

CONSERVATION CHANGE AND CHALLENGE

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Talk by Norman A. Berg, Deputy Administrator for Field Services, Soil Conservation Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture, at the State Work Unit Conservationists' Conference, Boise, Idaho, July 25, 1966

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I welcome this opportunity to join you. I am deeply concerned about your problems. I want to be closely associated with your progress and the dreams for the future of the fifty-four Soil Conservation Districts in Idaho and the 3,000 in our land.

Words are the legitimate weapons of civilized man facing the issues of his time. Your podium, as I see it, provides for a timely discussion of vital issues.

This is the time to speak for the unity of the countryside in all its values and uses. It is the time to advocate the protection and development of our resources as a whole, in accordance with their capabilities and the goals of the community. It is a time to speak for action that will meet the oncoming demands of a growing Nation. It is a time to forestall premature and disorderly commitments of resource use.

We find ourselves in an age demanding instant satisfaction of ill-considered demands--often hypocritically made in the name of progress and society. Therefore, I believe it is a time to come forward, to be heard. It is a time to assist conservation district governing boards to assume fully their responsibilities of leadership in soil, in water, and in related conservation work.

We live in a new kind of world. It is today, and is rapidly becoming a world of urban centers, of technological monsters, of political suspense, of population pressure, of competition for space and in space. It is a world in which knowledge, research, and science have come into their own. Nine out of ten of the men who might ever have identified themselves as scientists. are alive and practicing today.

We have, in this century, made London closer than New Orleans was in the last one. We have brought the farthest man in the world within the range of a whispered word. We are almost at a point where we can read into a man's mind and extract that which he would never express voluntarily. We have brought the highest leaders of distant nations into daily and momentary confrontation. We have made the genes of the world's finest livestock available in the lowliest stables in the farthest corners of the land. Three out of five of the men in the world today are living in the first generation of any genuine quality of political independence.

about their resource problems and to help make the decisions needed to solve them. Districts have by their actions exemplified the principles of democracy and Federal-State-local cooperation. They have achieved great things in the American tradition. They have proven again that democratic government controlled by the people themselves liberates the powers of the people into creative growth and plenty. But success and fame are fleeting. What would have been sufficient for yesterday is apt to be too little and too late for tomorrow.

The trends for conservationists are fairly easy to discern. Our Nation is facing the prospect of unlimited demands on its limited resources. All the evidence of our times supports a forecast of ever increasing needs for intensive management of its limited resources--including their planning, development, use and conservation.

There can be no turning back--change and its effects press heavily upon us. New problems roll over the horizon in increasingly complex numbers. Districts see the need for better and more representative governing boards. Planning for "conservation" by farms, ranches, and communities must be accelerated--putting the plans into operation must be speeded up. A proper role must be carved out for conservation districts in watershed and river basin work in rural and non-rural areas, in community development, in recreation areas, in cropland conservation, in Appalachia, and in land use adjustment.

The expansion of urban and suburban areas, now tending toward great metropolitan regions, is another dramatic instance of change with real meaning for conservationists. Partly it is a matter of intelligent, planned transfer of land from agriculture, grazing, forestry, and other uses into living space.

On many of these matters I feel that we and our allies in conservation may no longer have a black-and-white kind of decision. The kind of complexity that we're going to face in the future suggests no more black than white, nor vice versa. We're going to have to begin choosing from several colors of gray.

How do we as a Nation go about making such decisions?

What we do too often is make the decisions by answering much less demanding questions. Already, we're making many of these decisions by default. My wife and I were allowed to purchase a plot of ground with a house on it a few years ago. The only question asked was, "Do you have the money?" At that moment, a decision was made about population level, because as long as my house and trees are on that plot, it cannot be used for producing food. The same is true every time a super-highway is built; a decision is made about future population level. At the moment, somewhere between three and five percent of the arable land in this country is covered by asphalt and concrete. That's an area the size of Georgia. And so decisions are being made, but they're being made by default.

It would be foolish indeed to believe that the problems of conservation districts are exactly the same today as they were in 1937--or that the solutions

Is this the basic economic and social trend reflected in the replacement of smaller farms with larger ones and small industries with industrial giants? Is it the trend which has sent more and more power to central government?

These are the challenges that conservation poses in our age as we confront the new America. The question that concerns us today is the role of conservation districts in this more complicated resource picture. What would districts attempt to contribute, what responsibilities would district boards seek to fulfill? How can districts strengthen their capacity to meet the challenge of the times?

The history of districts has been one of steady and progressive evolution. As new problems have appeared, districts have moved to help solve these problems. At first they worked mostly with individual farmers. Next came work with groups of farmers. Later, programs expanded to include whole communities--in watershed projects, resource conservation and development projects, and planning and zoning programs.

In other words, as the times have changed, districts have changed.

Now, the question becomes one of the next step. Are districts ready to move ahead? Are they ready to make further adjustments in their programs and legislative authorities to enable them to do an even better job?

The NACD believes that this is a question which must be faced by every district in the Nation. To help explore its ramification, Past President Marion Monk appointed a Special Committee on District Outlook two years ago to look beyond the events and programs now current to the probable needs and developments of the years ahead, not only in terms of the resources involved, but in terms of districts as serviceable units of government; also, to anticipate future needs, identify potential problems associated with meeting the needs, and chart a course most likely to bring about the desired results.

John Wilder, of Somerville, Tennessee, who was NACD Treasurer at that time, and is now National Vice President of NACD, is the Chairman of that Committee. It included supervisors, representatives of State Soil and Water Conservation Committees, and others closely associated with the district program. The Committee worked hard and long, and its report to the NACD Board of Directors and Council at their meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana, was fully adopted.

The Committee had discovered that many districts across the country had already geared up to make a useful contribution to the solution of modern resource problems. By analyzing the experience of these districts, as well as examining the problems faced by other districts, the Committee studied a number of questions that appeared significant in the development of broader and more effective district programs. Let me list these briefly:

1. Do districts effectively use all the technical, financial, and educational help now available to them from Federal, State, and local agencies? Have all districts developed this kind of co-operation at the local level in order better to coordinate natural resources work within their justifications?

2. In Massachusetts and the Virgin Islands, district responsibilities have been redefined by legislation in broad terms.
3. In Pennsylvania and New York a new law makes it possible for districts to have some non-agricultural supervisors, rather than solely farmers.
4. In Montgomery County, Maryland, the district has helped to establish a sediment control program whereby builders and developers will be required to install erosion control devices in accordance with an approved conservation plan.
5. In one district in Arkansas, the supervisors have hired a full-time executive secretary to provide administrative assistance. State associations, also, are beginning to employ staff help because their programs are growing so rapidly. North Dakota, Colorado, Texas, and California have already taken this step.
6. In Massachusetts, the State Soil and Water Conservation Committee approved hiring an information specialist by conservation districts.
7. The Idaho-Washington RC&D Project, one of ten pilot projects throughout the nation, was approved for operation in February 1965. One of the principal hopes of the four soil and water conservation districts sponsoring the project was that means could be found to better control serious soil erosion on the non-irrigated croplands of the project. Appreciable progress has been made toward this objective.

Sparked by the RC&D sponsors, a broad movement is underway to organize a Columbia Plateau Resources Council from Idaho, Washington, and Oregon agencies, organizations and groups concerned with clear, clean water and proper land use. The formal organization meeting was held February 1966 at Spokane, Washington. It is the hope of the planning committee for this group that a potent force for coordinating action, informing the public and encouraging legislation to solve the land and water resource problem results from this effort.

In a host of other places districts are working with planning and zoning organizations to provide information on resource potentials, are working with highway departments to minimize land damage and erosion hazards during construction and maintenance, are developing and operating recreation facilities where needed, are rejoining with other districts in multiple-county economic development programs, and are contributing to conservation and resource development in many other ways.

Regardless of how we answer the questions previously raised, the needs are more than evident. There is need, for example, to re-identify the resource assets of each community, county, and conservation district to project the

The term "soil conservation" has come to signify those combinations of skills and practices needed to develop and sustain the productivity of each kind of soil for whatever purpose it is used--whether that use is for crops, for forest, for recreation, or for housing.

Soil conservation means choosing the appropriate use for each piece of land as well as protecting and improving the land after the use has been chosen.

Soil conservation means the careful planning and treatment of entire operating units be they farms or ranches or entire watersheds.

Soil conservation means working out land use and treatment in full recognition of the essential relationships between soil, water, plants, animals, and--yes--man himself.

The greatest danger, as conservation technology advances, is that we may fail to involve the human element. Conservation must be people-centered. It must not only be carried out for people, it must be carried out by people.

To be fully effective, conservation decisions must always be made by the people who will be responsible for carrying them out. Conservation will never be accomplished by edict. Government can and must be an active partner, but should do for people only what they cannot do for themselves.

Conservation will move forward if it is viewed and accepted by land owners and operators as a means of making more efficient use of their soils, and better management of water with higher yields per acre or hectare, with lower costs per kilo or ton, with better net income for the farmer or rancher.

It will go forward if city people are made partners, if they are helped to see their stake in soil and water resources, and if they are invited to work with rural people in soil and water conservation endeavors.

Rural and urban people both benefit from accelerated soil and water conservation programs. With better income, farmers can not only afford better education and medical care, but also can purchase more of the products and services offered by urban people. Urban water supplies are improved, flood threats diminished, and the entire community, and thus the Nation, benefits and prospers.

In Chicago a year ago, Secretary Freeman said,

"No longer can there be separate compartments in the conservation world--no compartment for soil conservation apart from beauty preservation, no longer a wall between wildlife protection and agricultural conservation, no longer a forestry objective separate from the interests of the grasslands, no longer a policy question as to multiple use of water resources and, finally, no more a disunity between city and open country. . .

We know men are more likely to fight with each other for noble than for base motives. The most powerful personal motive is not gratification of the senses, or the acquisition of mere wealth or power, but the conviction that one's skills and knowledge have a special contribution to make to the salvation of humanity. We hope you are interested in engaging in this kind of earnest search and encounter with like-minded, similarly concerned men and women. The stakes are too high--as a community of free men--to turn our collective backs to a promising future.

One of the late Adlai Stevenson's remarks seems particularly appropriate as a summary. He said, "We travel together, passengers on a little space ship, dependent on its vulnerable reserves of air and soil; all committed for our safety to its security and peace; preserved from annihilation only by the care, the work, and, I will say, the love we give our fragile craft."

Thus far the view points of the optimists have prevailed--everywhere I go I see no signs to the contrary among conservationists. It will simply take the same sort of deep commitment and dedication and hard work that I know you can--and will--do. Good luck!