5-1953

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HEAVY RAINS SHOW NEED FOR SOIL CONSERVATION PRACTICES

By G. H. BURVILL, M.Ag.Sc., Commissioner of Soil Conservation

AUTUMN 1953 will stand out in the weather records for the widespread heavy rains in the pastoral areas and wheatbelt. The rains which came from the cyclonic storms of March 22-25, totalled five to 12 inches in many pastoral areas and two to seven inches in the Northern and Eastern Wheatbelt. The steady rain soaked the land, but where the falls were heaviest, runoff to lower parts caused flooding and local inconvenience. All in all, it was a very welcome rain, especially where the previous winter had been dry. In the wheatbelt, ploughing and cultivation were soon in full swing to prepare for planting cereal crops.

But the latter part of April brought many thunderstorm rains of great intensity to a number of wheatbelt centres and in the first week of May further falls of two to three inches were widespread. Weaknesses in our defence against soil erosion became apparent, as the newly turned earth and fallows had their topsoil stripped off or cut into rills. Reports of erosion damage came in from travellers, farmers and Departmental officers.

More heartening, however, were the reports from farmers who had undertaken erosion control works and had employed soil conserving practices as advised by Soil Conservation Service officers. The benefits of contour furrows, contour banks and contour cultivation, supported by pasture improvement programmes, were revealed in these tests imposed by the abnormal rains. It is worth noting here that nearly every year reports of erosion damage by heavy rains before, or just after, seeding time, come in from various districts. This year the occurrences have been far more widespread.

The Soil Conservation Act was passed by Parliament in 1945, a very wet year. The Soil Conservation Service, set up by the Act, came into being on July 1, 1946, in a second very wet winter. In those two years many farms were damaged by soil erosion, and many farmers sought advice and help from the Soil Conservation Service. Steady progress has been made, and those farmers who have taken special measures to check or prevent soil erosion, have had good reason to be satisfied with their achievements. Their soil losses have been greatly reduced, especially during periods of abnormal rains such as have occurred in recent months.

Some of the rills and gullies of 1945 and 1946 were partly healed and obscured by grass in the milder seasons that followed. But many scars remained and some have again become centres of active erosion.

Farmers with soil erosion problems who wish to have advice and help are invited to make early contact with the Soil Conservation Service, Department of Agriculture, Perth.
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