



LSP

Myth

Buster #7

An ongoing Land Stewardship Project series on ag myths & ways of deflating them.

Updated: July 2005

Myth: *We no longer have a soil erosion problem in this country.*

Fact:

Between 1982 and 1997, the average annual soil erosion rate in the U.S. fell from eight tons to five tons per acre. Conservation tillage practices that disturb the soil less and set aside programs that leave land “fallow” or covered with perennial plants are credited with these dramatic reductions in erosion. However, under ideal conditions soil can only replenish itself at an annual rate of about half a ton per acre. When soil is eroded, it truly is lost as far as productive agriculture is concerned.

One estimate is that 90 percent of U.S. cropland is losing soil above the sustainable rate. Now there are signs that the gains in erosion reductions made during the last two decades of the 20th Century are dissipating. Since 1995 there has been no statistically significant change in overall erosion or the erosion rate, according to the USDA, and there’s anecdotal evidence that erosion rates are starting to sneak upwards.

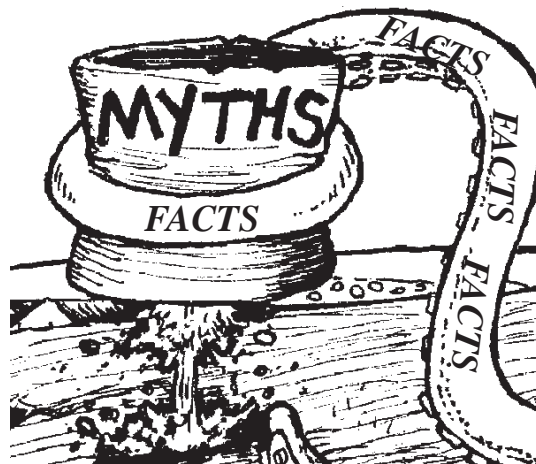
Why the backsliding?

Between 1982 and 1997, the average annual soil erosion rate in the U.S. fell from eight tons to five tons per acre. Conservation tillage practices that

For one thing, the conservation tillage revolution seems to have cooled, and many farmers are returning to the plow. But perhaps even more significant, government commodity programs are encouraging the planting of soybeans in parts of the country that had never seen the crop in great quantities before.

Now more than ever, forages, pastures, small grains and other soil-saving enterprises are giving way to corn and soybeans, which leave the soil vulnerable to erosion. Gyles Randall, a respected University of Minnesota soil scientist, recently wrote that this is the fourth year in a row of “severe erosion” in southern Minnesota. If something isn’t done quickly, warns Randall, crop yields will drop significantly. In fact,

Randall has proclaimed that the corn-soybean system of agriculture that now dominates the Midwest is no longer sustainable.



More Information

◆ To view the USDA’s Natural Resources Inventory, log onto www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/land/pubs/97highlights.pdf.

◆ Gyles Randall’s essay on the unsustainability of the corn-soybean system can be viewed at www.landstewardshipproject.org/pr/newsr_010927.html.

• • •

This Myth Buster is brought to you by the members and staff of the Land Stewardship Project, a private, nonprofit organization devoted to fostering an ethic of stewardship for farmland and to seeing more successful farmers on the land raising crops and livestock. For more information, call 651-653-0618 or visit www.landstewardshipproject.org.