

CONSERVATION ISSUES AND THE SCS PROGRAM

- I. If accomplishments of the past fiscal year provide any indication, the outlook for SCS is very promising. Our people responded quickly and sensibly to energy, drought, water quality, and many other resource-related needs. SCS had more Superior Service Award winners than in any other year in recent history. I am convinced that, with these great human resources, we can accomplish anything we set out to do.

- II. Several pieces of important legislation affecting our programs have been enacted or are pending.
 - A. The farm bill became effective on October 1. Among other things, it increases administrative approval on watershed projects and RC&D loans, extends the Agricultural Conservation Program, adds aquaculture to USDA functions, and provides for a set-aside plan with emphasis on the Great Plains.
 - B. Section 26 of a Senate bill, called the "Culver amendment," would provide \$200 million in FY 1979 and \$400 million in FY 1980 to the Secretary of Agriculture for a cost-sharing program to improve water quality in rural America through Section 208.

Material for talk by Norman A. Berg, Associate Administrator, USDA Soil Conservation Service, at the SCS New York AC/State Staff Conference, Long Island, New York, October 17, 1977.

The program would be administered by the Soil Conservation Service. The bill has been passed by the Senate.

- C. S. 106 and H.R. 75, the Land and Water Resources Conservation Act of 1977, have been passed by both Houses and await conference action. Under this legislation, SCS would continuously appraise the Nation's soil, water, and related resources...suggest and update programs to enhance those resources...and report to the Congress on effectiveness of those programs.
- D. The Senate has passed legislation to establish an emergency program within USDA to deal with natural disasters. This program would be similar to our "Section 216" work under the Flood Control Act of 1950.
- E. The Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977 recently became law. It deals specifically with coal mines, but SCS also is concerned about other large acreages that have been or will be mined, such as the sand and gravel areas in New York.

III. We are making significant progress in several current efforts designed to help local decisionmakers.

- A. Soil surveys. Soil survey manuscripts are getting processed faster. In FY 1977, we sent 150 manuscripts to the GPO for printing--a 50 percent gain over FY 1976. We also have reduced the time consumed in editing, printing, and publishing a manuscript from more than three years to about one year.

B. Resource inventories.

- (1) Our important farmland inventory is identifying the extent and location of prime, unique, and other rural lands needed to produce food and fiber. Responsibility for conducting the inventory and preparing important farmland maps has been assigned to state conservationists. A New York State map will be available soon, as will maps for Ontario, Yates, and Suffolk counties.
- (2) Our sheet, rill, and wind erosion inventory is developing data that will provide statewide estimates of conservation needs, land use and cover, prime farmland, and potential cropland. Information will be available to the states by June 1978. The Forest Service is assisting in field evaluations.
- (3) A more comprehensive assessment called for in the Rural Development Act of 1972 is also underway. An inventory of gully, streambank, and roadside erosion will follow next year.

IV. High priority jobs.

- A. More land treatment in critically eroding areas is an urgent conservation need. The national erosion and sediment inventory should help you do this with more precision in New York. Make these needs your prime targets for action.
- B. Protecting the nation's prime farmlands and prime timberlands from conversion to other uses is another high priority item.

We are deeply committed to these objectives.

C. Watershed review.

- (1) As you know, we recently completed a review of 749 small watershed projects, using new criteria for economic efficiency, environmental impact, and safety. The report is still awaiting final review and action within the Administration.
- (2) The review indicated ways to make policies and programs more responsive to today's needs. One clear signal is a need to emphasize nonstructural solutions to watershed problems. In August, Assistant Secretary Cutler told the Soil Conservation Society of America that "We look to land treatment, flood plain management, and storm water management as ways of providing needed flood protection and watershed stability."

D. Section 208.

- (1) The Department is working with the EPA to develop a "208" Management Implementation Plan. This Plan will begin with a pilot program to investigate ways to bring existing programs and expertise to bear on rural water quality problems. This could turn out to be a forerunner of the cost-sharing program proposed by the Culver amendment, recently passed by the Senate.

- (2) Thirty-nine SCS employees have been assigned to designated agencies in 23 states to work on nonpoint pollution control. Seven SCS people have been detailed to EPA regional offices to assist with "208" activities.
- (3) Districts are slated to become "208" management agencies in five states. In addition, districts working on "208" problems are getting more responsibilities, securing more funds from nonfederal sources, and hiring more people. It is essential that we maintain good, open communication with district leaders.

E. Wetlands.

- (1) Executive Order 11990 on protection of wetlands forbids Federal support to construction in wetlands whenever there is a practical alternative. We are committed to observing both the letter and the spirit of this Order. Wetland acreage in the U.S. has shrunk from 120 million acres in 1850 to 70 million today. It is still shrinking-- at a rate of about 300,000 acres each year.
- (2) Assistant Secretary Cutler has established a wetlands task force within the Department's land-use committee. Its job is to recommend new directions and activities for the Department. We are seeking the ideas of other federal agencies, and conservation, environmental, and agricultural organizations.

We want to open up USDA's policy-making process and get more public input in the development stages.

F. Flood Plain Management.

- (1) Under Executive Order 11988, agencies cannot conduct, support, or allow development action in flood plains unless it is the only practical alternative.
- (2) For SCS, this means that we will consider more nonstructural measures in small watershed projects and will put more emphasis on land treatment. Rather than require 50 percent of the land above proposed watershed structures to be under cooperative agreement before construction begins, we will work to have at least half the treatment in place before construction.

V. Future outlook and needs.

A. Reorganization of the Federal Government.

- (1) USDA officials have been studying proposals for a comprehensive review of all the federal functions on natural resources, energy, and the environment. It is too early to tell what recommendations will go to the President. There is strong evidence, though, that the Administration will regard resource conservation as an important national goal.
- (2) In the Washington Metropolitan Area, panel discussions have been held on the personnel management aspects of President Carter's Reorganization Project.

All employees were invited to attend and participate.

- (3) The recently announced reorganization of some agencies within USDA will have no direct impact on SCS.

B. SCS needs.

- (1) We must all participate in the effort to reduce paperwork. Much of it is necessary. But we do have some duplication, we do have some forms still in use after their original purpose has been forgotten. The Washington staff is stepping up its effort to cut back on advisory notices, to reduce your reading load in the field. (Plausible pause for applause)

- (2) Another effort that needs more attention is that of motivating SCS people to find ways to do their jobs better. Last year, our nearly 14,000 permanent full-time employees made fewer than 1,000 suggestions for work improvement. Only 1 in 4 of these suggestions was adopted.

C. Budget and personnel.

- (1) Fiscal 1977 was highly successful in the use of financial assistance funds for the RC&D and P.L. 566 programs.
- (2) Appropriations for fiscal year 1978 provide increases only for current services costs, agricultural service centers, GSA space, and the October 1976 pay raise.

- (3) We must continue to take advantage of private, local, and state inputs to soil and water conservation programs.
- (4) The ceiling for permanent fulltime employees is 13,955 for both the 1977 and 1978 fiscal years.

VI. What SCS is able to accomplish during the coming year hinges largely upon the quality of our technical assistance. This, in turn, depends on the degree of talent, initiative, and dedication that you bring to bear on resource conservation. It is a goal worthy of the best you have to give.

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