow steps have the Israelites begun to reclaim the land lost by their forefathers.

Syria, too, provides a stark example of what can happen when soil erosion is allowed to do its worst. In ancient times, during successive invasions by Persians and desert nomads, the elaborate terrace systems used to hold soil in place, fell into desrepair, and the soil washed away. Syria, today, contains over one hundred dead cities that shall never rise again for they rest on dead land.

There are other people besides farmers of the eroding land who suffer because of soil erosion. For thousands of years, Chinese living on the flood plains of the Yellow River have built dikes to contain its floods. The river, however, was filled with silt from upland farms. This silt was deposited in the channel between the dikes, destroying their effectiveness. To counter the river's gradual rise, farmers built higher dikes. Generations after generations continued the practice; in many places lifting the river as high as 50 feet above the plains. Then, for one reason

or another, one area of the dikes would be damaged or neglected, or the dikes would fail to keep up with the accumulation of silt. The Yellow River would then break loose rambling over the land in search of a new outlet; snuffing out millions of lives in the process.

Another example of indirect damage of soil erosion can be found in the French Alps. As the French population increased in the mid 1800's, the demand for grazing ground for goats also increased. The upland pastures were stripped of their protective cover that slowed down and absorbed the falling raindrops. As a result heavy rains caused catastrophic floods and landslides in the valleys. The French government sought to combat the problem with a system of terraces combined with better soil management. After millions of francs were expended, the Alpine valleys were safe again and the upland pastures were again fertile. Obviously, the French government had always thought it was a good idea.

History, it is said, repeats itself because people weren't listening the first time. Soil erosion has proven to be one of history's great, if somewhat overlooked, villains. Soil erosion, in all eras of history, has bankrupted farmers, starved city dwellers, collapsed governments, and brought mighty empires to their knees. We are a country that claims to have learned from history. Have we? Let's take a look.

In the last one hundred years, almost half of the nation's topsoil has eroded away! It takes between 250 and 1000 years to form an inch of topsoil; yet in another 100 years all remaining topsoil may be gone. True, we are making gains in some areas. Farms that can be protected by basic practices such as strip cropping and grassed waterways could have erosion down to acceptable levels by the mid 1980's. But, at present, only 40 per cent of the farmland in the United States that needs protection is getting it. Completion of the needed terraces will take over 1700 years at the present rate of installation. Completion of the necessary tree planting is over 300 years away. The time to act is now, for we cannot wait these periods of time.

At present, using conventional tillage, we are mining the soil at the rate of 2 bushels of soil for every one bushel of corn

produced. We've got to stop treating our soil like dirt, and start treating it like what it is — a precious and exhaustable resource, just like oil and natural gas. Unlike energy, however, there are no alternative sources for food. We have not realized the full magnitude of the soil erosion because we have fooled ourselves into complacency. Through the use of chemical fertilizers we have been able to keep our yields up.

We do have methods of preventing soil loss. There are a variety of systems to match a variety of needs. Some, such as terraces, require a rather large initial investment of time and money. Others, such as minimum tillage systems, actually lower the amount of time and money required to put in a crop. Systems such as strip cropping do not require new equipment, but only new methods. We have the tools, what we need is an informed and concerned public that is willing to use them.

Too many of us are like the young bride, who before preparing ham would cut off both ends. Her husband asked her why she did it. She replied, "Because my mother always did it that way." So the young bride asked her mother why she did it and she replied, "Because my mother always did it that way." So they asked Grandmother, "Why do you cut off both ends of the ham?" and she replied, "Because I only have one pan and it's the only way the ham will fit into the pan."

For the same reasons, too many farmers are using a tillage system that has not changed, except in size, since the prairie was first broken. Just like grandmother's ham, there was a time when deep plowing was both necessary and sensible. Today, however, it must be viewed as wasteful and old fashioned. There are new systems that do the job just as well or better than plowing. True, most do require more care and better management, but that is no reason to say "it can't be done."

Previous civilizations that ignored soil erosion lost their security, their freedom, their culture, and ultimately they surrendered even their homes, farms, and cities. All was lost and gone forever. It would be ironic indeed if the moldboard plow, symbol of this country's agricultural strength, was to be its ultimate downfall. And the last words of the American farmer were to be, "It can be done, but its not practical."