

Lost Topsoil: Erosion in America's Corn and Grain Belts

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Description

By 1984, American farmland has lost three billion tons of topsoil through erosion -- enough to fill 34,000 Houston Astrodomes. Some farmers are practicing soil conservation, terracing fields, or "resting" them.

Keywords

Erosion, Soil Erosion, Topsoil, Soil Loss, Wind, Rain, Soil Particles, Grass, Cultivation, Planting, Rows, Straight, Terraced, Terracing, Terraces, Fields, Sloping, Run-Off, Hay, Pasture, Farming, Farmers, Grain, Foreign Demand, Government Incentive, Fencerow to Fencerow, Grain Embargo, USSR, President Jimmy Carter, Congress, Soil Conservation Legislation, Drought, Low Yield, Bumper Crop, Corn Belt, Grain Belt, Cherokee County, Iowa, Chesapeake Bay, Silt, Sediment, Soil Conservation, Crop Land, Farm Land, Land Use, Environmental Science

Transcript

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CONNIE CHUNG, anchor:

America's farmland is eroding rapidly while the government is responding slowly to the problem.

Congress says erosion is costing the U.S. billions of dollars every year, although the study says the

problem is avoidable. The government is putting off most legislation until 1985, but 1985 may be too late. Lee McCarthy reports from Iowa.

LEE MCCARTHY, reporting:

The Nation's Corn Belt is green again. The year after serious drought caused disastrously low yields, Midwestern farmers are anticipating a bumper crop, but the green of the crops disguises a very serious problem. The top soil of America's farmland is eroding at a rate much faster than it's being replaced. Wind and rain loosen minute particles of topsoil that are either blown or swept away, but the particles add up.

ROBERT GRAY (American Farmland Trust): Almost 3 billion tons of soil comes off of our crop plant each year. People don't realize how – it's tough to quantify that. I mean, that would fill a Houston astrodome, for example, 34,000 times.

MCCARTHY: Cropland erosion first hit alarming levels in the early 1970's. Foreign demand for American grain was at an all time high. The government urged farmers to plant fence row to fence row and they did. High erodible fields were planted. Farmers moving to cash in went deeply into debt to buy more land and equipment. President Carter's grain boycott turned the boom to bust, but that didn't stop the erosion problem.

GRAY: And so it just feeds upon itself. Here they are. They're trying to get out of debt. They have to put more acreage in and, of course, it's just making the soil erosion problem worse because this acreage remains in it.

MCCARTHY: Tom and Linda Bidner are working to get their Iowa farm out of debt. To do that, they've got to preserve their rich productive topsoil so years ago they began terracing their fields to prevent erosion. Such protection is a major investment.

LINDA BIDNER: We have about 12 miles of terraces on this 400-acre farm. We estimate if we were to build them all today, they would cost about \$80,000. The estimate that we have to repair is about 10,000.

MCCARTHY: The Bidners are surrounded by farms with crops planted in straight rows on slopping fields. They're trying to tell their neighbors that such methods will destroy the farm's productivity by inviting erosion.

L. BIDNER: Mother nature, while she doesn't repair the damage, kind of covers it up. The grasses fill in those low spots that eroded out after another year's cultivation, everything kind of evens out so it's hard to see.

MCCARTHY: But the Bidners are convinced that without protection, America's topsoil will gradually disappear.

TOM BIDNER: We would probably be losing on an average of 15 to 20 times a year of soil loss.

MCCARTHY: Per acre?

T. BIDNER: Per acre. Over the last 100 years, we have lost, in Iowa, half of our top soil has been eroded away.

MCCARTHY: Erosion isn't just a Corn Belt problem. It's occurring on farmland all over the United States. The upper Chesapeake Bay was literally being filled in with the silt that had washed off farms in Pennsylvania and Maryland. That erosion is finally being stemmed strong state support for oil

conservation. Some of the land on the Wayne McGuinness farm has not been tilled for 10 years. Each growing season, some of the land is kept in hay or pasture or woodland. Where crops are planted, grass waterways direct the runoff. McGuinness also has neighbors who have not caught on. These green beans are a high cash crop, but nothing is being done to preserve the topsoil they're growing in.

WAYNE MCGUINNESS: You can see right here the sediment, the fine sediment that is washed off this land and across the road, and I think sometimes if somebody priced the cost of topsoil, they might be – have a better crop if they sold the topsoil instead of the vegetables they were raising on the field.

MCCARTHY: With soil conservation legislation stalled in congress, it looks like farmers will get no federal encouragement to conserve topsoil this year, but farmers like the Bidners believe that something must be done.

T. BIDNER: If we don't do something now, maybe 30, 50, 100 years from now, it will be too late and there's no way of returning back to what we have.

MCCARTHY: Lee McCarthy, NBC News, Cherokee County, Iowa.

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