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SOIL CONSERVATION - THE PROBLEM OF BUSINESS

I am glad to be back with you today. I have lived and worked much of my life in the midwest, principally in the Mississippi and Missouri Valleys. I love to come back, and every time I marvel at its richness. I also marvel at the blindness of so many Americans to what it means in all their lives. Westerners flock to the East to see the old cities like New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Washington. Easterners also flock to the West, but mainly to lakes, mountains, and the great cities of the West. Too few Easterners spend much time in the plains and prairies or on the rivers of these great valleys, which are the very foundation of all the past, present and future greatness of America. Rome ruled the world, but its world had to feed it, and finally Rome had to fall. England has been great, but has never been able to feed itself from its own soil, or support its industries from what it could dig below the soil.

Mesopotamia once had the richest soil production, but the soil was not conserved, and its empires vanished - likewise Syria and Egypt. Germany became a great and powerful state through its industries. It didn't neglect its soil like some other states, but there never was enough soil production to support its immense industrial population. It lacked the essential of permanent greatness.

In this age of manufactured things, a tremendous population of industrial workers is absolutely necessary. They make it possible for us to satisfy our myriad of wants. Without them we might eat well - be well housed - but not much more. Our present lives of comfort, convenience, relief from drudgery, and much of our social and spiritual development, would be impossible without what they produce.

But, ladies and gentlemen, history proves that such an industrial development is more or less transitory and unstable unless it rests on a broad, adequate foundation of soil production. In plain English, you could never have a great country in a desert. And you can never have a permanently great country unless it has been endowed with adequate and rich soil, and has cared for its soil intelligently. Every man and woman in America, whether engaged in banking, manufacturing, commerce, big or little, should before everything else be interested in the conservation of our soil and its utmost productive development. I don't mean the soil his house or his factory or store is on, but the soil that feeds, clothes and houses him. He should know how vital the soil is which supplies him with materials for his own production, and will supply more and more of such materials in the future.

The reason we're talking about soil conservation today, and will have to keep hammering away at it, is because of the enormous outrageous waste of soil that is going on every year. I'm not going into statistics with this audience, that knows all about this waste. It's a sorry story - millions of tons of our good, fertile earth, washed into our rivers and gone forever to the sea. It can't be replaced. This waste represents an irreplaceable part of our national wealth. The loss can't be insured. Much of this tremendous loss falls on individual farmers. A man breaks some virgin soil at great expense to him in time and

effort. By and by, some tiny gullies, not very alarming, not bigger than a corn stalk, appear. Year by year the gullies grow, and soon the farmer has to start prevention. State and national agencies will tell him how to tackle the job. If he's forehanded -- if he has the time, means and can get enough help -- he can often keep his wealth. You know, however, what happens in many, many cases. The continual pressure of nature is too great, and the farmer is overwhelmed and virtually ruined. This is a great loss of national wealth, but it is frequently a total loss to the individual farmer. He can insure against loss of buildings and equipment by fire, but the only insurance against loss of his good soil is eternal vigilance, eternal effort, and the use of intelligent methods.

This loss of national wealth, of course, is not all on improved land. A large proportion of it occurs on our huge acreage waiting for improvement and use. Millions of acres of once valuable land that has never been broken by man, are now worthless. All this good soil is now in the ocean. It's too rough for any use whatever.

Again some city fellow says, "What's all the talk about? The United States has plenty of land for a thousand years. Anyway, why doesn't the farmer take care of his land?" That city man is just showing his abysmal ignorance.

Yes, we have plenty of unused land, but that city man might be surprised to know how much of that soil should never be broken for farming, unless plans are made in advance to hold the soil where it is. To do this in many cases means regional protective projects far beyond the resources of individual farmers. Much of the soil loss of individual farmers is caused by things done sometimes a hundred miles away. No, soil conservation is too big a job for individual farmers, except the relatively few who are favorably located. Soil conservation is a war against aggressive nature. That war, like our military wars, must be fought by the whole nation.

Farmers as a class are as intelligent, as patriotic, as willing to work as any class in our nation. But, like merchants, bankers and manufacturers, farmers are good, bad, and indifferent. A good one can be plagued -- even ruined -- by the bad and indifferent ones around him. A huge educational program is vitally necessary. A farm should be planned from the selection of the site to the finished farm, just as elaborately as the planning for a new automobile plant.

Yet, what do we hear everywhere? People who have never farmed, buying farms. Few of them know whether they could ever get their farms into profitable production. Very few of them know the many mistakes which must be avoided, including the original purchase. Their farms may require large working capital, which few of them have. Hardly any know that at best it may take five or more tough years to get really going -- even if they have enough know-how.

The ignorant city man we talked of a while ago thinks of the soil only as a provider of food. That, of course, isn't so now, and will be less so in the future. He doesn't know that the soil should be conserved for our national wealth and prosperity, quite apart from helping the farmer. Our lumber and our paper largely comes directly from the soil. Oils for much of our industrial production comes from plants. Soy beans are grown not only for food. The old standbys -- cotton and wool -- are dependent on our soil, but are being replaced by various forms of cellulose which are made from plants of one kind or another. Suppose -- and it isn't fantastic -- that in ten or twenty years we should need a million tons of industrial alcohol. The farmer would have to produce it. I tell you we had

better conserve every acre of our soil. The greater our advance in technical processes, demanding raw material which is depleted or never was sufficient, the more we shall have to turn to soil cultivation. Yes, permanent prosperity for a great nation finally depends on having enough soil and cultivating it intelligently. The awesome fact is that lost soil can never be replaced to any large extent. When it's gone, it's gone forever. Many parts of the ancient world prove this. The story is there for us to read. Right here in the United States there is a huge bulk of evidence of what years and years of neglect of soil conservation have done to millions of our acres. A huge amount of our land is non-productive today because of what aggressive nature did centuries before we got here.

I hope you are convinced by this time that no nation, even the rich United States, can afford not to conserve such a major portion of its national wealth as its fertile soil. Our soil today is the most important part of our heritage for future generations. If it is lost, they will suffer seriously, and the prosperity of our country would be menaced. Only two other nations today have such a gorgeous endowment - Russia and China. We are more or less mature while they are adolescent. Even China, which has already lost a lot of its fertile soil, has plenty left. However, we have the wealth, the organized intelligence, and the general ability to conserve what we have left, so as never to risk losing our prosperous position for all time. Again I must stress the fact that permanent prosperity depends upon adequate soil resources intelligently handled.

For decades, our national and state governments, or at least the special departments involved, have been well aware of this necessity. Hundreds of millions have been spent on flood control, irrigation, and soil conservation, education and practical help to farmers in increasing amounts. The specialists of these departments are on their toes, and know the peril we are facing and where we are headed if much more is not done - and soon.

Moreover, the farmers themselves are responding, not only so far as their own acreages are concerned, but in their support of plans to save the national soil wealth in general.

But, ladies and gentleman, the people of the United States do not know. Bankers, manufacturers, city labor, commercial men, and people in general, do not seem to understand the need for an all-out national defense against aggressive nature. Nature in general - like its handmaiden fire - if mishandled, produces dire results. Mother Nature has untold bounties for us, but she must be treated with the utmost respect. If irritated by negligence, ignorance and cupidity, she can be violent and destructively aggressive.

Now let us face the real problem! There is a menace to our permanent national prosperity because of soil loss. It shows itself nearly everywhere, but it is terrible in many sections. Governments and many farmers are fighting hard, but it is evident that to win, the whole nation must get into the war. The answer is obvious. First, education of all the people, and then a tremendous increase in men and material.

We cannot expect much more from the farmers alone, and moreover a large part of the fight must be made where there are no farmers. There just isn't enough profit in farming for the farmer to pay for even a small fraction of what must be done. And he can't take much time away from farming to do the great constructive work necessary. Finally, the utmost he could do on his own farm, except in favorable locations, would not make a dent in the big problem. Again, all of us must get into the war.

Governments, national and state and county, have for years been working at the problem, intelligently and energetically, with the means at their disposal. Associations like the Friends of the Land, the Mississippi Valley Association and farmers' associations, have done a noble job. They have carried on education, they have worked for appropriations, but their response has been mainly from the farmers and from increased government effort. But the education has made precious little progress with the people generally. Here again is the nub of the job. How to get the whole nation into the war. Congress and state legislatures respond generously with appropriations only when there is an aroused public clamor. Few in America saw the menace of World War II to America, until Pearl Harbor. Then the people rose on their hind legs and Congress appropriated billions, and practically laid democratic methods aside, to win the war.

The first task, therefore, is to arouse the nation and make everybody conscious of the menace. The awakening must come from groups among the people who can provide the means. Plainly, this means that business must take the lead and join with the farmers who are closer to the job. It won't be hard to show that such an effort by business would not only be patriotic in the best sense, but also would be intelligent self-interest.

Further, I believe the joint effort should stem from local business. I dislike the terms small and large business. I think a better classification is national and local business. In most cases, local businesses will be the smaller, but as a total bulk larger in influence and power. Moreover, they can never grow to be a menace to government.

National business, such as General Electric, General Motors, Dupont, Westinghouse, U. S. Steel, and the like, would approach this as a national problem, which it is of course, but the spade work of the solution must be done regionally.

After all, there is a close community of interest between the local business man and the farmer near by. The local business man I am talking about is the local business man, of which there are millions, who has no national or distant market. His success depends upon the prosperity of his own region. He can't, like big or national business, balance the poor regions by the good ones. In many regions his prosperity depends upon prosperous farmers.

What do I propose specifically?: In every state I would select one of the state's supermen as starter and unifier. I would have him divide his state into strategic regions or districts. I would put an organizing go-getter in charge of each region and give him a small, live committee of hustling business men. This committee, aided by the state leader, would adopt a program of education by speeches, news items in the local papers, radio and regional meetings. Schools, colleges, business men's organizations and representatives of state and national departments would be closely related and supported. They would require money, and the state leader would organize for this. The object would be to put soil conservation, as the basis of regional and national prosperity, in the minds of every citizen, whatever his occupation. Soil conservation would be placed on a par with national defense by all the people. It is national, as well as regional, defense. The nation is aroused to national defense only when war is impending. Soil conservation is victory in a war which is not impending, but which has been under way for years. Soil destruction is a disease like consumption or cancer, which will go on and on unless fought vigorously and intelligently. It, however, is not like those diseases which baffle us because we don't know what to do with them. Soil conservation is a visible external process. Our experts know very well what to do. The serious question is, "Will we do it? - everywhere and by everybody?"

Of course, the state and regional organizations should be unified and helped by some sort of central organization. It would be a kind of general staff working out the grand strategy and providing much basic material for publicity, education and popular stimulation. Yes, gentlemen, if we're to win this struggle against the forces of nature and have permanent national prosperity, if our children and grandchildren of endless generations are to live in a better and better United States, we must make this struggle a ground-roots one.

Finally, gentlemen, I believe this is first of all a valley matter. Other sections of the country have an equal national responsibility, but it is our job to get it started. The Mississippi and Missouri Valleys are the bread-basket of America. As industry needs more and more products of the soil, these great valleys will provide them. In major proportion, the richness of America beneath the soil is in these valleys. That richness was put there by nature in past milleniums. It can be exhausted. But nature in those same milleniums gave us our millions of acres of fertile soil. That can also be wasted, but only if we permit it. Both are alike in that respect -- when both are gone, they are gone forever. We can't restore exhausted mines or oil wells, and we can't bring soil back from the ocean. There is a big difference, however. When we exhaust mines and oil wells, we do it for useful purposes. When we don't conserve our fertile soil, it is unnecessary, heedless, criminal waste, not only serving no good purpose, but, worse than all, crippling our nation, perhaps forever. Can it be possible we shall be as stupidly blind, and criminally negligent, as other great nations of history, and not take up the task?