FARM GOINGS-ON

Coastal zone land: the very best

The land by the sea, the ocean, the gulf, or whatever, these days is called the coastal zone. Actually, this coastal zone is land from the Gulf waters upward a few miles and it's wet.

What's best for the coastal zone, this 5.3 million acre strip of marshes, swamps and low-lying areas that excites people from across our nation is this. Though not too many persons agree on what's the best use for it, most do agree that good use is the key. And good use, many conservationists say, must begin with proper identification and long-range planning.

If this coastal zone is so important to folks in upstate New York, as well as to Louisiana, let's take a closer look at its character.

More than 3.2 million acres of the zone are in the coastal marsh, the area adjoining the gulf. The remaining land is used for agriculture and urban and built-up areas. It's estimated that 95% of this country's wetlands are in the Louisiana coastal zone. It is the largest and richest estuarine region in the world. That alone makes it fairly important.

Over 28 percent of this nation's fisheries are found in the Louisiana coastal zone. And in 1970, 19% of the oil and gas produced in the nation came from this zone. To top it off, Louisiana ports located in the zone handled 32 percent of all water-borne commerce tonnage shipped in the USA during this same period.

In 1970, the total market value of rice, sugarcane and other crops produced in this zone amounted to more than $230 million. And the value of forest products was over $70 million.

Today we can pinpoint many uses of land in the coastal zone area. In the marsh part alone, people fish, hunt, play, live and work. People run cattle in the marsh and often lease large areas for hunting waterfowl, trapping fur animals, catching alligators and growing crawfish. Actually, more than a million people live and work in the coastal zone area.

In the upper portions of the zone, a variety of crops, pastures, plants, recreation spots, homes and factories takes up land. The U.S. Soil Conservation Service has assisted people in the coastal zone for more than 40 years.

Most of this technical help has been channeled through all or parts of eight soil and water conservation districts located in the zone.

The SCHS and other resource agencies have identified many soil, water, plant and wildlife conservation problems in the coastal zone. The coastal marsh land has suffered greatly from these problems.

Problems, such as too much or too little water, have caused plants to die. Also, the change in water salinity in converting fresh marsh areas to salty has disturbed natural animal and plant life. Overuse by cattle, in some locations, and canal, road and other construction have caused deterioration of some marsh life.

The upper portions of the coastal zone have also suffered from erosion, poor water and plant management, flooding and unwise use of soils. SCHS and conservation districts help coastal zone land users plan and install many conservation measures. Users of land for wildlife get help in designing structures for water control. This leads to upgrading plants and wildlife assistance is given in water management for waterfowl, fish and animals.

Grazing plans and cattle walks are planned with users who run cattle in the zone. SCHS and state soil and water conservationists have made soil surveys on 1,300,000 acres of the coastal zone, and plans call for this total to hit 5.3 million in another 10 years.

According to Alton Mangum, state conservationist, these surveys will be made available to coastal zone land users to aid them in making land use decisions. On agricultural, urban and wooded areas in the zone, assistance is available to plan practices to control erosion, to design structures for water management, and to plan cropping systems and wildlife habitat improvement.

The SCHS and soil and water conservation districts are revising long-range plans to provide more assistance to landowners in the zone who have soil, water and related resource problems.

What the future holds for the great Louisiana coastal zone is anyone's guess. Through good management practices, it and the people who live and own land there will thrive as well as the many people who depend on the marshes for existence.

Those who watch the zone from afar and the people who live and own land in the zone are the best for it. And it can be the best.