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TECHNICAL NOTES

LAKE STATES FOREST EXPERIMENT STATION
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More Forest Land in the Northern Lake States?

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The northern Lake States region, consisting of 94 counties stretching across northern Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, has been in transition from forest to agriculture and vice versa since the first white pine here fell before a logger's axe (fig. 1). The sweep of logging across the region opened up lands which, at the time, were judged to be fine opportunities for agricultural settlement and development. Agricultural economists during the 1920's carried on intensive studies of the patterns, problems, and possible solutions of agricultural development in this area, and even as recently as the 1930's commercial agriculture was considered to hold considerable promise on these northern lands.^{1/}

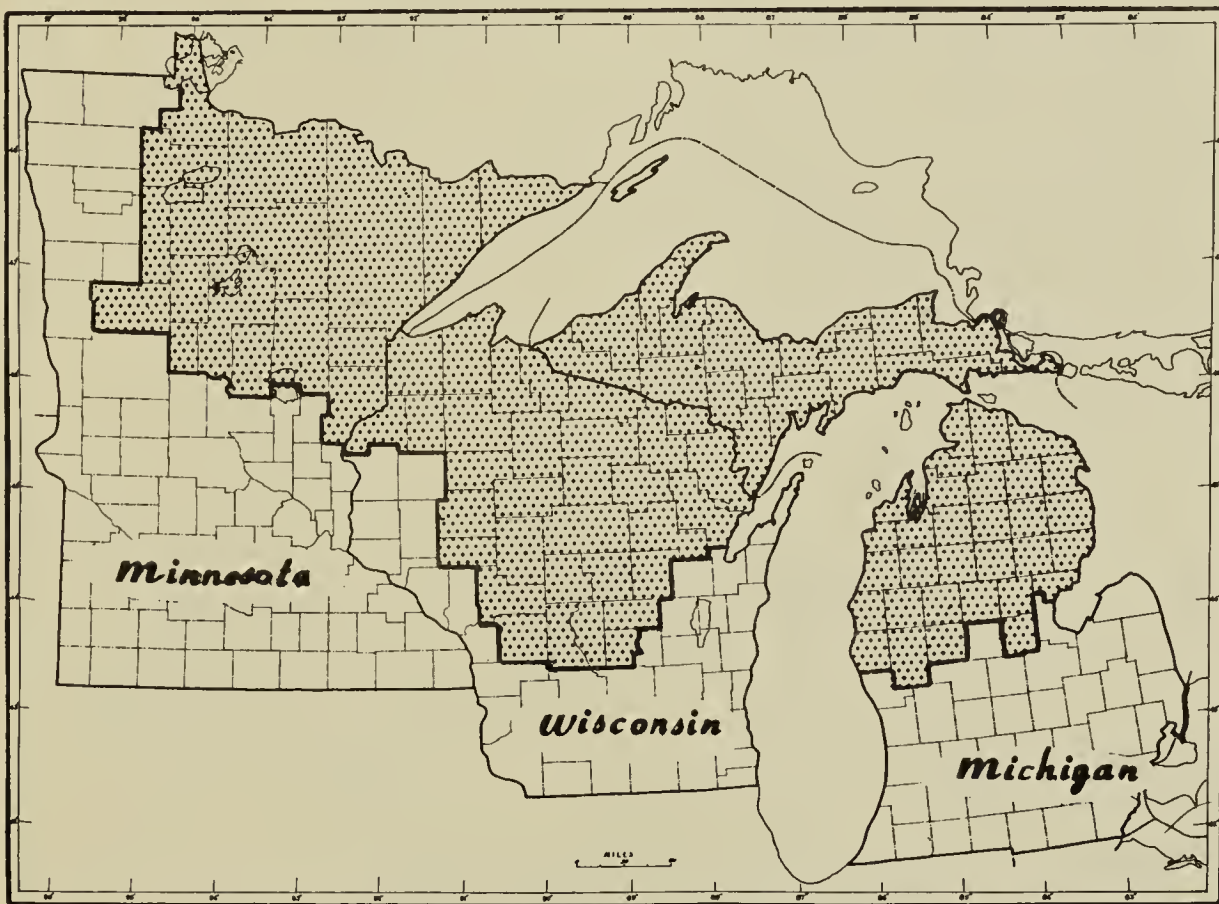


Figure 1.--Location of 94 counties included within the area referred to as the Northern Lake States.

However, examining the trend in number of active farms and their acreage in the northern Lake States now gives cause to speculate that, whereas at one time the forest was giving way to the plow, the reverse now seems to be true. Data from the past several Censuses of Agriculture show striking declines in farming as a land use in the northern Lake States (fig. 2).

^{1/} For instance, see: J. D. Black and L. C. Gray, Land Settlement and Colonization in the Great Lakes States, (U.S. Dept. Agr. Bul. 1295, 1925); and W. A. Hartman and J. D. Black, Economic Aspects of Land Settlement in the Cut-over Region of the Great Lakes States (U.S. Dept. Agr. Cir. 160, 1931).

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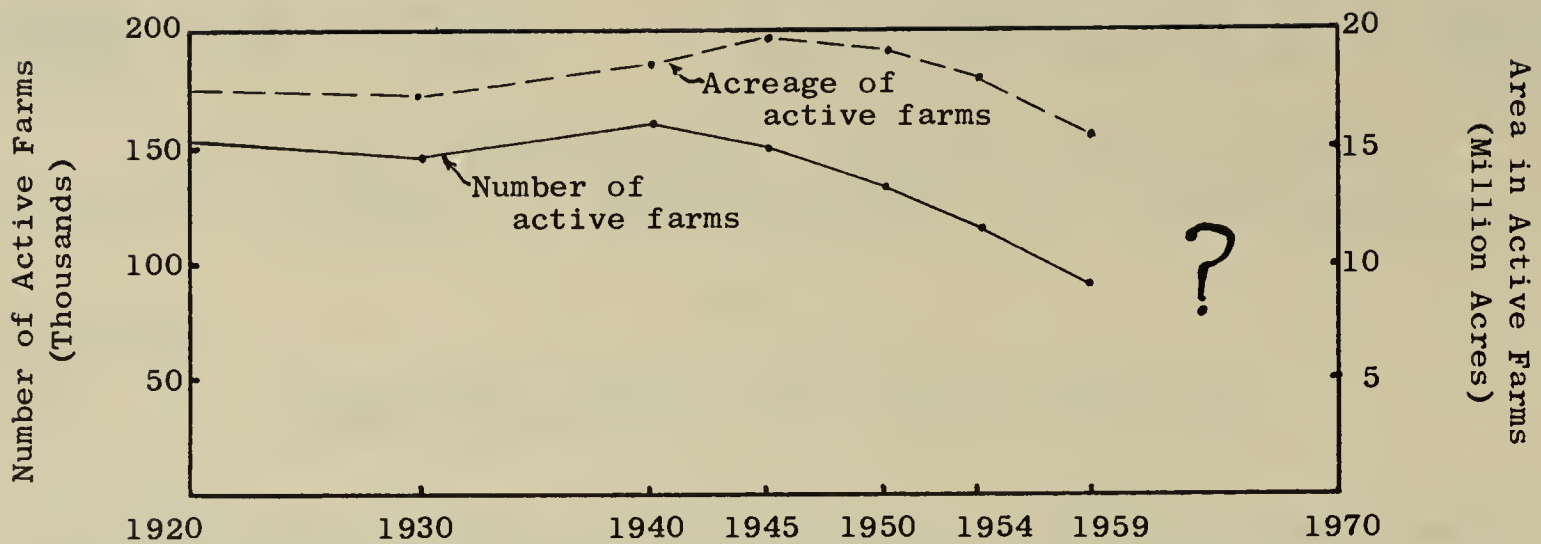


Figure 2.--Trend in the number of active farms in the Northern Lake States, 1920-1959.

Recently, the Soil Bank program undoubtedly has influenced some farmers, particularly older operators, to leave farming in these northern counties. However, the Soil Bank program was initiated late in 1956, and the trend away from farming was evident before this date.

What will become of the lands included in these farm units? The Census of Agriculture shows that almost 3,600,000 acres of farm holdings moved out of farm use between 1950 and 1959. This includes cropland and pasture as well as existing farm woodlands. Averages from Census data suggest that these northern farms are divided in approximately a 60:40 proportion between cleared and forested land. Thus in less than 10 years some 2,160,000 acres of crop and pasture land have gone out of production and face an uncertain future.

Undoubtedly some consolidation will occur, with more aggressive, prosperous farm operators taking over adjacent idle farms. However, farm land is not mobile and economics of location often will preclude this building up of larger operating units. Also in many northern areas the decline of farm service facilities will impede a resurgence of agriculture. Where several hundred active farms in a locality once made the operation of a feed store, farm equipment store, or processing plant a profitable enterprise, the decrease in the number of active farms may alter the situation and cause a loss of these necessary service facilities.

While predictions concerning future land use are fraught with uncertainty, some land economists suggest that agriculture likely will continue to decline on the poorer soils and less adaptable areas of the Lake States region.^{2/} If this does prove to be the case, then resource planners must consider the use of several million more acres of land which could be made available for timber production, wildlife habitat, and recreation. However, while these changes are occurring in the northern areas counter inroads of urban expansion, highway development, and other nonforest uses are being made on presently forested lands in the southern part of the region. The next several decades may produce a more complete geographic specialization of land use in the Lake States, with northern areas being devoted more completely to wildland uses such as forestry and recreation while southern areas continue to feel the pressures of expanded urbanization and associated service uses.

^{2/} Marion Clawson, R. Burnell Held, and Charles H. Stoddard, Land for the Future (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1960), p. 459. Also see: Willard W. Cochrane, "An Economist Looks at Northeastern Minnesota", The Future of Minnesota's Resources, 1958, Report of the Governor's Second Conference on State Resources (St. Paul, Office of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation, 1958), p. 218.