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How to Halt Deserts: Conservation

KENT RUTH of Geary sends along an item from the Menonite Weekly Review by Willard Unruh, a leader in conservation and stewardship, who notes that the Sahara Desert once was a forest.

The point impressed Kent, who has done a marvelous job of telling the world about Oklahoma and telling Oklahomans about our country.

It reminded us that pioneers in westward-bound wagon trains called the Great Plains "the Great American Desert" because they had been accustomed to clearing trees to make farms and they expected to do likewise in their new homelands.

Today the "Great American Desert" not only is the "breadbasket of America"; it also is an "international grocery store" that provides food for people on every other continent of the world.

Thus, while Americans have been turning an area labeled a desert into food-producing farms, "desertification" has spread in the vast Sahara region of Africa, in Patagonia of South America, in the Gobi area of Asia, and elsewhere as mankind ex-

ploited the land.

Unruh wondered that "when God had finished making the world and calling it good, he had included a desert or two."

"In the early 1970s the world became aware of the starvation on the southern edge of the Sahara in the region called the Sahel, an Arabic word meaning border," he wrote. "On closer study it became apparent that the problem was more than lack of rain — deforestation, overgrazing and cultivation of marginal land had pulled the desert southward."

Some 250,000 square miles of land fit for agriculture or intensive grazing had been lost to the desert in 50 years.

Many but not necessarily most of us can remember the "black blizzards" of the 1930s when huge dust storms whipped down across the Great Plains to deposit piles of silt in fields, on roadsides, in homes and stores, choked residents, and obscured vision of motorists.

It was then people realized that if we were to survive and eat well we would have to do something to pre-

serve our soil and water. If these precious resources were lost, the people must go, too. That got our national soil and water conservation movement going.

Federal, state and local agencies still are pushing for more conservation, but the movement needs a new push from the public. Land that once was forests and farms is now in cities and highways. Poor incomes discourage farmers from applying conservation.

Unruh said an eminent Egyptian ecologist estimated that worldwide an area larger than Brazil once classified "above semi-arid" has been changed to desert through human misuse.

In the first chapter of Genesis in the Bible, it is written that after God had created man and woman He said to them: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it."

According to population reports, mankind has been very successful in multiplying, but spreading "desertification" does not signify an outstanding job of replenishing the productivity of the earth.