

Soil Erosion

general statement of intent? Where is the support and funds badly needed? Until funds are earmarked for this specific purpose, this will remain simply a statement of intent. I wonder whether anything has been done since that statement of intent was expressed by the federal-provincial Ministers of Agriculture. I am told that they are still living in the world of good intentions.

The present policies that are pursued by Departments federally and provincially are often at odds with the principles of soil and water conservation and tend also to work against the remedial action that is needed to correct soil erosion and soil damage. For instance, in many provinces there are drainage incentive programs which do accelerate run-off and soil losses. We have a situation whereby marketing agencies are encouraging farmers to produce greater quantities of agricultural products on a fixed or even shrinking land base. We also have a tax assessment process in most provinces where no distinction is made between productive and non-productive land. That distinction was drawn by the Senate committee and it recommended remedial action.

• (1410)

In addition to all those factors, what plays against the badly needed corrective measures to deal with soil erosion is the fact that successive Governments and their departments have, since the late 1940s, endorsed the use of chemicals without providing adequate research into economic alternatives to chemical weed and pest control.

What emerges is a picture requiring a plan of action as indicated in the motion before you today. What is emerging from the Senate and Science Council reports can be summarized as follows. Governments at both levels should increase basic research into soil and its growing capacity. Second, Governments should increase applied research on conservation techniques and appropriate technology. Governments should pay attention to the need for increasing the number of field personnel working on soil conservation. Governments ought to create a better method for technology and information transfer from the researcher to the farmer. Finally, there is an absolute necessity for harmonizing policies between various jurisdictions and among departments within the same jurisdiction as to make soil and water conservation a real and top priority.

Experts also point to the need for farmers to move away from monocultures. They ought to increase crop rotation. They ought to use fall cover crops and persist in contour plowing. They should use conservation tillage, reduce summer fallow and excessive use of fertilizers to prevent acidification of soil. Finally, they should reduce where possible dependence upon the use of heavy machinery.

In answer to these preoccupations on the part of farmers, one month ago, more precisely May 19, the Soil Conservation Canada Organization was founded. Its president, Senator Sparrow, spelled out in a very concise brochure the aims of this organization. Inevitably the question arises as to what the

Government of Canada, through its research facilities and agricultural programs, is doing to assist this organization to carry out the mandate it so fully defined at its inception.

What is the Government planning to do in order to restore research to the level it ought to be in order to face this major catastrophe? At this point, if you look at the research facilities available, one has to conclude that due to inflation alone the Government of Canada, in the field of agriculture, lost some \$20 million over the past five years. It has also lost some 140 person-years by way of budget reduction or attrition and the like.

The Liberal task force, under the auspices of the Hon. Member for Algoma (Mr. Foster), carried out extensive hearings in the West in late 1985 and 1986 and produced an excellent report which I highly recommend to your attention because it attempts to convey to Parliament the signals of distress that farmers registered on this very question of soil erosion and degradation. The farmers who appeared before the task force called for an increase in research and development related to soil conservation and for more field testing on soil and water conserving crop production methods. Despite that, and despite the efforts by the Hon. Member for Algoma to register this need, to the best of my knowledge government action has been invisible. Hence the reason for raising this matter in the House today.

The National Farmers Union, which appeared through its president, Wayne Easter, almost 13 months ago before the World Commission on Environment and Development had something very interesting to say about the general problem in agriculture, which includes this question of soil degradation and erosion, as well as economic losses to our farming community. He said:

The problem in agriculture is not faceless. I as a farmer am a potential victim of the system that we now operate under. Why are approximately a quarter of Canadian farmers facing the immediate prospects of farm bankruptcy? It is directly related to the general concept of a cheap food policy that has constituted a cornerstone of federal agricultural policy since the beginning of settlement.

We regard the current cheap food policy as a form of economic violence that is contributing towards soil exploitation and the growing impersonal relationship between farmers and the soil for economic survival. It is a policy of industrialization that can lead only towards disaster economically—for us as farmers, and environmentally for us all as Canadians and as world citizens.

Those words will be remembered for a long time to come because they point to a general issue, namely that of finding ways of developing our agricultural resources in a stable manner, one with which farmers can live for generations to come rather than being driven by the objective of maximum production, which sooner or later has to be paid for as we are now beginning to face by way of soil erosion and degradation. That is why the World Commission on Environment and Development has raised in its recent report the profound importance for the global community of coming to grips with the question of stable development. That is, a development with which we can look in confidence to the future rather than continue taking from our natural resources, the soil, the fishery, and forests, without putting back.