The Development of a New Deal Land Policy:
Fergus County, Montana (1900-1945).

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Abstract
Encouraged by the Enlarged Homestead Act, higher than average rainfall, and various
boosters, thousands of Americans homesteaded in Montana and the northern Great
Plains during the 1910s. The agricultural economy boomed during World War I, but the
post-war contraction during the 1920s, coupled with drought, caused serious economic
problems for farmers. In response to the problems in the agricultural economy, a Land
Utilization movement emerged, led by agricultural economists such as Lewis C. Gray.
Land utilizationists believed that a readjustment of land use would correct the problems
in the agricultural economy. Toward that end they sought changes in federal land policy,
especially on the Great Plains, because of the problems caused by cultivating
submarginal land--land that could not consistently raise crops. Federal land laws,
including the Homestead Act, had all but guaranteed that land on the plains would not be
put to its best use. The situation worsened during the Great Depression and
subsequently, under the New Deal, many of the ideas of the Land Utilization movement
came to fruition. During the mid-1930s, the federal government made dramatic changes
to land policy, ending the homestead movement and initiating a Land Utilization Program
that repurchased failed submarginal farmland and created a new public domain. The
program purchased more than 11 million acres, including nearly 100,000 acres in Fergus
County, Montana. Through the purchase of submarginal agricultural land and the
conversion of that land to grazing, the Land Utilization Program contributed to the
stabilization of the agricultural economy in Fergus County. In part because of the
implementation of the ideas of the Land Utilization movement, grazing increased, wheat
farming decreased, and farms got larger and more diversified. The influence of the
movement is also reflected in land classification and planning efforts. Ultimately, the
new policies signify a deeper shift in the role of government as the government
relinquished its trust of individual landowners to protect and maintain the country's land
resources.

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