

Discovering How the West Was Won

The U.S. Interior Department's plan to break up and redistribute large, federally irrigated farm-holdings in the West represents a victory for land-reformers on both ends of the continent. In California, the fight was carried by George Ballis and the organization he founded, National Land for People, which now has 1100 members. The NPL got an occasional assist from Governor Edmund G. Brown, Jr. and his "small-is-beautiful" administration.

In Washington, more than a half-dozen groups and many individuals kept applying the pressure. Among them were Friends of the Earth (directed at the time by Tom Garrett), RURAL AMERICA, David Weiman's one-man lobby called Ag Resources, and William Veeder, a

160-Acre Ruling Stirs the Waters

Washington Attorney who worked for the U.S. Justice Department twenty years.

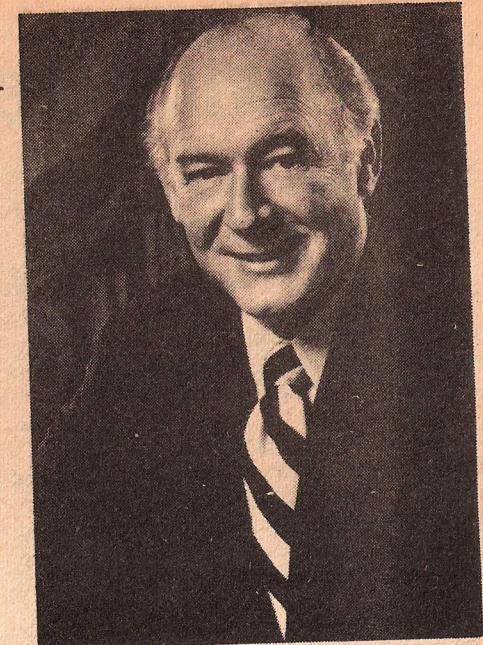
These and others spent long hours meeting with officials of Interior and its Bureau of Reclamation. The turning point, however, came not from agitation but from Jimmy Carter's victory at the polls. As a Washington observer has noted, "Ford would have proposed new regulations, too. But his plan would have just condoned the government's old habits -- which are dreck."

Carter, on the other hand, appointed Cecil D. Andrus as Secretary of Interior, and Andrus -- according to our best sources -- personally supervised the writing of new, reform-minded regulations. His proposed guidelines stipulate that growers using subsidized water be restricted in their holdings to 160 acres per person, including as many as four members to a grower-family or four owners of a corporation. The upshot would be an absolute ceiling of 640 acres per owner. Barring litigation or a change of heart in Washington, the regulations will go into effect just in time for Thanksgiving.

In proposing the new rules Andrus was merely obeying the law -- the Reclamation Act of 1902, to be precise; but because that simple expedient had not occurred to any of his predecessors, Andrus' announcement has created a furor. "Disastrous and illegal," said a spokesman for the Westlands Water District, a consortium of huge landholders in California's San Joaquin Valley. Even the New York Times complained, ambiguously, in an editorial that "Such shuffling of land ownership hardly redistributes wealth in any important way." But the Times is out of touch. The Andrus decision is a precedent-maker: It represents the government's first major attempt at agrarian reform since passage of the Homestead Act in 1862.

The Times notes sourly that "A populist chorus now hails the decision...."

The same populist tendencies were at work in 1902 when Congress passed the Reclamation Act, which authorized federal water projects for parched Western farmlands. The history of that act, however, suggests that Jonathan Swift was right in his cynical characterization of the law. "Laws," he wrote, "are like cobwebs, which may catch small flies but let wasps and hornets break through."



Secretary Cecil D. Andrus

Summing Up The New Rules

The Interior Department's proposed regulations embody several important changes in current practices. They limit to 160 acres the amount of reclaimed land that can be owned by any one person, and they define more specifically the procedures by which excess lands may be sold and who can qualify as purchasers. The principal changes are as follows:

1. All new purchasers of excess land benefiting from low-priced federal water must live on or in the neighborhood of the irrigated land. (Excess land is irrigable land served with water from any federal project under reclamation laws and held by one person in excess of 160 acres). Eventually the owners of all land served with low-cost federal water will be required to live on or near the land.

ruralamerica

A Voice for Small Town and Rural People

OCTOBER, 1977

VOL. 2, NO. 11

Jeffords Presses Fight in Congress To Protect Endangered Farmlands

by Henry Hyde

Bills have been introduced in both the House and Senate this year which would assist states and localities struggling to

land could well be among America's most severe problems within a few years. Good agricultural land is being converted to other purposes, such as urban development and highway projects at an alarming rate.

House and Senate this year which would assist states and localities struggling to preserve prime agricultural land. The proposed legislation establishes a federal commission to conduct a national inventory of agricultural land and provides federal funding for a variety of pilot preservation programs carried out at the state and local levels.

If passed, the legislation could significantly alter past adverse patterns of agricultural land conversion.

Leading the fight for a federal agricultural land policy has been Jim Jeffords, the Republican Congressman from Vermont. Jeffords is the author of the National Agricultural Land Policy Act (HR 4569), which now has the support of more than 50 members of Congress.

To Jeffords the loss of prime agricultural land is a familiar problem. New England's farmland has been dwindling in recent years and with it has gone the ability of the region to feed itself. Jeffords' own state, Vermont, has experienced a 70 percent decline in farming since 1950 and a loss of 50,000 acres of prime cropland in 15 years.

Jeffords maintains that unless the current trends can be reversed or at least slowed down, "a shortage of agricultural

other purposes, such as urban development and highway projects at an alarming rate. We are now converting about five million acres of land each year to those uses and about a million of that is prime cropland."

HR 4569 establishes an agricultural Land Review Commission to conduct an inventory on the quantity, quality and financing of agricultural and forest land in the United States. In addition to the inventory, the Commission would be required to submit an annual report which would include: 1) the effects of urbanization, industrial development and other non-agricultural activities on this land; 2) the effects of climate predictions, soil salinity, fertilizers and fuels on the productivity of the land; 3) the effects of acquisitions of agricultural land by persons not engaged in farming activities; and 4) methods of improving and protecting agricultural land.

The other major element of HR 4569 provides \$50 million in federal money to assist states and localities wishing to start programs aimed at reducing the amount of land being removed from agricultural production. Programs could include the purchase of development rights and changes in property tax structure. Federal funding for these projects would continue over a five-year period.

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From the very start, Congress in its debate on reclamation was nervous about the wasps and the hornets. Federal water, many feared, would enrich the powerful and fail to serve the small farmer. Francis Griffith Newlands, a Nevada congressman and chief sponsor of the bill, tried to reassure his colleagues. The measure, he told them, specified that "no water right for more than 160 acres shall be sold to any landowner," and that each owner "must also be a resident or occupant of the land." Absenteeism was considered as dangerous as giantism. The whole idea, he explained, was to "break up any large land holdings...in the vicinity of government (water) works and to insure occupancy of the land reclaimed."

Some congressmen remained skeptical. A representative from New York warned that "the great railroad interests of the West" were cleverly promoting the bill, "egging it on, encouraging it..." The railroads, he pointed out, owned "millions of acres of these arid lands, now useless, and the very moment that we, at the public expense, establish... these irrigation works

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person in excess of 160 acres). Eventually the owners of all land served with low-cost federal water will be required to live on or near the land.

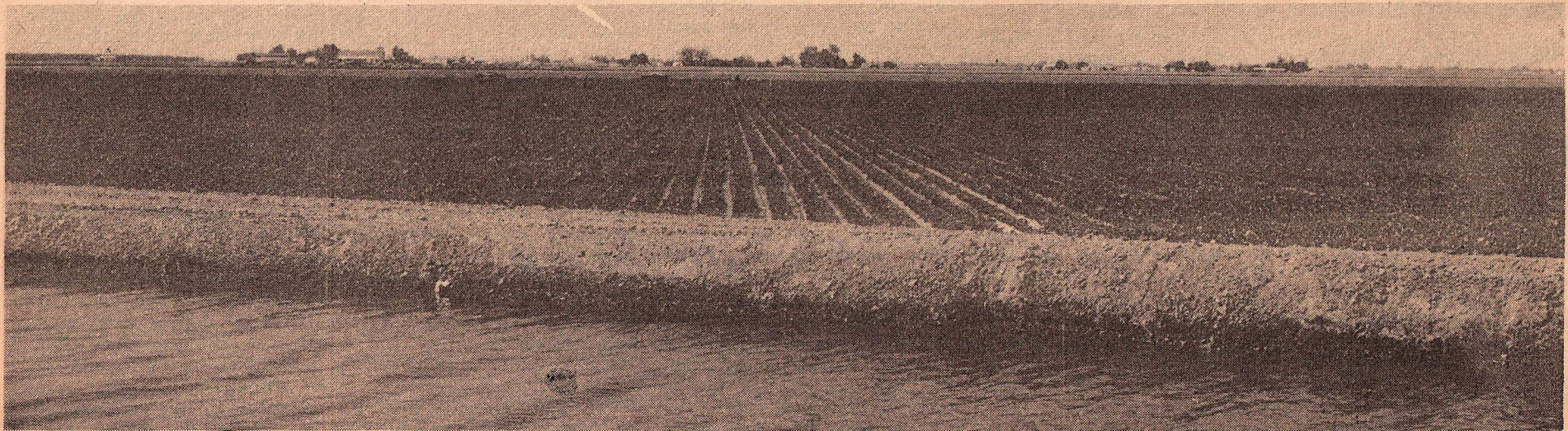
2. The criteria for determining qualified purchasers of excess land are tightened to prohibit multiple ownerships.

3. The regulations discourage speculation by allowing the Department of Interior to exercise continuing supervision over the sale price of land.

4. The proposal places some limitations on the leasing of excess and nonexcess lands.

5. In the future when excess land is available for sale the Department will announce the availability of such lands and choose among prospective purchasers by lottery.

coming soon
**Third
National
Conference
on Rural America**
see page 8 & 12



RECLAIMED: A big spread near Mendota, Cal., is made green by federalized water.

photo by J.C. Dahilig