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A Conference of the Retention of Prime and Important Farm and Forest Lands was sponsored by North Carolina Governor James B. Hunt on the 17th of December in Raleigh. This circular will record some of the notes I made at that Conference.

The Executive Director of the National Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Neal Sampson, spoke from a national point of view. To begin with, the United States, in a real way, is its land. Everything we eat, or live in, or wear, everything we do involves an exchange with the land. If we do not look after the land, the land will not look after us. (I sort of wondered if he was not going to start talking about the Second Law and entropy.)

Dr. Sampson spoke of three basic problems having to do with our farmland: (1) Maintaining it as farmland; not losing it to shopping centers and roads and housing developments. (2) Erosion to wind and water. (3) An economy that makes it difficult for the farmer to stay on the farm; bankruptcy.

Our national strength is not found in armament, says Dr. Sampson, it's not in the B-1 or the MX; it's in the resource base, the land itself, yet 98.9% of the Federal budget goes to defense and entitlements. The continued abuse of the land for short term profit will surely undermine the strength of the US economy, of the US itself. We cannot let Federal programs for keeping agriculture strong be abandoned. At the same time, if you are going to save the farms of North Carolina you are going to have to do it yourself. Don't get hung up on any one way of protecting the farmland. There must be a mixture of programs intelligently applied; zoning laws, tax structures, loan programs, price support, education, erosion control, etc., etc. All strategies must be used and applied to differing situations in differing measures. But, we do not have the option of sitting still and letting the land slip away.

Secretary of the Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, Joe Grimsley, gave a sort of statistical overview of conditions in North Carolina. Some 6% of a population of 5.9 million live on farms, and it steadily becomes more difficult to do so. Bankruptcies are way up. There are 20 million acres of forest in North Carolina, 6.1 million acres of cropland and 2 million acres of pasture. Population in the state will increase 1.8 million by 2000. Erosion takes 47 million tons of top soil per year. (In a later speech the total loss of top soil was put at 80 million tons per year.)

My most satisfactory encounter of the Conference was over lunch with USDA soil conservationist, Tim Etheridge, who works in Jones County, NC. An outdoorsman, articulate, soft-spoken, handsome, knowledgeable, Tim told about no-till and reduced-till agriculture now practised on 440,000 acres of North Carolina farms. Corn and Soybeans are rotated year after year without turning the soil over and exposing it to wind and rain erosion. More and more farmers are being urged to convert to this system and he is convinced that its widespread adoption would cure much of the erosion problem. He also told how farmers could grow windbreaks around fields so as to reduce the appalling loss from spring winds in the farmland east of Goldsboro. When asked why such measures had not been adopted long since, some one at the table said it was simply inertia. Farmers in that area do not readily change their ways.

Another soil conservationist, Robert Horton, from the Wadesboro area, answered questions about the advantages and disadvantages of using human waste as soil nutrients. He promised to help educate me on that subject. It has long been a conviction of mine that recyclable waste should be recycled. Here again, my reading of the Second Law says that low entropy stuff should not be discarded.

Governor Hunt made the luncheon address. Most of us know that he has made the attraction of industry to North Carolina the central theme of his administration; but, Governor Hunt is a farmer with a farmer's love for the land. He says the right words; he knows the language. He tells the farmer's anecdotes, and he is properly stunned by his awareness of the resources covered over by the super highways, one of which took away thirty acres of his farm near Wilson.

But, the Governor is devoted to making jobs for North Carolinians, not jobs on the farm, but jobs in industry. The increase of population between now and the year 2000 of two million will require jobs, houses, roads, stores, recreation. Can we have all that and still keep our agriculture healthy? "I say, 'Yes.' I can't sympathize with people who want to stop industry dead in its tracks."

We heard in the afternoon from an economist, a representative of the Institute of Government at Chapel Hill, and from a representative of the Association of County Commissioners. They spoke of the application of the free market to the problem, of the fact that there are no laws and no blue print to guide the control of conversion of farm land, and that zoning laws are an outcome of pressures on county commissioners.

The most moving speech of the day was made by Bishop Fraser of the Episcopal Church of North Carolina. Together with Bishop Gossman of the Catholic Diocese he helped form the Land Stewardship Council of North Carolina, and his plea for a responsible stewardship of the land was powerful indeed. "Look at the highway between Raleigh and Durham. We can do better than that."

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Well, that's a sampling of what was said. The problem is pretty well understood it seems to me, by farmers, economists, politicians and perhaps best of all by bureaucrats. I suppose we are all better off for the knowledge gained and for meeting new and interesting people. The legislators (there were several) will go to their committee meetings with new insights. But, no coordinated program to prevent erosion was presented and no program to prevent encroachment from urbanization and road building. While the Governor strongly says that the industrialization of the state need not threaten agriculture or the quality of life or the health of the environment, he did not say why he thought so.

As far as I can see it now, the developers will continue to develop, and the financially strapped farmer will continue to be forced off his land. Industry can call the tune because the administration will do anything to get them to come here. Bishop Fraser has no reason to exult.

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December 29th
5:30 pm -- Thomas Berry - Progress in a Technological Society. The Future of North Carolina - The Beautiful.