

MEMORANDUM FOR HEADS OF AGENCIES

August 11, 1980

SUBJECT: Analysis of Impacts on Prime or Unique Agricultural Lands in Implementing the National Environmental Policy Act

Approximately one million acres of prime or unique agricultural lands* are being converted irreversibly to nonagricultural uses each year. Actions by federal agencies such as construction activities, development grants and loans, and federal land management decisions frequently contribute to the loss of prime and unique agricultural lands directly or indirectly. Often these losses are unintentional and are not necessarily related to accomplishing the agency mission.

On August 30, 1976, CEQ, in cooperation with the Department of Agriculture, issued a memorandum to the heads of federal agencies on the need for analysis of prime or unique farmlands in the preparation and review of environmental impact statements. The memorandum also recommends steps for agencies to take in making such analyses. Since that memorandum was issued, federal agencies' environmental impact statements have begun to include references to the presence of prime or unique farmlands that would be affected by the proposed federal action. Moreover, they have clearly indicated that many federal and federally assisted projects have direct and indirect adverse impact on prime or unique farmlands.

Recent studies by the Council and the General Accounting Office indicate that federal agencies have not adequately accounted for the impacts of their proposed actions on agricultural land through the environmental assessment process. Furthermore, agency project plans and decisions have frequently not reflected the need and opportunities to protect these lands. The purpose of this memorandum is to alert federal agencies to the need and the opportunities to analyze agricultural land impacts more effectively in the project planning process and under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Agencies can substantially improve their analysis of impacts on prime or unique agricultural lands by following closely our recently established NEPA regulations [40 CFR 1500-1508, Nov. 29, 1978]. The regulations apply to these lands in several specific respects. Determining the effects of a proposed federal agency action on prime or unique agricultural lands must be an integral part of the environmental assessment process, and must be a factor in deciding whether or not to prepare an environmental impact statement. For example, when an agency begins planning any action, it should, in the development of alternative actions, assess whether the alternatives will affect prime or unique agricultural lands. Then, recognizing the importance of these lands and any significant impacts that might affect them, it must study, develop, and describe appropriate alternative uses of available resources. (Sec.1501.2(c).)

In determining whether to prepare an environmental impact statement, the regulations note that the "Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as ***prime farmlands***" (Sec.1508.27 (b)(3)) must be considered, among others. If an agency determines that a proposal significantly affect the quality of the human environment, it must initiate the scoping process (Sec. 1501.7) to identify those issues, including effects on prime or unique agricultural lands, that will be analyzed and considered, along with the alternatives available to avoid or mitigate adverse effects. An environmental impact statement must include a description of the area that will be affected by the proposed action (Sec. 1502.15) and an analysis of the environmental consequences of the proposal, including a discussion of "natural or depletable resource requirements and conservation potential or various alternative and mitigation measures" (Sec. 1502.16(f)). These resource requirements include prime or unique agricultural lands. The effects to be studied encompass indirect effects that may include "growth inducing effects and other effects related to induced changes in the pattern of land use***" (Sec. 1508.8(b)). The cumulative effects of a proposal must be studied (Secs.1508.7,1508.8(b)), as must any mitigation measures that could be taken to lessen the impact on prime or unique agricultural lands (Secs. 1505.2(c),1506.2(d).)

*As used in this memorandum, prime and unique agricultural land is cropland, pastureland, rangeland, forestland, or other land, but not urban built-up land, which is capable of being used as prime and unique farmland as defined by the Department of Agriculture (see attachment) [The attachment to this memorandum was § 657.5 of title 7 CFR.]

Federal agencies with technical data on the occurrence, value, or potential impacts of federal actions on these lands will provide the lead agency with data that may be useful in preparing environmental assessments or impact statements. The U.S. Department of Agriculture will cooperate with all agencies in planning projects or developments, in assessing impacts on prime or unique agricultural lands, and in defining alternatives. Technical data as assistance regarding agricultural land may be obtained by contacting the Chairperson of the USDA Land Use Committee (list attached) or any USDA office. In addition to providing technical data and assistance, the USDA will continue to emphasize the review of EISs on federal actions likely to have significant effects on prime and unique farmlands. Under Section 1504 of the regulations, USDA should refer to CEQ those proposed federal actions which will review such referrals, and take necessary steps in accordance with Section 1504 of our regulations.

Because prime and unique agricultural lands are a limited and valuable resource, the Council urges all agencies to make a particularly careful effort to apply the goals and policies of the National Environmental Policy Act to their actions and to obtain necessary assistance in their planning processes so that these lands will be maintained to meet our current national needs and the needs of future generations of Americans.

Gus Speth, Chairman

MEMORANDUM FOR HEADS OF AGENCIES

August 11, 1980

SUBJECT: Prime and Unique Agricultural Lands and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

The accompanying memorandum on Analysis of Impacts on Prime or Unique Agricultural Lands in Implementing the National Environmental Policy Act was developed in cooperation with the Department of Agriculture. It updates and supersedes the Council's previous memorandum on this subject of August 1976.

In order to review agency progress or problems in implementing this memorandum the Council will request periodic reports from federal agencies as part of our ongoing oversight of agency implementation of NEPA and the Council's regulations. At this time we would appreciate receiving from your agency by November 1, 1980, the following information:

- identification and brief summary of existing or proposed agency policies, regulations and other directives specifically intended to preserve or mitigate the effects of agency actions on prime or unique agricultural lands, including criteria or methodology used in assessing these impacts.
- identification of specific impact statements and, to the extent possible, other documents prepared from October 1, 1979 to October 1, 1980 covering actions deemed likely to have significant direct or indirect effects on prime or unique agricultural lands.
- the name of the policy-level official responsible for agricultural land policies in your agency, and the name of the staff-level official in your agency's NEPA office who will be responsible for carrying out the actions discussed in this memorandum.

Gus Speth, Chairman

PART 657 - PRIME AND UNIQUE FARMLANDS

Subpart A - Important Farmlands Inventory. Section 657.5 Identification of important farmlands.

AUTHORITY: 16 U.S.C. 590A-F, Q; 7 CFR 2.62 PUB. L. 95-87; 42 U.S.C. 4321 ET SEQ.

a. Prime farmlands.

1. General.

Prime farmland is land that has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, forage, fiber, and oilseed crops, and is also available for these uses (the land could be cropland, pastureland, rangeland, forest land, or other land, but not urban built-up land or water). It has the soil quality, growing season, and moisture supply needed to economically produce sustained high yields of crops when treated and managed, including water management, according to acceptable farming methods. In general, prime farmlands have an adequate and dependable water supply from precipitation or irrigation, a favorable temperature and growing season, acceptable acidity or alkalinity, acceptable salt and sodium content, and few or no rocks. They are permeable to water and air. Prime farmlands are not excessively erodible or saturated with water for a long period of time, and they either do not flood frequently or are protected from flooding. Examples of soils that qualify as prime farmland are Palouse silt loam, 0 to 7 percent slopes; Brookston silty clay loam, drained; and Tama silty clay loam, 0 to 5 percent slopes.

2. Specific criteria.

Prime farmlands meet all the following criteria: Terms used in this section are defined in USDA publications: "Soil Taxonomy, Agriculture Handbook 436"; "Soil Survey Manual, Agriculture Handbook 18"; "Rainfall-Erosion Losses from Cropland, Agriculture Handbook 282"; "Wind Erosion Forces in the United States and Their Use in Predicting Soil Loss, Agriculture Handbook 346"; and "Saline and Alkali Soils, Agriculture Handbook 60,"

i. The soils have:

- A. Aquic, udic, ustic, or xeric moisture regimes and sufficient available water capacity within a depth of 40 inches (1 meter), or in the root zone (root zone is the part of the soil that is penetrated or can be penetrated by plant roots) if the root zone is less than 40 inches deep, to produce the commonly grown cultivated crops (cultivated crops include, but are not limited to, grain, forage, fiber, oilseed, sugar beets, sugarcane, vegetables, tobacco, orchard, vineyard, and bush fruit crops) adapted to the region in 7 or more years out of 10; or
- B. Xeric or aridic moisture regimes in which the available water capacity is limited, but the area has a developed irrigation water supply that is dependable (a dependable water supply is one in which enough water is available for irrigation in 8 out of 10 years for the crops commonly grown) and of adequate quality; or,
- C. Aridic or torric moisture regimes and the area has a developed irrigation water supply that is dependable and of adequate quality; and,

- ii. The soils have a temperature regime that is frigid, mesic, thermic, or hyperthermic (pergelic and cryic regimes are excluded).

These are soils that, at a depth of 23 inches (50 cm), have a mean annual temperature higher than 32 F (0 C). In addition, the mean summer temperature at this depth in soils with an O horizon is higher than 47 F (8 C); in soils that have no O horizon, the mean summer temperature is higher than 59 F (15 C); and,

- iii. The soils have a pH between 4.5 and 8.4 in all horizons within a depth of 40 inches (1 meter) or in the root zone if the root zone is less than 43 inches deep;

and,

- iv. The soils either have no water table or have a water table that is maintained at a sufficient depth during the cropping season to allow cultivated crops common to the area to be grown;

and,

- v. The soils can be managed so that, in all horizons within a depth of 40 inches (1 meter) or in the root zone if the root zone is less than 49 inches deep, during part of each year the conductivity of the saturation extract is less than 4 mmhos/cm and the exchangeable sodium percentage (ESP) is less than 15;

and,

- vi. The soils are not flooded frequently during the growing season (less often than once in 2 years);

and,

- vii. The product of K (erodibility factor) \times percent slope is less than 2.0, and the product of I (soils erodibility) \times C (climatic factor) does not exceed 60;

and

- viii. The soils have a permeability rate of at least 8.06 inch (0.15 cm) per hour in the upper 20 inches (50 cm) and the mean annual soil temperature at a depth of 20 inches (50 cm) is less than 59 F (15 C); the permeability rate is not a limiting factor if the mean annual soil temperature is 59 F (15 C) or higher;

and,

- ix. Less than 10 percent of the surface layer (upper 6 inches) in these soils consists of rock fragment coarser than 3 inches (7.6 cm).

b. Unique farmland.

1. General.

Unique farmland is land other than prime farmland that is used for the production of specific high value food and fiber crops. It has the special combination of soil quality, location, growing season, and moisture supply needed to economically produce sustained high quality and/or high yields of a specific crop when treated and managed according to acceptable farming methods. Examples of such crops are citrus, tree nuts, olives, cranberries, fruit, and vegetables.

2. Specific characteristics of unique farmland.

- i. Is used for a specific high-value food or fiber crop.

- ii. Has a moisture supply that is adequate for the specific crop.

The supply is from stored moisture, precipitation, or a developed irrigation system.

- iii. Combines favorable factors of soil quality, growing season, temperature, humidity, air drainage, elevation, aspect, or other conditions, such as nearness to market, that favor the growth of a specific food or fiber crop.

c. Additional farmland of statewide importance.

This is land, in addition to prime and unique farmlands, that is of statewide importance for the production of food, feed, fiber, forage, and oilseed crops. Criteria for defining and delineating this land are to be determined by the appropriate State agency or agencies. Generally, additional farmlands of statewide importance include those that are nearly prime farmland and that economically produce high yields of crops when treated and managed according to acceptable farming methods. Some may produce as high a yield as prime farmlands if conditions are favorable. In some States, additional farmlands of statewide importance may include tracts of land that have been designated for agriculture by State law.

d. Additional farmland of local importance.

In some local areas there is concern for certain additional farmlands for the production of food, feed, fiber, forage, and oilseed crops, even though these lands are not identified as having national or statewide importance. Where appropriate, these lands are to be identified by the local agency or agencies concerned. In places, additional farmlands of local importance may include tracts of land that have been designated for agriculture by local ordinance.

