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UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D C 20548

COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

JUL 19 1977

Mr R M Davis
Administrator, Soil Conservation Service
Department of Agriculture

Dear Mr Davis

We are making a survey to determine whether the use of prime agricultural land for nonagricultural purposes is, or is likely to become, a problem in the United States Part of our effort to date has been to inquire into what landowners are doing or planning to do, and what problems might be involved, with certain land in Minnesota which the Soil Conservation Service had identified in a 1975 study as noncropland which had high or medium potential for conversion to cropland within the next 10 to 15 years

This land was included as part of an 111-million-acre cropland reserve which the Service estimated existed nationwide based on its 1975 study About 78 million of the 111-million-acre reserve was classified as having high potential for conversion to cropland considering commodity prices, development costs, and production costs The remaining 33 million acres of the reserve were classified as having medium potential for conversion to cropland using the same criteria

The Service's study was undertaken to obtain data on the potential for developing new cropland, especially in view of the large amounts of cropland that had been converted in recent years for housing, industrial, and other purposes Although some agricultural authorities have stated that the potential cropland should take care of the Nation's needs for increased food production for the foreseeable future, they believe the Nation will be facing a squeeze in crop productive capability in a few years and action may be needed to preserve potential cropland It is therefore important that estimates of the availability of potential cropland be fairly reliable

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In estimating the acreage of potential cropland, Service field representatives gathered and analyzed information from sample areas in 506 counties throughout the United States Various points within these sample areas were assessed as to their potential for conversion to cropland They considered such factors as the condition of the land, how the land was being used, and the type of development that would be necessary and the environmental and economic problems that would be faced in using the land for growing crops They then classified the sample points according to whether they had high, medium, low, or no potential for conversion to cropland The results of the sample were projected to estimate the 111-million-acre reserve

To get some idea of the reliability of the estimate, we selected five counties in Minnesota and visited all 44 sample points in those counties that had been classified as having high or medium potential for conversion to cropland The 44 points included 31 of the 58 sample points in the State of Minnesota that had been classified as high-potential cropland and all 13 of the sample points in the State that had been classified as medium-potential cropland, as shown below

County	Total points with high or medium potential	Number of points classified as	
		High potential	Medium potential
Hennepin	5	5	0
St Louis	9	0	9
Redwood	2	2	0
Stearns	8	7	1
Kandiyohi	20	17	3
Total--5 counties	44	31	13
Total--Minnesota	71	58	13

We viewed the land represented by these points and discussed the likelihood of conversion with the landowners

Two of the sample points we visited in Stearns County had been converted to cropland On the basis of our site visits and discussions with landowners and Service field representatives, it seems unlikely that the other 42 points in our survey represent land that could or would be converted to cropland in the foreseeable future if needed We believe these points, which the Service's 1975 study projected to represent about 1 8 million acres, should have been classified as having low potential, and in one case no potential, for conversion to cropland In many cases the land was being used for other agricultural purposes, such as raising cattle and turkeys, and in other cases the landowners believed it would be uneconomical to make the land suitable for growing crops

For example, two areas in Kandiyohi County which were represented by 18 sample points were being used as pasture for turkeys The owner said that he had a large capital investment in turkey facilities and would not convert the pasture to cropland as long as he raised turkeys An area in Hennepin County which was represented by several points was being used as a cattle lane and pasture The owner said he would not convert the land in the cattle lane to cropland as long as he owned dairy cattle and would not convert the pasture area unless he could obtain double the rent he was receiving for pasture rental Because these areas are already in agricultural production, we believe they should not be considered as having high or medium potential for cropland Several of the other areas had drainage or other problems that landowners said would be too costly or difficult to correct

The enclosure lists our specific reasons for believing the land represented by 42 of the 44 sample points we visited has little or no potential for conversion to cropland

In two of the five counties, district conservationists said that they had used aerial photographs to classify the sample points and had not visited the sites District conservationists in the other three counties said that they had visited the sites but had not always talked to the landowners to determine whether they had any plans or views for using the land as future cropland

We recommend that, in future studies of this type, landowners of the sample points be consulted about their intentions or plans for using noncropland for future crop production and to obtain their views on the problems that would be encountered in converting such land to cropland Such knowledge would provide a better basis for classifying their land as having high, medium, low, or no potential for conversion to cropland.

We discussed our observations and recommendation with representatives of the Service's Land Inventory and Monitoring Division We asked them to consider landowners' intentions in their current erosion inventory study which is to include an updated assessment of the Nation's potential cropland They have agreed to discuss our observations with State and district conservationists during training sessions preparatory to undertaking the new study. They also said they would emphasize to their field offices the necessity of physically visiting all the sample points to insure that potential cropland is appropriately classified

We appreciate the cooperation of your staff in considering this matter

Sincerely,

Brian P Crowley
Assistant Director

Enclosure

ENCLOSURE I

POTENTIAL CROPLAND SAMPLE
POINTS WITH QUESTIONABLE CLASSIFICATION

County	Sample number	Point number(s)	Service classification	Suggested GAO classification	Reasons for differences
Hennepin	062	9	High	Low	The area was being used for cattle. The owner said the area could be converted if he got rid of his cattle, but he had no intention of doing so.
	062	13	High	Low	The owner said that, for this area to be cropped, it would have to be tiled and a drainage outlet would have to be made across a neighbor's property. The owner thought the cost of converting would be too great for such a small plot.
	133	5	High	Low	The owner wanted to keep the land in pasture and said he would not convert as long as he owned the farm.
	133	17	High	Low	The owner was renting out this land as pasture for $30 an acre. He said he would consider clearing the land if he could double his rental. He was skeptical about the cost of clearing the land
	133	21	High	Low	The sample point lies in a cattle lane. The owner said he would not convert the land unless he got rid of his dairy herd which he has no intention of doing. The district conservationist believed the classifications in Hennepin County would be different if owners' intentions were considered.
St. Louis	591	1,5,9, 13,17, 21,25, 29,33	Medium (all points)	Low	The sample area was State-owned tax-forfeited land. The area had a high water table and the soil was primarily peat. The quarter section adjacent to the sample area had been mined for peat. The district conservationist felt this land should have been classified as having low potential.

ENCLOSURE I

County	Sample number	Point number(s)	Service classification	Suggested GAO classification	Reasons for differences
Redwood	241	21,25	High (both points)	Low	Both points fell in a low drainage area containing boulders and scattered trees. The owner, who does tiling part time, said it would be too difficult to tile and the soil is poor.
Stearns	041	5	High	Low	The point was located on a parcel of land that was very steep and rolling. The district conservationist indicated the land would have to be leveled using heavy equipment.
	041	17	High	Low	The point fell on the edge of a marsh and the owner said the land was too low and wet to economically convert. The area had been tiled once but it was still too wet to farm.
	122	13	High	Low	The owner said he planned to keep this area in pasture for his dairy herd. The point fell at the base of a slope.
	122	25	High	Low	This point fell in a lightly wooded area which the owner planned to clear and use for pasture.
	192	21	Medium	Low	According to the owner, the area where this point fell is low and wet in the spring, and he planned to keep the land as pasture for his dairy cattle. The district conservationist said the best use of the land was as a grazing area for dairy cattle.
	361	9	High	Low	The sample point fell in a rolling wooded pasture area. The owner wanted to keep the area in pasture and said he would not convert the land as long as he owned the farm.
Kandiyohi	031	1,5,9, 13,17, 21,33	High (all points)	Low	Sample numbers 031 and 041 fell on turkey farms owned by one person. The area on these farms is primarily pasture used for turkeys. The owner said he would not convert the pasture to cropland as long as he raised turkeys.
	031	25,29	Medium (both points)	Low	

ENCLOSURE I

County	Sample number	Point number(s)	Service classification	Suggested GAO classification	Reasons for differences
	041	1,5,13, 17,21, 25,29, 33	High (all points)	Low	See preceding comment
	041	9	Medium	Low	
	092	29	High	Low	The sample point fell in a pasture area which had once been tiled, but the tile was too small to be effective. The owner had no plans to retile and drainage would require cooperation from neighbors.
	152	13	High	No potential	The point fell in a platted area between a landowner's backyard and a golf course. The sample area is close to, if not within, the city of Willmar. The owner said she wanted to keep the land as open space.