



Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains: Years of Readjustment, 1920-1990

Mary W. M. Hargreaves

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Grandiose plans for land retirement and expanded irrigation have been frequently proposed for the northern Great Plains, but they have not significantly affected agricultural practices in the region.

Those major readjustments to farming methods that did occur in the region evolved out of local initiative in response to drought and depression during the 1920s. With some refinements but few amendments, procedures remain basically the same today.

In Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains, Mary Hargreaves reviews the changes in agricultural technology and farm management through the 1920s, the introduction of federal programs as drought and depression recurred in the 1930s, and the realignment of concerns from drought to marketing instability during the recovery years that followed.

Drought remains a perennial problem in the region, which in this study includes the eastern two-thirds of Montana and the western half of the Dakotas. But instability of marketing has been a greater concern, according to Hargreaves, and marketing, not environmental factors, occasioned the land retirement programs of the 1950s and 1980s.

Despite the economy and practicability of dry farming, the national agricultural policy of acreage restrictions since the 1930s has promoted the use of costly inputs and enabled higher-cost producers to continue competitive operation.

"Misconceptions and myths have too frequently entered into national land-use planning," Hargreaves writes. "There are still those who see the Plains as a 'Great American Desert'; still those who look to irrigation as the only basis for successful agriculture there; and still those who cherish the small diversified homestead operation as the agrarian dream, regardless of the environment."

Dry farming has proved successful in the northern Great Plains, Hargreaves contends. That success is measured not only by production but also by limited erosion. On its record, dry-land agriculture should not now fall prey to "hyperbole, myth, or politics."

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