12. SOIL CONSERVATION IN ICELAND

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THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ICELANDIC
SOIL CONSERVATION SERVICE

At the close of the cold period from 1860 to 1890 a good deal was written and a lively discussion maintained on the problem of wind erosion in Iceland. The great damage it had caused, particularly in the previous decades, seemed bound to continue on an ever escalating scale if protective measures were not undertaken. The drift-sand was closing in on most farms in the middle of the South and a great many had already been evacuated.

About the beginning of the 20th century the Agricultural Society of Iceland showed a growing concern for the problem of erosion in general and the drift-sand in particular. On its initiative a number of specialists, including Danes, were sent to undertake a field study of the problem. The Icelandic Althing granted a small sum of money for fighting the sand-drift. Some farmers took some protective measures, which consisted mainly of erecting walls of stones or timber right across the direction of the erosion at the junction of the eroded areas and the vegetated land. The results of these individual and public attempts to stop the erosion were however negligible.

The State Soil Conservation Service was previously named the Icelandic Sand Reclamation and the oldest legislation on sand reclamation dates back to an 1895 "Act for Resolution on Sand Erosion and Reclamation". This contained authority for District Commissions, but the Act proved a dead letter with no implementation so it made no mark in its field.
In 1907 an Act on "Forestry and Prevention of the Erosion of Land" was enacted and a special Sand Reclamation representative was engaged. He was Gunnlaugur Kristmundsson of Hafnarfjord and for 40 years he fought a serious shortage of funds and a disbelief in the importance of his function.

The link between sand reclamation and forestry, however, remained very weak and was abolished by a new "Act on Sand Reclamation" in 1914 whereby the Governor was charged with the administrative supervision of sand reclamation with the Agricultural Society of Iceland which was to look after sand reclamation affairs.

Since then there has at all times been some legal connection between the Agricultural Society of Iceland and Sand Reclamation. The act on Sand Reclamation was thereupon augmented and amended in 1923 and again in 1941. Then again 1965 marks the end of an era with the passing of the Act on Land Reclamation. The name of the Institute was then amended to the State Soil Conservation Service and the operation and task of this Institute was vastly extended and is now as follows:

1) To stop and prevent destruction of vegetated areas and soil and further the reclamation of eroded areas;

2) Protection of growth, which is achieved by obstructing the excessive utilisation of plant growth anywhere in the country;

3) Supervision of all grazing areas in Iceland;

The organisation began its activities by importing barbed wire for fencing in areas which were being eroded and protecting them completely from grazing. Sowing of sand lymegrass or "Melgras", in Icelandic, (Elymus arenarius) was undertaken on a very small scale, mainly on a trial and error type basis and it was even tried to plough down the seed.

The farmers living in the neighbourhood of the eroding areas did not have much faith in the experiments and considered their usefulness of a very limited value. Most of the farmers accepted erosion as a fact of life and would not have anything to do with interfering with God's will. According to the Act of 1975 the Service can take any land and protect it as long as is needed in order to reclaim it and make it fit for controlled grazing (under the supervision of the S.C.S.). However, rather than enforcing the previously mentioned law legal contracts have been made between the landowners and the Service.

It soon became evident that some regrowth took place within