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AGRICULTURE REPORT – October 23, 2001: Conservation Agriculture

By George Grow



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The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization is warning farmers about damage caused by heavy farm equipment, such as tractors and ploughs. F-A-O officials say repeated use of such equipment is a major cause of soil loss and land damage in developing countries.

The officials say traditional methods to clear fields have been linked to soil loss, especially in warmer climates. They say intensive use of heavy machines also causes soil damage in industrial countries.

F-A-O officials say millions of hectares of land could be protected from damage and soil loss if more farmers followed conservation agriculture policies.

The goal of conservation agriculture is to protect, improve and make more effective use of nature. Farmers supervise their crops as well as water supplies, soil, and plant and animal life.

Conservation agriculture policies are designed to protect the environment and increase agricultural production. Farmers are required to cover their land with leaves, sticks and other organic materials. This natural cover protects the soil from heat, wind and rain. It also keeps the soil cooler and helps to stop water from evaporating.

F-A-O officials say less time spent clearing fields means lower fuel and labor costs. It also means farmers need to spend less for heavy machines.

Supporters of conservation agriculture also are careful when using chemicals to kill insects. Over the years, they are able to decrease the amount of pesticides they use on their crops.

The F-A-O reports that such methods are being used on about fifty-eight million hectares of land worldwide. The U-N agency is especially pleased with the spread of conservation agriculture in Latin America.


For example, in the past, farmers in Santa Catarina, Brazil depended on heavy machines, pesticides and fertilizer products. Many farmers grew the same crop, corn, from one year to the next. The farmers reported increasing soil damage. The productivity of their farms decreased.

The F-A-O says the farmers started to use other methods of farming. Now the farmers use conservation agriculture methods on more than one-third of the state's total farmland.

The F-A-O says it plans to expand its conservation agriculture program in Africa, Central Asia and South Asia.

This VOA Special English AGRICULTURE REPORT was written by George Grow.

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