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CHANGE--ON OUR TERMS

It is a pleasure and a privilege to be with you again in Tennessee. This is a diverse and attractive state, and more people are discovering it. You have new residents, new industries, and new challenges in resource use and development.

Or should I say you have continuing challenges?

Two years ago at your 24th Convention in Knoxville I discussed what I termed three central issues of creative conservation:

First, rapidly increasing demands on resources;

Second, changing demands on resources, and a greater concern for environmental quality; and

Third, increasing complexity of resource problems.

Material for talk by Norman A. Berg, Association Administrator, Soil Conservation Service, at the annual meeting of the Tennessee Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Memphis, Tenn., December 8, 1969.

We discussed the effect of these issues on local self-government--especially the future role of conservation and watershed districts.

These items are still as important as ever, in Tennessee and in our Nation. In getting ready for today's talk, I looked at many speeches since 1967. They all have one or more of these themes; they contain many thousands of words, some sharp, some ringing, that outlined the problems, cited examples of progress, pointed to the urgency for action, and exhorted each and every person to do more, as soon as possible. This made me think a little more about what to say.

And it seems to me that an old cliché fits best--the only thing constant is change. Tennessee is changing rapidly; it has turned into an urban state in the last few years, as more than half of the residents now live in towns and cities. Many others live in rural areas but earn their living in town.

Metropolitan areas are bulging; Sumner County near Nashville has had a population jump of 50 percent in the past 8 years. And you can expect that change will accelerate in Tennessee in the foreseeable future. You can't stop it, and I don't think you want to stop it. But you can guide change; you can help make sure that change means improvement. You can help make sure that in the midst of changes in land use and in living patterns, "improving our living environment" is possible. You can see to it that changes in your communities are made on your terms.

In thinking about some of the changes in American life, I thought about my own life and how it seems to fit a pattern. I came from a Midwest farm background, and worked as a career conservationist in a number of largely rural areas in several states. But for a long time now, my family and I have lived in a very urban setting in metropolitan Washington, D.C.

When I retire, we may go back again to a rural or semi-rural area to live. This transient way of life is common to many American citizens of the past few generations.

I know firsthand about land-use changes, too. My father pioneered on a northern Minnesota farm that was originally forest and should probably never have been intensively cultivated. That land, in my lifetime, has gone from original forest cover into row crops and from there into its present primary use for outdoor recreation.

With all these land and people changes occurring, I think many of us who have a rural background have trouble keeping a good perspective. We have personally seen agriculture change from about 6 million small, horse-powered farms to less than 3 million large, diesel-powered farms. We have witnessed the growth of a new agricultural vocabulary--words like remote sensing, eutrophication, no-till, laser, chlorinated hydrocarbons, pelletizing, to name a few.

We have watched the American economic emphasis change from "making a living" to "quality of living." We have seen higher education become a must for almost every vocation. We have watched United States population grow by 54 million, and virtually all of that growth has taken place in the metropolitan centers. We have witnessed-- in fact, we have caused -- major shifts in land use.

Finally, we have seen conservation change from a concern of the few to the concern of everyone. No longer is it possible for a small group of dedicated conservationists to worry about the future, while American society as a whole continually shifts the burden of its land and water responsibilities onto the next generation. I'm reminded of Lucy Van Pelt's stirring remark in the "Peanuts" comic strip--"Stick the next generation!"

All of a sudden, that next generation is here -- you and I are the ones for whom the air is polluted, the water silting up, the underground reservoirs lowering. All of a sudden, that vague tomorrow -- when all the chickens come home to roost, to use another old phrase -- is today. So, improving the environment by harnessing our accelerating changes in every facet of American life has to be the vital concern of every person in this Nation.

Conservation once was almost totally a rural activity. During the 1960's it became fashionable to dabble in "urban conservation" too. In the 1970's we will have to do resource conservation work wherever it needs doing, with proper regard for its effect on the whole community, not just any one part of the community. We will need a "town - and - country" conservation that blends the needs and opportunities of both rural and urban property and residents. This is our proper perspective, a concept of conservation work that encompasses the total community.

We have to help this Nation accommodate an additional 100 million citizens by the turn of the century in acceptable living patterns and in an acceptable environment.

Three weeks from now we will embark on a new decade, one in which America will experience more change than mankind used to experience in a century. Are we all ready for it?

In September, the Soil Conservation Service asked itself that question. We held a state conservationists' meeting that was different from any we have ever held before.

Instead of trying to solve present problems--however pressing and urgent--we focused our full attention on what the SCS should be doing in the decade of the Seventies.

We were aware, of course, that to develop a program for the Seventies we needed to review as objectively as possible the work we are doing now.

In making this review, it was not enough to defend an operation because we have been doing it for many years or because it provided so many jobs or because the men responsible for the operation are good friends. The question was: Do we continue this activity? Do we go on doing it the same old way? Should we expand or curtail it?

Among the specimens put under the glass for critical scrutiny were individual farm and ranch conservation planning, all aspects of soil surveys, the Conservation Needs Inventory, technical assistance in the establishment of conservation practices, watershed project planning and installation services, Great Plains Conservation Program contracting, ACP assistance, the RC&D program, and anything else we are doing. The more of a sacred cow the operation was, the more it probably needed a critical review.

We also took a look at the many new areas in which SCS is being called upon to give technical assistance: help to planning and zoning commissions; help to land developers and tax-levying bodies; recreation developments; sediment reduction and water quality improvement; environmental improvement, and so on.

We needed to define these areas very clearly. We needed to define the contribution we can make as an agency. We needed to determine what resources we need to be of greater service, and whether we need additional legislative authority, and if so how to justify that need. If we lack the resources to do a necessary job, we have to figure out what we can stop doing so that we can divert resources to new areas of emphasis.

All in all, we had a very provocative and I think a very useful week-long discussion. We didn't come up with all the specifics of a plan for the 1970's, but you might be interested in some of the general recommendations or proposals made:

A major item was that we strengthen our inventory capabilities to provide better data, faster, on a wider variety of resource conditions, problems, and opportunities; and that we involve wide participation in these inventories by State agencies, universities, and other Federal departments. Among the inventory items were these--

-- Speed up the National Cooperative Soil Survey, reduce the time lag between mapping and publication, make greater use of special and interim reports to meet particular planning needs, and streamline the reports;

-- Broaden the Conservation Needs Inventory to include urban and developing areas, build in flexibility so that individual States can collect data peculiar to their needs, shorten the lag between collection and publication, and re-do the inventory at least every 10 years;

-- Broaden the perspective of our river basin surveys to deal more adequately with water quality, pollution abatement, municipal and industrial water supply, fish and wildlife, and recreation;

-- Undertake other comprehensive surveys of erosion, sedimentation, pollution sources, flood damages, water impoundment sites, scenic areas, wildlife potentials, and other resource concerns; and

-- Seek the legislative authority, funds, and additional technical competence that we need to do these jobs.

All of these items underscore our feeling that to bring good resource improvement to meet people's needs, the decision makers and planners need to have the facts at hand. The SCS can provide many of the needed facts, and we are going to work to make them available faster and in more usable form.

In the area of conservation planning, we discussed the need for streamlining our assistance; for being more flexible; for being more selective; and for relating planning on individual land units to planning for neighborhoods, communities, multi-county areas, and regions. We discussed the development of a planning strategy that would provide for more comprehensive consideration of resource and environmental problems and influence, particularly in the area of pollution.

We discussed the total watershed project and RC&D project needs, including how to provide for more flexibility in planning, and for greater coordination with special-interest groups such as wildlife agencies and organizations.

It was the consensus of the group at our meeting that state, local, and private interests may have to provide a larger proportion of the technical assistance for installing conservation work on individual land holdings. We in SCS will need to continuously evaluate how to provide the best overall direction and technical assistance.

The group also discussed the need for broad-scale approaches to work involving pollution control, roadside and streambank erosion control, and surface-mined land restoration.

Sprinkled throughout all of our discussions on the various topics was the thought that we ought to look at and strengthen our relationships with conservation districts, their associations and state leadership, and with other organizations that are involved in the conservation business.

So SCS, reflecting the whole national emphasis, is moving toward better and more comprehensive planning, closer involvement in controlling pollution from all sources including agriculture, and a re-examination of the institutional arrangements and working relationships that now exist.

We hope this means an even closer working relationship with you in the years ahead. Districts and SCS haven't always seen eye to eye, but we seem to be able to iron out the differences, help each other play a stronger role, and move out together on our mutual challenges.

This is a kind of relationship worth keeping. We welcome your suggestions on how the SCS can better aid conservation districts in Tennessee.

In October, we did hear from Dr. David Hamilton of Tennessee A&I University in his role as member of the Public Advisory Committee on Soil and Water Conservation. We appreciated the contributions made by Dean Hamilton in the discussions. He and the other members reiterated their call of a year ago for USDA to take a more aggressive role in restoring the quality of the environment, which they said continues to deteriorate. They said resource conservation should have greater priority in America's attention and expenditures, and they recognized that major programs in land-use planning, flood prevention, and resource conservation and development are helping solve many national problems, social and economic as well as physical problems. They said the programs that USDA, SCS, and districts are involved in benefit a wide sector of the population.

And they said we need to do more to meet the needs and the opportunities of rural America.

This last point is receiving a major new push right now. As many of you know, Secretary of Agriculture Clifford Hardin is a member of the President's newly formed Council on Rural Affairs. In a speech about the Council's organization, Secretary Hardin said: "The Nation must progress rapidly with rural development, both for the welfare of rural America and also to save our big cities from even worse population and environmental problems than now exist. It is not enough simply to think of improving conditions for the people in rural America and thereby stemming the migration to the cities. We must do much more. We must make it a matter of urgent national policy to create in and around the smaller cities and towns sufficiently good employment opportunities and living environments that large numbers of families will choose to rear their children there."

There has been some stemming of the migration to big cities. But there are still too many small towns like Cottonwood, Kansas, with almost twice as many residents aged 65 or over as aged 25 to 40.

There are still too many farmers who cannot make enough income off the land, or get enough community services for a decent life. And today's successful farmer may find himself living in an unsuccessful community. As someone has said, "Big farming is exciting, but you get kind of lonely when there are so few people to talk to in town on Saturday night."

To stay alive and healthy, rural communities today must have the institutions and services that will make young families want to live there. This begins with good jobs and goes on to good schools, medical facilities, and shopping and cultural activities that are convenient.

To stay alive and healthy, rural communities must become all-purpose communities that no longer depend on agriculture alone. It takes a new degree of understanding and cooperation to welcome nonfarm people to the countryside, to recognize the importance of job-providing industry, and to help neighborhoods and smaller communities to find their place in the larger economic and cultural life which grows best in a cluster of communities that provide all the services that a family needs.

I think the subject of rural development and rural living is an exciting one in Tennessee, with tremendous opportunities for the future. And conservation districts should be in the center of the action--not as a separate offshoot of your interests, but as one stitch in a tightly knit program that covers all the bases--one part of a broad role in environmental improvement.

As I said in the beginning, changes are inevitable in Tennessee, in both rural and urban areas. The question is, on whose terms and under what criteria will the changes be made? I think you in conservation districts are in an excellent position to see that many of the changes are made on your terms. I think your knowledge of the use and availability of resource information and your proven ability and local leadership make you extremely valuable in helping shape the kinds of communities that Tennesseans want and need for a good life.

I think you need to continue to review your own district programs to see that they fit this broad role that you should assume in Tennessee's future. You should be geared up to serve all of the people in Tennessee, and you should seek some kind of participation by all kinds of people in Tennessee.

Proper community development will require the meshing of many different voices and viewpoints into a workable, rational plan for community growth. We need land for farms and for outdoor recreation and wildlife. We need land for homes and airports and roads. We need water for farming and industry and home consumption and many other uses. Some of these purposes will conflict, and it is a question of multiple use, or sequential use, or value judgments among conflicting uses.

Who straightens out these viewpoints and blends the interests? Who speaks up for good land and water use and proper treatment no matter what the choices are? Conservation districts have a prestigious background upon which to build.

You have experience, and you have a reputation as local officials of character and competence. Who is better suited than you to take a guiding role in harnessing change in Tennessee, in planning and supporting good policy decisions on land and water use?

I hope you'll take up this challenge in its broadest sense. I hope many of you will go beyond arranging for technical resource information to become a part of the planning and decision-making process in your communities. And I hope that you and other local leaders will actively solicit the views of the entire community--farmers and businessmen, women and young people. Many women's groups--the League of Women Voters, for example--are very effective in conservation projects. As for young people, we know how effective they can be in making changes. And they are interested in their environment, because it will be their world a longer time than it will be mine--perhaps yours.

Conservation districts should have a lot to do with the way in which Tennessee communities develop. You will have many knotty decisions to make. You will need to take a stand often on what you believe. You will have to look at business, educational, health, social, and other opportunities as well as natural resources. But I think you will find the 1970's a decade of stimulating and satisfying work, and a decade of real accomplishment. The next generation may be thankful for its environmental heritage.

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