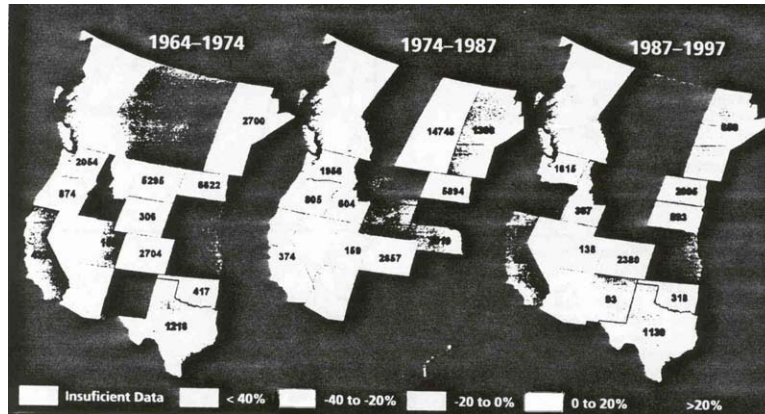


REQUIEM FOR SUMMER FALLOW



by Elwin G. Smith and Douglas L. Young

A sharp reduction in summer fallow began three decades ago in western North America. Summer fallow, a practice in which fields are tilled but not planted, is used in arid regions to conserve moisture for the following year's crop and reduce variations in yield. Unfortunately, summer fallow also increases soil erosion and contributes to reduced air quality.

Changes in summer fallow acres have varied considerably over time and geography, as shown in the map graphics above. In 1969, 17 percent of cropland in the western United States was in fallow. By 1997, fallow acreage had dropped to 8 percent of cropland acreage. In roughly the same time period, farmers in the Canadian prairie provinces cut summer fallow from 40 percent of cropland to 19 percent of cropland.