

SAVING THE NAVAJOS

For generations, over-grazing has accelerated soil erosion on the Navajo reservations, weakening alike herd and herdsman. To drift, to allow this denudement to run its deadly course would mean the destruction of the Navajo race within a few years. Faced with this catastrophic decay, the Indian Bureau has substituted action for decades of talk. With all necessary haste, it has partially diverted the Navajo way of life into a new, temporary and complicated economy where to a certain degree soil restoration work replaces the tending of flocks and other customary pursuits. Extensive programs of activity, touching every side of Navajo life, have been introduced. The rock of appropriations has been smitten doubly hard in behalf of the imperilled Navajos—over nine million dollars of special federal funds are being applied to their problems.

The program is vast; complex. Speed is essential. Of equal importance, for its psychological effects, is a smooth transition. Mistakes are being made, undoubtedly, and it is impossible to gauge the outcome of this wholesale channeling of ancient thought and habit. But the need is stubborn, inflexible, and the present Indian policy framers, distinguished for their capacity to project themselves into Indian thought, are attacking this need according to their enlightened intelligence. There follows a brief outline of their program, drawn from information available in Washington.

SOIL EROSION AND RANGE CONTROL: Walter V. Woehlke, the Indian Commissioner's special representative, has graphically defined erosion in the Navajo country:

“ . . . Sheet erosion and gully formation is proceeding at an ever-increasing rate. As the gullies form, they drain the ground water of the valleys, rendering them arid and incapable of supporting a grass cover. Deprived of valley and mesa grass, the flocks climb the hills and mountain-sides, browsing on the brush until it, too, is destroyed and the thin soil departs, leaving the gaunt rock ribs bare and sterile.”

The Navajos have squarely and bravely faced the situation. They have agreed to reduce the total number of their sheep by at least one-third; their flock of goats by 200,000. Already they have disposed of 90,000 sheep. To remunerate the individual owner for his sacrifice, they were willing to mortgage the tribal