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Estimating Changes in Gross Agricultural Soil Erosion by Water - A Case Study for Manitoba

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Estimating Changes in Gross Agricultural Soil Erosion by Water - A Case Study for Manitoba

The principal author of this article is Doug Trant. For further information on the materials please contact him at 613-951-3829.

L'auteur principal de cet article est Doug Trant. Pour plus de renseignements, veuillez communiquer avec lui au 613-951-3829.

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Estimating Changes in Gross Agricultural Soil Erosion by Water - A Case Study for Manitoba¹

D.F. Trant²

D.R. Coote³

L.C. Carpentier⁴

H.L. Trépanier²

Introduction

The five major land degradation processes taking place in Canada today include water and wind erosion, soil acidification, soil compaction and soil salinization. Land degradation processes have many impacts both economic and environmental. They have been estimated to cost Canadian farmers as much as 1 billion dollars annually (Fox and Coote, 1986, Dumanski *et al.*, 1986). This on-farm cost includes: declines in crop quality, reductions in crop yield and increased expenditure for the inputs required to maintain reasonable yields. The environmental impacts of land degradation include: water quality deterioration, wildlife habitat destruction, increased water run off and air pollution resulting from wind erosion. The cost of these environmental impacts have yet to be calculated for Canada, but available evidence in North America suggests that the off-farm impacts are considerably greater than the on-farm impacts (Fox *et al.*, 1991).

Water erosion is Canada's most costly land degradation problem. In 1985 it was estimated that the economic impacts of water erosion were more than 500 million dollars (Fox and Coote, 1986). In the United States, the Environmental Protection Agency identified soil erosion as one of the five most important environmental problems. American estimates indicate that the combined environmental and economic costs of their soil erosion problem range between 4.4 and 43.5 billion dollars and that erosion exceeds levels that will permit sustained high production levels on 40 percent of cropland (Steiner, 1990).

The study reported here uses agricultural cropping information in conjunction with detailed soils data to estimate changing gross agricultural soil erosion by water for the Province of Manitoba. This study is primarily methodological, and does not attempt to address the policy implications of soil loss. Nor does it make predictions about the longevity or sustainability of the soil resource given the gross soil erosion rates that are calculated. It is an elaboration of a larger study which estimated gross agricultural soil erosion for all of Canada (Carpentier, 1992).

In early 1992 the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) prepared a first-ever study of world soil degradation (Oldeman *et al.*, 1992). The UNEP study indicates a 'serious concern' for more than half of Manitoba's agricultural soils, claiming that they have been damaged by agricultural activity (Crabb, 1993). The study reported here will examine cropping trends in these areas and estimated soil erosion trends over the last 20 years. Manitoba is also a good testing ground for the methodology used in this study, because it has a reasonable cross section of agricultural activity, both dryland and mixed agricultural systems. These new estimates are based on micro-level soil and crop information and represent the most detailed estimates calculated at this scale in Canada.

1. Centre for Land and Biological Resources Research contribution # 93-93

2. National Accounts and Environment Division, Statistics Canada, Ottawa, Ontario.

3. Centre for Land and Biological Resources Research, Agriculture Canada, Ottawa, Ontario.

4. MacDonald College, McGill University, Ste Anne de Bellevue, Quebec.

In soil science there are several ways of estimating soil erosion loss on land. The scale of the project largely determines the method used. At the largest and most detailed scale measurements are made in the field using specialized equipment to determine soil removal rates from given parcels of land. Studies for larger areas require models that allow researchers to simulate events taking place in the field. Modelling methods lack the precision of actual field sampling methods, but results are generally consistent with larger scale sampling. Given the size of Canada, the only practical way to estimate gross soil erosion is through the application of a generalized model. The *Universal Soil Loss Equation* (USLE) is the most widely used generalized water erosion model in North America, and has been adapted for the study reported here.

Methods

The USLE was used to compute a relative index of soil loss in Manitoba. The USLE is made up of five basic physical parameters that, when assessed collectively, determine the water erosion potential on a parcel of land (Wischmeier and Smith, 1978). The equation and physical parameters are as follows:

$$A = R * K * LS * C * P \quad (EQ 1)$$

Where:

A is computed soil loss per unit area per year measured in tonnes per hectare per year.

R is a rainfall and run-off factor which includes a factor for run-off from snow melt. It is derived from rainfall intensity expressed as kinetic energy per hectare per hour of rainfall.

K is a soil erodibility factor as determined by the particle size distribution and organic matter content of a specified soil. The relationship is based on experimental observations and regression analysis.

LS is a topographic factor estimated from slope length and steepness.

C is a crop cover and management factor, determined by the type of vegetation, and the cultivation method used. An index value of 1.0 represents the maximum erosion potential of a tilled fallow field.

P is a conservation practice factor where 1.0 represents the use of no conservation practices while a value of 0.0 represents total protection from erosion.

Three of these five factors, rainfall erosivity, soil erodibility and the topographic factor (*R, K, LS*) are relatively constant and are not normally affected by typical agricultural practices in the short term. In other words, farmers cannot readily adjust the amount of rainfall they receive, or the particle size distribution of their soil, or the steepness or length of the slopes on their fields. However, the crop cover and management factor (*C*) is largely determined by farmers as they decide what crops to plant and what tillage and management practices they will employ. The *C*-factor is subject to variation seasonally, and from year to year, across the landscape. The *P*-factor is also determined by farmers who can vary the type and intensity of conservation practices used on farms (Trant, 1993).

Calculations were done at Statistics Canada using physical data from Agriculture Canada's Centre for Land and Biological Resources Research (CLBRR), and time series cropping information for 1971, 1976, 1981, 1986, and 1991, obtained from Census of Agriculture. This data is stored in Statistics Canada's GIS (Geographical Information System) based Environmental Information System (EIS). Trends derived from quinquennial observations can misrepresent annual variations significantly. However, for Manitoba, fluctuations in the annual cropland areas planted in specific crops are low for this study period. Cropping data were overlaid at the Enumeration Area level and aggregated to Agriculture Canada's Agroecological Resource Areas (ARA) to provide detailed crop data. (Huffman *et al.*, 1993). There are just over 60 ARAs in Manitoba, some containing as many as 1,000 farms.

A consistent set of crops was selected to estimate the change in expected gross soil erosion taking place on more than 98 percent of Manitoba's cultivated area. The remaining 2 percent of cultivated

area is a residual composed of many specialty type crops occupying small areas. Erosion is not estimated separately for these crops but is calculated as an aggregate. The crops in Table 1 are listed from least protection from water erosion (summerfallow) to most protection from water erosion (improved pasture). Crops more likely to be associated with erosion have higher *C* values. Regional climatic effects are accounted for by varying the value of *R* and its resultant impact on calculated *C* values by rainfall erosivity region. Regions with higher rainfall and run-off erosivity have more intense rainfall or rainfall of longer duration. Five rainfall erosivity regions were identified for this study. Each is an aggregation of the 60 ARAs which in turn are an aggregate of the more than 200 Soil Landscape Units (SLUs).

Physical data were taken from Agriculture Canada's Soil Landscapes of Canada (SLC) map series. The *R*, *K* and *LS* portion of the USLE was estimated by Eilers et al (1989) at the SLU level. Because of geographic resolution errors Census data could not be merged with SLU level physical data, requiring that both physical data and cropping information be aggregated for combination at the ARA level. The distribution of cultivated land in each SLU was estimated by Agriculture Canada for the 1981 crop year. Using these distributions as areal weights it was possible to estimate *R*, *K* and *LS* for each ARA.

Table 1

Crop Cover and Management Factor by Rainfall Erosion Region - Manitoba

Crop Type	C-factor				
	Region 1	Region 2	Region 3	Region 4	Region 5
Summerfallow	0.58	0.73	0.56	0.52	0.78
Sugar beets	0.57	0.58	0.57	0.56	0.59
Silage corn	0.57	0.58	0.57	0.56	0.59
Grain corn and sunflowers	0.53	0.54	0.53	0.52	0.55
Peas and beans	0.55	0.60	0.55	0.54	0.57
Potatoes	0.41	0.42	0.41	0.40	0.43
Flax and canola	0.26	0.34	0.26	0.25	0.31
Grain ^a	0.29	0.34	0.34	0.24	0.51
Pasture	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

a. Grains are usually grouped into separate spring and winter categories because winter grains have a much lower erosion potential. A single *C* - factor was used for grain in Manitoba because less than 2 percent of grain is winter grain.

Source: Carpentier 1992.

Table 2

Estimated P-factors for Manitoba Conservation Practices^a

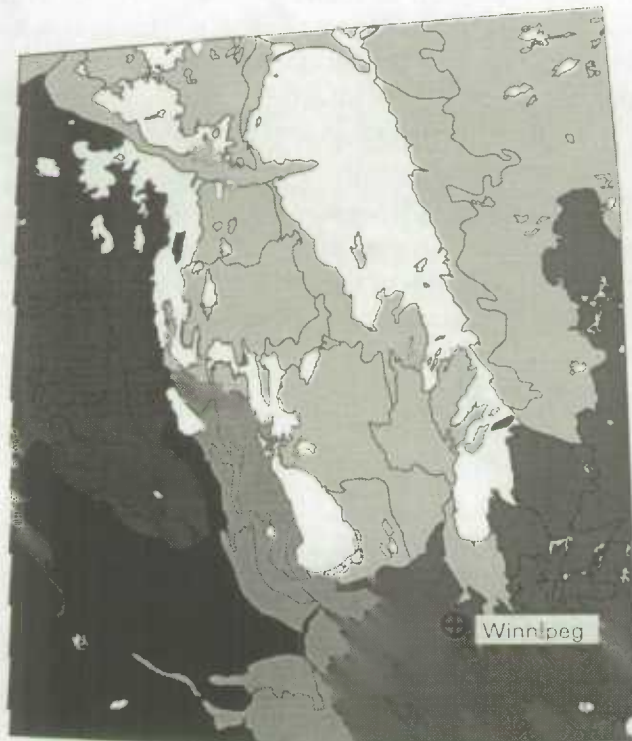
Conservation Practice	P-factor
No-till cultivation	0.50
Strip cropping	0.50
Contour cultivation	0.65
All Other types	0.65
Conservation tillage	0.75
Winter cover	0.85

a. Estimated by Coote after Wischmeier and Smith, 1978.

Table 2 indicates the P-factors used to correct erosion estimates for the 1991 crop year, the only year for which detailed conservation data is available.

Map 1

Rainfall Erosion Regions - Manitoba



Rainfall regions

	Water bodies
	Region 1
	Region 2
	Region 3
	Region 4
	Region 5

Sources: Statistics Canada, National Accounts and Environment Division. Agriculture Canada, Centre for Land and Biological Resources Research.

An adaptation of the USLE was used for calculating soil loss. Gross erosion by water (A) on agricultural land was calculated as follows.

$$A = \sum_a \sum_{cr} \{ ([0.675 \times Dom_{cr,a}] \times C_{cr,a} \times P \times Cenarea_{cr,a}) + ([0.325 \times Sdom_{cr,a}] \times C_{cr,a} \times P \times Cenarea_{cr,a}) \} \quad (EQ 2)$$

When $Sdom = 0$, or when there are only dominant soil characteristics:

$$A = \sum_a \sum_{cr} ([1.0 \times Dom_{cr,a}] \times C_{cr,a} \times P \times Cenarea_{cr,a}) \quad (EQ 3)$$

Where:

A - soil loss per unit area per year

a - ARA (Agroecological Region)

C - Crop cover and management factor

$Cenarea$ - Estimated Census Crop Area

cr - crop type

s - soil landscape unit (SLU)

Dom and $Sdom$ - are the RKLS factors for dominant and subdominant soils

The two constants 0.675 and 0.325 are the assumed proportions of dominant and subdominant soil in each SLU. The values for C by crop type were estimated by Carpentier (Carpentier, 1992).

Results and Discussion

Manitoba covers an area of roughly 450 000 km². Of this area approximately 77 250 km², or 17 percent, is agricultural land. Of this agricultural land in 1991, 47 610 km² or 62 percent was cropland and summerfallow. Cropland provides the foundation for most of Manitoba's diverse agricultural industry.

Agricultural soil erosion occurs primarily on cropland. Cropland that is tilled or cultivated is left unprotected from rainfall and runoff energy for substantial periods during crop growth and after harvest. Soil erosion rates vary in relation to cultivation technique and soil management. Information from the 1991 Census of Agriculture indicates that 66 percent of the area seeded in Manitoba is conventionally tilled (no measures to conserve surface residues), 29 percent of seeded area was conservation tilled (used measures to conserve surface residues), while 5 percent of seeded area used no-tillage for seed bed preparation (Trant, 1993).

Two soil erosion estimates were calculated in this study. The first is an unadjusted soil erosion rate based on changing crop distributions only. The second takes conservation measures into account, and as a result provides a better indication of actual soil erosion in 1991 (Figure 1). Unfortunately, conservation practices data were gathered only in 1991 and interpolation is required to obtain erosion values for conservation in 1986. Historical data on these practices are not available, making detailed calculations at the SLU level impossible. However, the use of conservation tillage and no-till methods did not begin in any substantial way until 1981 in Manitoba (R.G.Eilers, personal communication). Future erosion estimates will be able to incorporate census conservation data at the SLU level.

Figure 1

Gross Soil Erosion by Water - Rates, 1971 - 1991

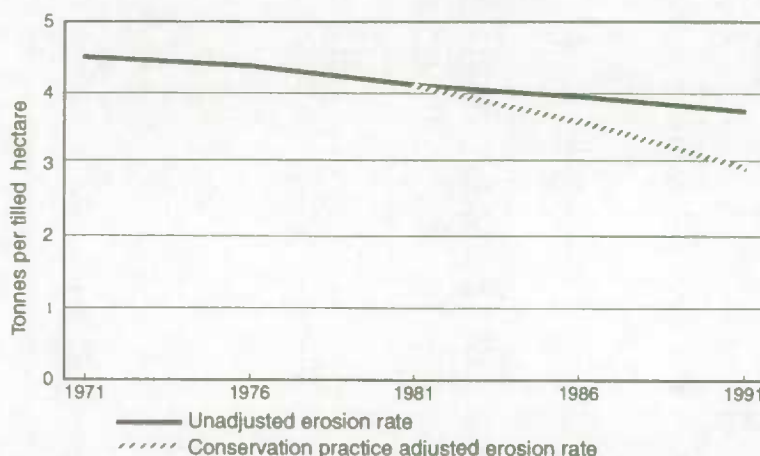
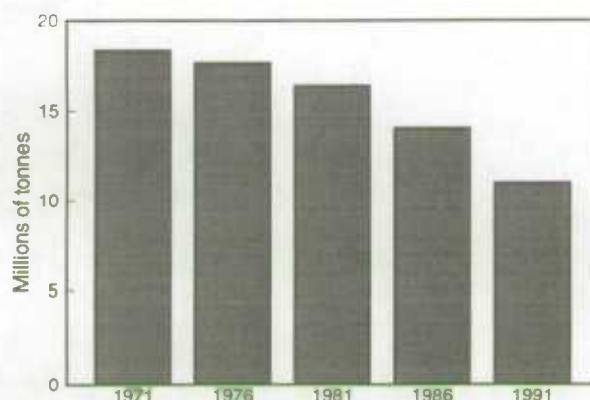


Figure 1 indicates trends in soil erosion rates since 1971. Average unadjusted erosion rates have declined from 4.5 to 3.75 tonnes per hectare on tilled land. Changing crop and summerfallow combinations have been the principal cause of this shift. Soil loss rates have generally declined as less and less land is summerfallowed and more land has been seeded with crops that protect soil surfaces. The conservation adjusted rate moved from 4.5 to 3.0 tonnes per hectare assuming negligible use of conservation practices in 1981.

Figure 2 shows the estimated decline in gross soil erosion resulting from both cropping pattern changes and the increasing use of conservation practices.

Figure 2

Gross Soil Erosion by Water, 1971 - 1991



The area of land in summerfallow declined by 72.4 percent between 1971 and 1991 (Table 3). Summerfallow erosion rates are higher than those associated with crops. Average estimated erosion rates for summerfallow consistently exceed 7 tonnes per hectare in Manitoba (Table 4). The unit area estimates represent average losses and as such do not reflect maximum or minimum erosion loss rates on given parcels of land. The gross erosion estimates for land in summerfallow, unadjusted for conservation practices, parallel the decline in summerfallow area with a 72.3 percent decrease, going from 8.2 million tonnes in 1971 down to 2.3 million tonnes by 1991 (Table 4).

Table 3

Tilled Land Areas, 1971 - 1991

Crop Type	1971	1976	1981	1986	1991	change 71-91
	thousands of hectares					percent
Barley	830	667	942	634	544	-34.4
Buckwheat	32	18	51	22	16	-51.6
Mixed grains	115	70	48	32	28	-75.8
Total oats	594	517	273	195	155	-73.8
Total rye	52	38	75	31	33	-36.4
Total wheat	1 020	1 544	1 593	1 993	2 174	113.2
Total Grain	2 643	2 853	2 982	2 907	2 950	11.6
Mustard seed	14	23	66	50	20	58.6
Flaxseed and canola	464	305	530	810	758	63.4
Soybeans	1	0	2	0	0	-90.7
Sunflowers	63	20	110	23	74	17.8
Oilseed Total	531	333	661	846	838	57.8
Silage corn	4	13	20	13	12	196.9
Grain corn	4	7	89	14	40	1 000.1
Field peas	21	15	41	58	52	151.4
Field beans	1	3	1	10	16	1 213.1
Potatoes	13	14	17	19	20	51.4
Sugar beets	13	13	12	11	11	-17.2
Vegetables	2	2	2	1	2	-20.2
Wide-row Crops	58	68	182	126	152	164.1
Summerfallow	1 075	934	598	509	297	-72.4
Total Area Tilled	4 072	4 094	4 180	3 994	3 730	-8.4

Increases in the area of grain have led to increases in total gross erosion from grain crops. Average erosion rates for grain indicate a movement of 3 to 4 tonnes of soil per hectare (Table 4). Land area in grains increased from a 1971 value of 2.64 million to 2.95 million hectares by 1991 (Table 3). Gross erosion estimates parallel this change indicating an 11.7 percent increase in soil erosion from grain crops (Table 4).

An increase in the area planted in oilseeds between 1971 and 1991 led to higher gross soil erosion estimates. In 1986, oilseed production reached a maximum in Manitoba (Table 3). More than 1.5 million tonnes, of a provincial total 17.2 million tonnes of soil erosion, occurred on land planted in oilseeds in 1981. Between 1971 and 1991 the area planted to oilseeds was estimated to have increased by 57.8 percent. At the same time erosion increased by 15.7 percent. However, estimated erosion associated with oilseeds peaked in 1981, apparently because areas planted to sunflowers, which have a high C-factor (Table 1) were at a maximum.

Table 4

Gross Soil Erosion Estimates by Major Crop Type, 1971 - 1991
(Unadjusted for Conservation Practices)

Crop Type	1971	1976	1981	1986	1991	change 1971-91
thousands of metric tonnes						percent
Barley	2 950	3 286	3 286	2 273	1 899	-35.6
Buckwheat	72	34	113	50	35	-51.0
Mixed grains	322	191	127	81	70	-78.2
Total oats	1 886	1625	896	602	457	-75.7
Total rye	174	140	250	86	100	-42.4
Total wheat	3 540	5 305	5 546	7 006	7 430	109.9
Total Grain	8 944	10 580	10 218	10 098	9 992	11.7
Average tonnes per hectare	3.38	3.71	3.43	3.47	3.39	
Mustard seed	14	23	66	50	20	42.9
Flaxseed and canola	631	597	891	1 231	709	12.4
Soybeans	3	2	10	0	0	-88.6
Sunflowers	293	116	589	116	359	22.5
Total Oilseeds	941	737	1 556	1 398	1 089	15.7
Average tonnes per hectare	3.18	3.08	3.72	3.10	3.29	
Silage corn	23	72	102	59	54	140.4
Grain corn	15	23	374	50	145	878.9
Field peas	85	61	173	246	235	175.7
Field beans	5	12	3	39	61	1 208.2
Potatoes	37	39	49	56	75	103.9
Sugar beets	43	44	39	38	37	-13.9
Vegetables	8	9	8	5	7	-15.2
Wide-row Total	215	260	748	494	613	185.7
Average tonnes per hectare	3.73	3.84	4.12	3.91	4.03	
Summerfallow	8 229	7 252	4 714	3 791	2 283	-72.3
Average tonnes per hectare	7.66	7.76	7.88	7.44	7.69	
Total Erosion	18 329	17 920	17 236	15 780	13 978	-23.7
Average tonnes per hectare	4.50	4.38	4.12	3.95	3.75	

The largest increases in estimated gross soil erosion come from the wide-row crop group. Areas planted in wide-row crops more than tripled between 1971 and 1981, while the erosion resulting from these increases went from 215 000 tonnes to more than 748 000 tonnes, an increase of 248

percent. Since 1981, the area of these crops has declined, with a similar decline in estimated erosion.

Map 2 shows estimated erosion trends by Agroecological Region. The largest declines are found in the south where they exceed 50 percent. The largest increases are found east of the Red River (1), in the Souris and Assiniboine valleys (2,3), and in the Swan River Area (4), with values in some cases exceeding 100 percent.

Map 3 shows Soil Landscape Unit polygons and calculated erosion rates ($\text{t ha}^{-1}\text{yr}^{-1}$). The 1981 census year is the only year information at this more detailed scale is available. The two largest dark shaded areas with greater than 10 tonnes per hectare erosion on cultivated land are the highly sloped Riding Mountain and Duck Mountain areas. However, only very limited agricultural activity takes place in these areas.

Map 4 indicates the general decline in unadjusted gross erosion between 1971 and 1991. Areas in the Turtle Mountain Region and Manitoba Escarpment show the greatest change, going from average values which in some cases exceeded 20 tonnes per cultivated hectare in 1971 to well under 10 tonnes per cultivated hectare by 1991.

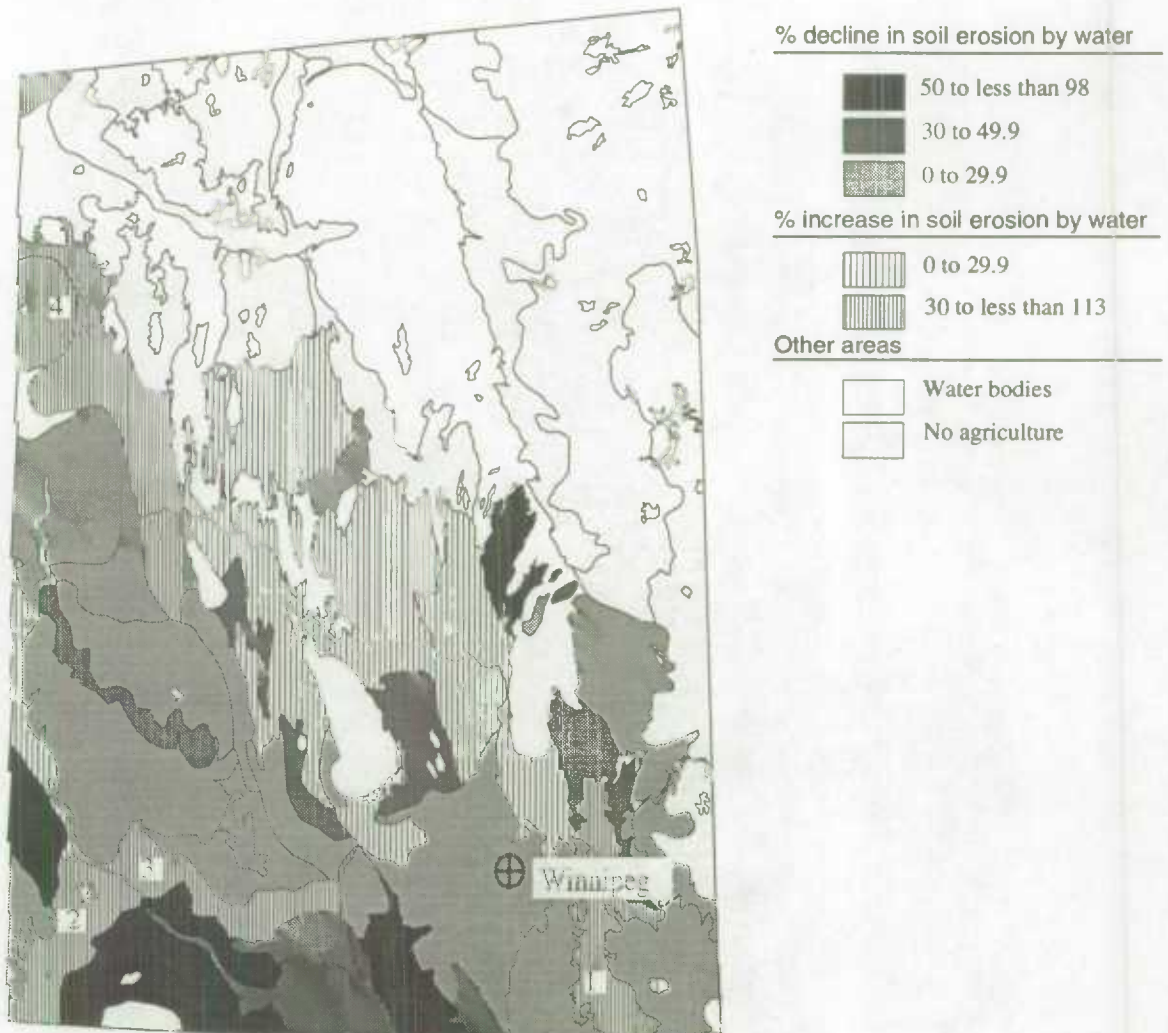
These estimates indicate significant improvement in agricultural soil erosion rates in Manitoba over the last 20 years. When combined with the effects of increasing soil conservation measures (Figures 1 and 2) these estimates become even more encouraging. However, many important questions still remain unanswered. Are these calculated loss rates sustainable for 10 years, 50 years or 100 years? How are the other provinces doing? Are there areas where erosion is still intensifying? How great an impact has soil erosion had on yield? How much land has actually been taken out of production due to soil erosion degradation? Is this land reclaimable in the future? What are the actual environmental costs of soil erosion? These and other related questions will need further investigation if agricultural sustainability is to be achieved in the years ahead.

Conclusion

Changing land management practices and crop distributions relative to slope and soil erodibility factors have considerable influence on estimated soil loss rates on farms in Manitoba. Conservation practices also have significant impacts on reducing expected soil erosion rates. Over the past 20 years changing agricultural crop distributions have reduced expected soil erosion by water by 24 percent or 4.4 million tonnes, while conservation practices may have further reduced soil erosion by an additional 16 percent or 2.9 million tonnes, for a total reduction of 40 percent or 7.3 million tonnes. These declines were achieved with a moderate 8 percent decrease in tilled area, from 4.07 million hectares in 1971 to 3.73 million hectares in 1991. While gross soil erosion by water and tilled land area declined, actual cropland area increased by 29 percent in Manitoba, going from 3.69 million hectares in 1971 to 4.76 million hectares by 1991. The difference in these values is largely the result of reduced summerfallow.

Map 2

Change in Gross Agricultural Soil Erosion on Tilled Land, 1971- 1991

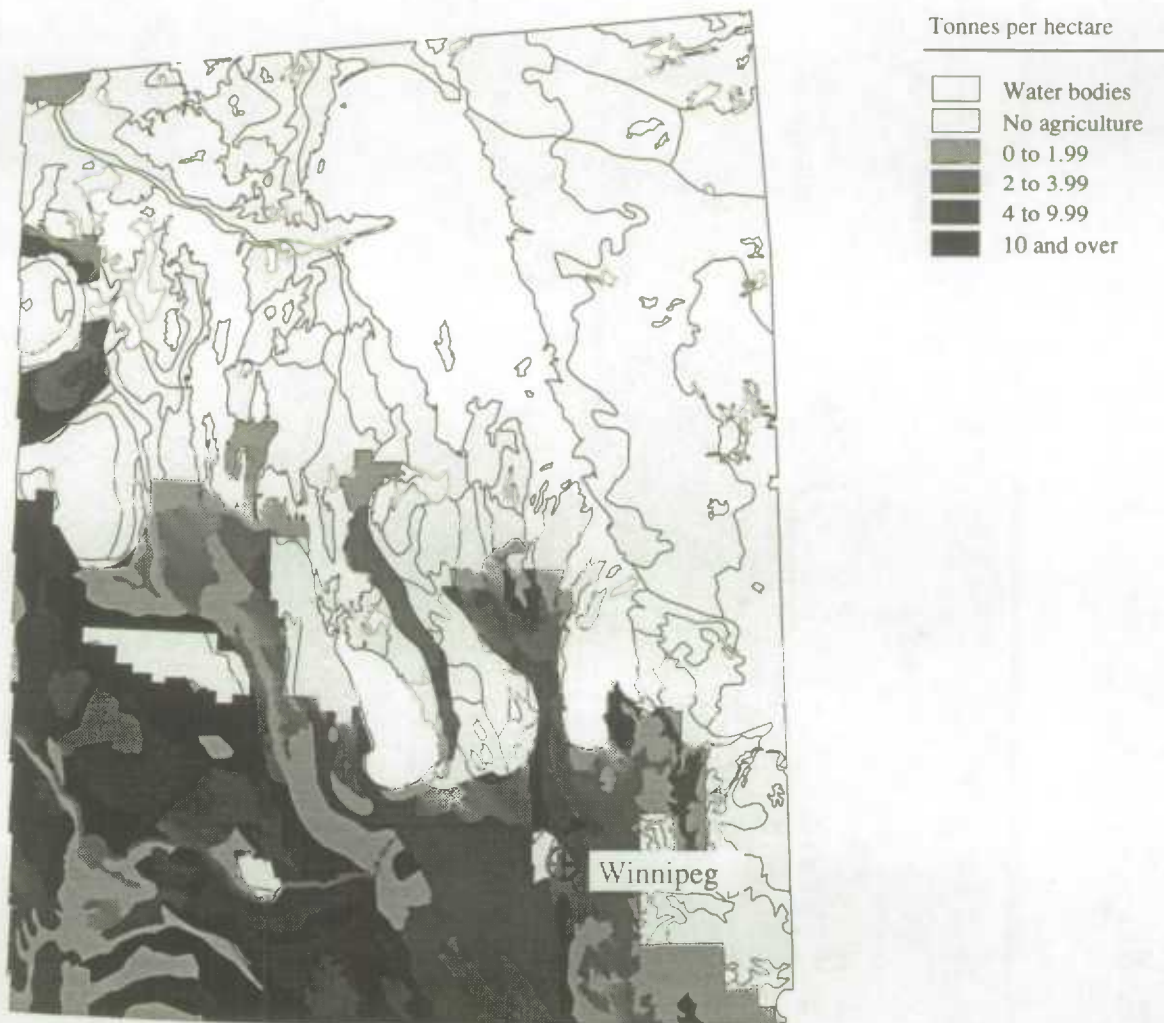


Note: Not adjusted for conservation practices.

Sources: Statistics Canada, National Accounts and Environment Division. Agriculture Canada, Centre for Land and Biological Resources Research.

Map 3

Gross Agricultural Soil Erosion by Water on Cultivated Land, 1981



Note: Not adjusted for conservation practices.

Sources: Statistics Canada, National Accounts and Environment Division. Agriculture Canada, Centre for Land and Biological Resources Research.

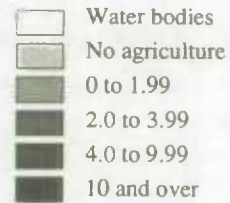
Map 4

Gross Agricultural Soil Erosion by Water on Cultivated Land, 1971, 1981 and 1991

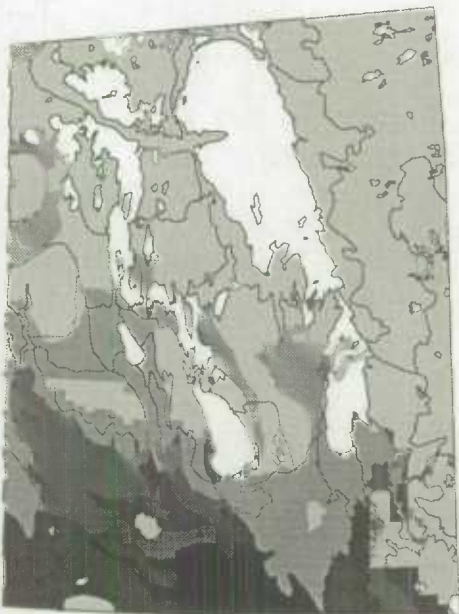
1971 – 18.33 million tonnes



Tonnes per cultivated hectare



1981 – 17.24 million tonnes



1991 – 13.98 million tonnes



Note: Not adjusted for conservation practices.

Sources: Statistics Canada, National Accounts and Environment Division. Agriculture Canada, Centre for Land and Biological Resources Research.

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2. Hamilton, Kirk and Doug Trant (December 1989): *Statistical Aspects of the Application of Geographic Information Systems in Canadian Environment Statistics*, Journal of Official Statistics 1989, vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 337-348.
3. Smith, Robert (September 1990): *An Annotated Bibliography of the Resource and Environmental Accounting and Valuation Literature*.
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