

CONSERVATION--CHALLENGE AND CHANGE--
THREE DECADES OF EXPERIENCE

The dramatic story of the effort to make feasible the control of soil erosion and the conservation, development, and utilization of the soil and water resources in a Nation that spans a continent is a story that belongs to no one man. It is a story of conservation progress by millions of individual land holders who are proudly wedded to free individual enterprise. It is a story of progress based on a Nation's history of severe resource destruction and its consequences. The true story can only be told by many and it relates the birth and steady growth of an unusually promising new unit of local government that is privileged to play an exceptional and intimate three-way governmental partnership. It is told against a backdrop of the fact that in spite of progress the new growth is not yet firmly established, even after nearly three decades. For today Districts must now either accept still broader functions or shrivel to smaller stature. And this is not a unique challenge in today's world.

Three decades ago it was apparent that really effective conservation work was done better and lasted longer when the landowners and operators played a large and active role in the job. Out of a variety of experience the Soil and Water Conservation District idea was born. The first District in the Nation was formed in North Carolina on August 4, 1937. This was in tribute to Hugh H. Bennett, first Chief of the U. S. Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service, whose home farm was in

Talk by Norman A. Berg, Assistant to the Administrator, Soil Conservation Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C., April 27, 1965, at the meeting of the Mid-Atlantic States' Soil and Water Commissions, Boards, and Committees, College Park, Maryland

The State governments contribute the administrative functions exercised by the State Boards, Committees or Commissions in establishing and chartering Districts, determining and revising boundaries, stimulating cooperation between the Soil Conservation Districts, plus, in most States, some funds (intended primarily for District administrative purposes), plus the required authority for local governmental units to exercise the police power by enforcing compulsory conservation ordinances in appropriate cases. (This last is a legislative power that can only be authorized by the States; Congress cannot by Constitutional limits.)

Finally, the Federal government (in this three-legged stool arrangement) contributes a set of national policies and the great bulk of the funds (primarily in the form of free--to date--technical services and cost-shares or grants, plus constant stimulus, encouragement, and information.

May I ask a question? If the founders of Soil Conservation Districts should have thought they should be able in an absolute sense to be entirely independent of the State and Federal governments would they have denied them the power to raise independent revenues by local taxation?

The Standard Act--we are continually reminded by that able and articulate NACD counselor, Phil Glick, gave no District the power of the purse. Absolute or any other kind of realistic independence cannot be achieved without the power of the purse.

The answer is that Districts were not given, either in the Standard

6. They develop a wider usefulness for all of America's natural resources.
7. They create a strong market for the products of industry.
8. They develop new and improved water supplies for industry, agriculture, recreation, and municipalities.
9. They add to the fish, game, and wildlife population.
10. They promote privately-owned recreational space and facilities.
11. They provide an organized channel for the practical application of research and science to current resource problems.
12. They encourage the improved management and marketing of farm-produced timber and wood products.
13. They contribute substantially to the beauty of the countryside.

And all these have operated to promote the acceptance of local responsibility by landowners and other citizens in resource development, without regulation or compulsion.

However, it is now being said by some that we can shoot the moon, desalt the sea, and while reaching these goals, can put soil and water conservation on the shelf until another day.

Nevertheless, all signs are that America is in a race against time to bring about:

1. Elimination of waste in resource use.
2. Needed adjustments in land and water use.
3. Development of resources to provide
 - new water supplies
 - recreational areas
 - more intensive agriculture
 - improved water quality
 - wildlife management.

You must grow in the esteem and confidence of urban America.

You must do all these things if you are to grow into your great potential role as the local governmental unit best equipped and organized to coordinate the conservation programs of all levels of government and insure that they best meet the needs of the community.

But you must grow to do this. The alternative is to shrivel and disappear.

LOOK SQUARELY AT CHALLENGES

There are challenges ahead that exceed anything of the past. Let's look at them squarely.

They are not challenges merely of physical conservation problems such as erosion and sedimentation, critical as those problems still are.

There is the challenge of determining whether the dog wags the tail or the tail wags the dog!

There are challenges of sustaining the long-standing basic working arrangements between government and districts.

There are challenges of unmasking the glitter and glamor of new words and proposed short cuts to conservation accomplishment.

Let me relate finally a growing challenge to overcome:

THE NEW "FARM PROBLEM"

A new public attitude is now fostered in opposition to public programs directed toward maintaining and improving the productivity and efficiency of agriculture.

Basically this attitude grows out of the comfort, complacency, and assurance of abundance of high quality food at bargain rates for a population that is now 93 percent non-farm.

There seems to be no apprehension that land and water resources may

FORESEEABLE DEMANDS ON PRIVATE LAND

Let us take a look at the demands that are going to be placed on productive farmlands.

It is estimated by the Department of Agriculture that by 1980 we may need 50 percent more agricultural production to feed the increased population as well as we are now eating. This would require production equal to about 230 million acres of cropland at present yields.

By the end of the century, our population may have doubled. We will then need twice as much agricultural production. This would require about 500 million acres more cropland, assuming no increase in crop yields.

But we do not have 500 million more acres of suitable cropland from which to feed twice as many people. We will have to meet that demand from land and water already in agricultural use.

Only through land use planning and skillful use of technologies far in advance of those now in use will it be possible to meet these increased demands.

In a report issued by the Department of Agriculture, May 1962, entitled "Land and Water Resources--A Policy Guide"--an estimate was made of cropland requirements between 1959 and 1980 based on an assumption that crop yields will continue to increase at a rate of 2½ percent a year. In 1959, we were using 453 million acres of cropland. By 1980, it is estimated that we will need only 407 million or 51 million fewer crop acres, if crop yields continue to increase at a rate equal to the rate of increase during the last decade.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS FOR CONSERVATION,
LAND USE ADJUSTMENT, AND RECREATION

In any listing of public programs for conservation, land use adjustment, and recreation, it is important to distinguish between those specifically for lands in public ownership and those to assist or influence the use of lands in private ownership.

Nearly three-fourths of the land surface, and an even greater proportion of natural resources, are in private ownership. Decisions about the use and management of most of the Nation's landscape are made by millions of landowners and operators--not by public agencies.

This means that the public can express its interest in how the land is used only as it finds ways to cooperate with these millions of owners. Fortunately, much experience has already been gained about ways to do this.

Yes, there are challenges of who does what in the days and years ahead.

But perhaps the greatest challenge is that of avoiding lethargy, self-satisfaction and apathy.

Some people even take for granted that the familiar basic approach to conservation accomplishments on the individual acres, farms and watersheds in your districts will go on and on without question.

I'm referring to the technical services now available to help landowners and operators plan and install conservation programs and practices.

I refer to the trained conservationists, engineers, and aides who serve more than a million properties a year, under Districts' direction.

It has been in this kind of approach that the sound concepts and the

exemplified by the late John F. Kennedy may yet prove to have been his greatest bequest to the American people. We all brag too much. We are all guilty of Madisonavenuizing our conservation efforts. Without necessarily meaning to, we not infrequently give the impression of having achieved total success when our efforts, in reality, are only well started."

"Keeping the Kennedy gift for understatement in mind, it would seem this nation is now mature enough to face reality without everlastingly gilding the lily. We have not licked our forestry problems. We have not licked our wildlife problems. In all probability we will never completely lick them and we would be well advised to say so more frequently. Too much "success" must never be permitted to dull the cutting edge of gradual and never-ending conservation advance nor should people and particularly government officials be lulled by success stories that should more appropriately be labeled 'limited advance' at best."

"Let conservationists always remember that the real glory of the conservation effort in America is not the unusual men who lead its programs or the banner headlines in the press but the application of conservation measures to the land by thousands of unsung professionals and technicians. Let us always look to the land itself for the story of our modest successes and bitter failures. There we will find the stark truth, the real chronical of conservation."