



The Mid-Century Conference

THE MID-CENTURY CONFERENCE on Resources for the Future, financed by the Ford Foundation, was held in Washington last week. It attracted about 1400 people from a great variety of interests. Not only did they come from all parts of the United States but some 30 foreign countries were represented. The purpose of the conference was not to try to find the answer to our resources problems nor was it to vote on plans or hand down lists of specific recommendations for solving problems. Its aim, rather, was to clarify and place into perspective the issues and problems involved.

The conference was organized on a discussion group basis with certain problems posed as stimulants to thinking and the bringing forth of ideas. With such a broad general topic handled in this fashion, it was reasonable to fear that there would be a great amount of talk without moving toward any clearer views than existed beforehand. But discussion was well directed and it did lead to the development of a number of ideas in the clarification of issues. Admittedly one could hear axes being ground and there were evangelists for various pet theories. But the variety of points of view represented by men who said something when they spoke was great enough to keep the situation in balance.

Summaries of the ideas expressed and the areas of agreement and disagreement were made available at the close of the conference. They provide an assessment of many aspects of our resources situation. The full text of the proceedings is expected to become available in the future. It will be massive, but for those willing to work through the great amount of discussion reported, it will be filled with stimulating thoughts and points of view.

The idea which stood out throughout the conference and in all discussion groups is that there is a great need for research and education in this country to lead us to better management of our resources. This assertion of the need for research and education was backed with evidence of the losses we suffer for lack of it, and controversies existing where better and more specific knowledge should settle issues. The areas of disagreement, in many cases—the public ownership of range lands, for example—were much narrower than had been expected and it is likely that the realization of this may improve a number of situations. There were areas of disagreement which were not narrow, but some of the issues were defined and clari-

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fied in ways which may lead to reduction of those conflicts. We cannot expect them all to disappear as there always will be sincere philosophical differences as long as men think.

In some cases the discussions brought out great differences of opinion as to what the issues really are and what are the problems we face. It may be surprising to some that there was considerable disagreement as to whether our future problem is one of managing surpluses or of meeting shortages. Much discussion centered about the use of our land resources. Yet it was brought out during the conference that we do not even know what our land resources are, as there is not sufficient data on the land of this country to provide basis for evaluation.

There is too much inefficient use of land and more attention should be given to changing from submarginal uses where profitable use is possible. There is a problem of research plateaus—crops or products where yield or efficiency improvements apparently no longer can be increased through the application of existing knowledge. More research is needed for the long-term future. But a great deal of improvement can be made by putting into practical use, existing knowledge. Thought must be given both to the present and the future.

The debate over the controls of public lands brought forth lively arguments—some sound, some more emotional than thoughtful, and some which appeared rather specious. But Lewis Douglas, chairman of the conference, distinguished himself in his closing remarks at that session, as he did on several occasions during the meeting, by making it clear that the argumentative approach to the situation tended to miss or gloss over some basic issues rather than to clarify them; and a clear view of the issues is needed before progress can be made. He pointed out that in this controversy, as in many, there are areas of agreement which offer starting points for progress against the problems involved.

A great deal of information and opinion went into the record and some worthy ideas already have been put on paper. But the broad benefit from this conference, which may be seen in the future, should come from the outlining and defining of issues which may furnish a base for an effective approach to the best use of our resources.