

Ferdie J. Deering

SEP. 15 1977

Conservation Can Prevent Deserts

DESERTS are found in all parts of the world, some covered by ice or snow and others by seas of sand.

Deserts still are being created or enlarged by the same forces, in a process called "desertification." A conference just concluded in Nairobi, Kenya, was called to draw up plans to resist desertification in a global effort.

Causes of desertification have been identified as insufficient rainfall, deforestation, overgrazing, and farming methods that make the land vulnerable to wind and water erosion.

A recent article in "To the Point International" magazine, from Belgium, says that 5 to 7 million hectares of usable land are being turned into desert each year. It also estimated 3 billion metric tons of soil are being washed away and production of 30 million tons of needed grain is being lost.

"It is estimated that an area the size of Brazil has been made use-

less through man's misguided husbandry," the article says. "It is not as if the earth's fertile regions are extensive."

During the past half century, it has been estimated, 250,000 square miles have been added to the Sahara desert. Food production declines in semi-arid countries since 1950 have been cited as evidence that an immediate turn-around is needed.

Oklahoma has had costly experience with desertification. Lessons learned from Dust Bowl days should be valuable wherever excessive removal of ground cover contributes to the problem.

Oklahoma has demonstrated that correction of methods can restore damaged, eroded land to a high degree of productivity. Areas in the state that were hit hard by drouth, erosion and sand storms during the 1930s now produce good crops and pastures.

Following World War II, The Farmer-Stockman magazine and WKY Radio, in cooperation with

Oklahoma State University and USDA Soil Conservation Service, conducted a successful contest promoting "soil building" on farms in Oklahoma County.

Gullied fields were leveled, fertility was restored and productivity regained on useless land in a few years. Somewhat similar results have been obtained in Arizona and other states where raw desert land was made to blossom and produce when irrigation water and modern farming methods were applied.

Objectives of the Nairobi conference to combat desertification are commendable, because the need is urgent. The task of evangelizing the world for conservation is gigantic, in view of resistance encountered in previous attempts to introduce modern agriculture to farmers in developing nations.

Stakes in the counterattack on desertification are high, because the world's diet depends heavily on the outcome.