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Message to Congress on the Use of  
National Resources, January 24, 1935

Tully Archive: FDR Papers

Speech Drafts: Message to Congress on the Use of

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19

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NATIONAL RESOURCES MESSAGE

TO THE CONGRESS:

I am transmitting to you herewith the Report of the National Resources Board appointed on June 30, 1934 to prepare a survey of our national resources. As the Board has stated in its letter to me, the Report is the first attempt in our national history to make an inventory of our national assets and the problems relating to them. For the first time it draws together the foresight of the various planning agencies of the Federal Government and suggests a method for future cooperation. Many agencies of the Government have helped the Board in this immense project. The contribution made by the Mississippi Valley Committee of the Public Works Administration, which acted as the Water Planning Committee of the Board, has been particularly noteworthy. The document which I am submitting is in five parts: the general report of the Board, and the reports to the Board of its Committees on Land Planning, Water Planning, Mineral Policy and of the Federal Board of Surveys and Maps. I recommend a careful perusal of the Report to every member of Congress. It is a remarkable foundation for what we hope will be a permanent policy of orderly developments.

In this inventory of our national wealth we follow the custom of prudent people toward their own property. We take stock of what we have. We consider the uses to which it can be put. We plan these uses in the light of what we want to be and to accomplish as a people. We consider our land and water resources not as static and sterile possessions but as life-giving assets which must be directed by wise provision for the future. The use of natural resources is not a thing apart, but involved closely in the whole mass of human activities, with industry, labor, finance, taxation.

Natural resources planning is not planning at all, if it leaves out of account the many vital factors in our economic and social life, the resultant of which makes a standard of living.

For the coming eighteen months I have asked Congress in my budget message for four billion dollars for public projects. A substantial portion of that four billion dollars will be used for objectives suggested in this Report. As the years pass the Government should spend each year a reasonable and continuing sum on this program. After the fiscal year 1936, for instance, it would seem fitting that approximately \$500,000,000 should be appropriated yearly for this purpose. As the Board recommends, this appropriation should replace all separate appropriations for rivers and harbors, public buildings, soil erosion, reforestation, retirement of submarginal land, the development of power and irrigation and flood control. A permanent National Resources Board, toward the establishment of which we should be looking forward, would report yearly to the President recommendations for priority in particular projects. These projects would then be included in a general program submitted to the Congress by the President covering a number of years and coordinated in accordance with the suggestions of the report.

The effort of the people of America to turn to their use the bounty of Nature has been marked by many achievements in the arts of communication and transportation and in mechanized production. It is, as this Report points out, an error to say that we have "conquered Nature". We have rather started to shape our lives in harmonious relationship with Nature. This Report is a milestone in our progress toward that end.

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harmed us. For the coming eighteen months I have asked Congress in my budget message for four billion dollars for public projects. A substantial portion of that four billion dollars will be used for objectives suggested in this Report. As the years pass the Government should spend each year a reasonable and continuing sum on this program. After the fiscal year 1936, for instance, it would seem fitting that approximately \$500,000,000 should be appropriated yearly for this purpose. As the Board recommends, this appropriation should replace all separate appropriations for rivers and harbors, public buildings, soil erosion, reforestation, retirement of submarginal land, the development of power and irrigation and flood control. A permanent National Resources Board, toward the establishment of which we should be looking forward, would report yearly to the President recommendations for priority in particular projects. These projects would then be included in a general program submitted to the Congress by the President covering a number of years and coordinated in accordance with the suggestions of the report.

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To go no further back than the three or four centuries of white men in the American Continent, we find a continuous striving of civilization against Nature: It is only in recent years that we have learned how greatly by these processes we have harmed Nature and Nature in turn has harmed us.

We should not too greatly blame our ancestors for they found such teeming hospitality in woods and soils and waters -- such abundance above the earth and beneath it -- such freedom in the taking, that they gave small heed to the results that would follow the filling of their own immediate needs. Most of them, it is true, had come from many peopled lands where necessity had made necessary the preserving of the bounties of Nature but they had come here for the obtaining of a greater freedom, and it was but natural that freedom of conscience and freedom of government should extend itself in their minds to the unrestricted enjoyment of the free use of land and water.

Furthermore, it is only within our own generation that the development of science, leaping forward in great strides, has taught us where and how we violated nature's immutable laws and where and how we can commence to repair such havoc as man has wrought.

In recent years little groups of earnest men and women have told us of this havoc; of the cutting of our last stands of virgin timber; of the increasing floods, of the washing away of millions of acres of our top soils, of the lowering of our water-tables, of the dangers of one crop farming, of the depletion of our minerals -- in short the evils

that we have brought upon ourselves today and the even greater evils that will attend our children unless we act.

Such is the condition that attends the continued use of our natural resources if we continue our planless course.

But another element enters in. Men and Nature must work hand in hand. The throwing out of balance of the resources of Nature throws out of balance also the lives of men. We find millions of our citizens stranded in village and on farm -- stranded there because nature could not support them in the livelihood they had sought to gain through her. We find other millions gravitated to centers of population so vast that the laws of natural economics broke down.

If the misuse of natural resources were alone concerned, we should consider our problem only in terms of land and water. It is because misuse extends to what men and women are doing with their occupations and with their many mistakes in herding themselves together that I have chosen, in addressing the Congress, to use the broader term "National Resources."

For the first time in our national history we have made an inventory of our national assets and the problems relating to them. For the first time we have drawn together the foresight of the various planning agencies of the Federal Government and suggested a method and a policy for the future.

I am sending you herewith the report of the National Resources Board, appointed by me on June 30, 1934 to prepare the comprehensive survey which so many of us have sought so long. I transmit also the report made by the

Mississippi Valley Committee of the Public Works Administration, which Committee has also acted as the Water Planning Committee in the larger report.

These documents constitute a remarkable foundation for what we hope will be a permanent policy of orderly development in every part of the United States. It is a large subject but it is a great and inspiring subject. May I commend to each and every one of you, who constitute the Congress of the United States, a careful reading of our plans.

In this inventory of our national wealth we follow the custom of prudent people toward their own private property. We as a Nation take stock of what we as a Nation own. We consider the uses to which it can be put. We plan these uses in the light of what we want to be, of what we want to accomplish as a people. We think of our land and water and human resources not as static and sterile possessions but as life-giving assets to be directed by wise provision for future days. We seek to use our natural resources not as a thing apart but as something that is interwoven with industry, labor, finance, taxation, homes, recreation, good citizenship. The resultant of this interweaving will have a greater influence on the future American standard of living than all the rest of our economics put together.

For the coming eighteen months I have asked the Congress for four billion dollars for public projects. A substantial portion of this sum will be used for objectives suggested in this report. As years pass the Government should plan to spend each year a reasonable and continuing sum in the development of this program. It is my hope, for example, that after the immediate crisis of unemployment begins to mend, that we can afford and that it will seem fitting that we should appropriate approximately five hundred million dollars each year for this purpose. Eventually this appropriation should replace all separate appropriations given in the past without planning.

A permanent National Resources Board, towards the establishment of which we should be looking forward, would report yearly to the President and the Congress recommendations for priority of projects in the national plan. This will give to the Congress, as is entirely proper, the final determination in relation to the projects and appropriations involved.

As I have already stated, it is only because of the current emergency of unemployment and because of the physical impossibility of weighing and testing each and every project that a segregation of items is clearly impossible at the moment.

For the same reason the constituting of fixed administrative machinery would retard the immediate employment objective.

Our goal must be a national one. Achievements in the arts of communication, of transportation, of mechanized production, of agriculture, of mining and of power, break down not State Government but the economics of State boundaries.

Only through the growth of thought and action, in terms of national economics, can we best serve individual lives in individual localities.

It is, as this Report points out, an error to say that we have "conquered Nature." We must, rather, start to shape our lives in more harmonious relationship with Nature. This Report is a mile-stone in our progress toward that end. The future of every American family everywhere will be affected by the action we take.