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# **Interviews with Chiefs of the Soil Conservation Service: Williams, Grant, Davis, and Berg**

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Edited by Steven E. Phillips and Douglas Helms

Cover contains photos of the four SCS chiefs interviewed in this volume:

Top left: Donald Williams

Top right: Kenneth Grant

Bottom left: Mel Davis

Bottom right: Norm Berg

Cover designed by Jimmy Todd, SCS

Photos: courtesy of the SCS Office of Public Affairs

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**Interviews with Chiefs of the  
Soil Conservation Service:  
Williams, Grant, Davis, and Berg**

**Edited by Steven E. Phillips and Douglas Helms**

**Economics and Social Sciences Division  
Soil Conservation Service  
United States Department of Agriculture  
Washington, D.C. 20013**

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## Introduction

Here, with varying degrees of candor, is the story of the Soil Conservation Service, told by four men who ran the agency from the Eisenhower to the Reagan administrations, a period of about thirty years. First came the late Donald A. Williams, who had the formidable task of managing the long-term development of the Service after the tenure of its crusading founder, Hugh Hammond Bennett. Next Kenneth E. Grant led the agency as environmental concerns grew and urban or suburban citizens demanded more assistance. Under Mel Davis, the Service attempted to cope with the expansion of land in production agriculture (largely a consequence of large grain sales to the Soviet Union) even as budgetary pressures increased. Finally, Norman A. Berg steered the agency during a time of renewed interest in environmental concerns. He was also the last "career chief," that is, he worked his way up the ranks of the Service to the top position. (Note: the title for the top position in the Service has switched between "chief" and "administrator.")

We edited these interviews with a light hand so as to give the reader a feel for the conversational style of each man. We endeavored to transmit not only what they said but also how they said it.

Several themes tie their tenures together. From its initial emphasis on soil conservation on agricultural land, the Service has steadily expanded into areas like flood prevention and rural economic development. Each chief sought to accomplish these new tasks while maintaining the agency's traditional role of service to farmers. Perhaps the most contentious issue was, and is, the perceived conflict between economic development and environmental protection. This is clear in disputes over the use of structural measures for flood control, channelization, and agricultural chemicals. Other common issues include the organization of the Service and relations with Congress and the White House.

Readers seeking to learn more about specific issues or programs discussed in these interviews are advised to turn to *Readings in the History of the Soil Conservation Service* (Historical Notes Number 1, 1992) by National Historian Douglas Helms.

We would like to thank Messrs. Williams, Grant, Davis, and Berg. Each graciously gave of their time, both for the interviews and to review the transcripts. Barbara Cook and Sheree Gross of the Economics and Social Sciences Division (ECN) cheerfully helped with the tedious task of transcribing the interview tapes. Nancy Mathews and Anne Henderson of Strategic Planning Division, as well as Jennifer Harr and Leigh Ann Mays of ECN made valuable suggestions for improving the readability of the text. Finally, we greatly appreciate the efforts of Claudette Hayes of the Service's Publication and Printing Branch, who has managed the printing of this and earlier volumes in the Historical Notes series.

Steven Phillips  
Historian

Douglas Helms  
National Historian

## Kenneth E. Grant

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## **Biographical Sketch**

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Kenneth E. Grant was born in New Hampshire in March of 1920. After receiving a B.S. in agronomy from the University of New Hampshire and serving for four years with the United States Army Air Corps, he joined SCS in 1946.

He advanced rapidly from soil scientist to deputy state conservationist by 1956. From 1959 to 1964 Grant was state conservationist for New Hampshire. In 1964, after obtaining a Masters in Public Administration from Harvard University, he moved to the state conservationist position in Indiana. It was there in the Lincoln Hills area that he helped initiate the first Resource Conservation and Development project in the nation. In 1967 he was selected to become associate administrator. Following the retirement of Donald Williams, Grant served as administrator from January of 1969 to May of 1975. During his tenure, SCS faced a tremendous challenge as the amount of land under cultivation grew rapidly due to increased grain exports.

Grant served as USDA representative for a variety of important projects, including the Connecticut River Basin survey and the Ohio and Wabash River Basin studies. In the late 1960s, he represented USDA in a major project with the Office of

Science and Technology that led to the *Report to the President on Control of Agriculture-Related Pollution*. He also carried out two assignments as advisor on erosion control in Pakistan and one assignment on soil and water management in India.

In 1971, the University of New Hampshire awarded him the honorary degree of Doctor of Science. He has received the Distinguished Service Award from USDA, which recognized his contributions in many areas including his response to growing public concern over the environment. Grant is a fellow of the Soil Conservation Society of America.

Grant served as a volunteer to the International Executive Service Corps (IESC). He went to Greece as an advisor to the Ministry of Agriculture on soil and water conservation. He also assisted in recent activities of the IESC.





**July 29, 1988**

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**HELMS:** This is July 29, 1988, and we're in Durham, New Hampshire. To start off, Mr. Grant, could you tell me where you were born and something about your early education?

**GRANT:** Doug, I was born not too far from here in Rollinsford, New Hampshire, which is on the Maine-New Hampshire border, in 1920. I moved around quite a lot during my early years but basically lived in the New England area, primarily in the state of New Hampshire. I went to high school in Dover, New Hampshire, and graduated in 1941 from the University of New Hampshire. In education beyond that, I became a graduate student in the Agronomy Department, but World War II came along and interrupted that for four years.

**HELMS:** Do you recall anything from your college years about the soil conservation movement? Were there things you observed in the countryside?

**GRANT:** I have observed in this state in particular a very, very pronounced transformation of the landscape. New Hampshire way back in the 1850s was a highly agricultural state. And practically every county in the state, of which there are ten, was cleared except in the very northern part of the state. The peak of agriculture was around 1850. From

that point on people went west, and agriculture went through a decline. Many counties that were at one time 75 percent cleared are now back to 80 to 85 percent woods. So I've seen some of this transition from the 1920s on. For example, I'd walked four miles from my home to Dover, where I went to high school and I was among dairy farms all the way. Today you could walk that same area and there's about two operating farms. There's been a great change in the agricultural picture. I worked on farms all through my early days. Today of course little of that exists. I'm aware of and can remember the discussions on radio and in newspapers of the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. That was a long way off but nevertheless we were aware of what was going on.

This state has never suffered from a real severe problem of erosion that you had in much of the country because the agriculture was not that intensive and the type of land use was such that most of the land was kept in pasture. People don't realize how much agriculture there was in the state at one time. I've read some of the old histories, where they had cattle drives, and sheep from the central part of this state moved all the way down to the Brighton stock markets near Boston. The background of many of the people that I knew when I went to college was agricultural. Today that has changed.

**HELMS:** Was there anything in your college curriculum about soil conservation? Had it made an impact?

**GRANT:** Oh yes. I studied primarily agronomy and agricultural economics. The problems associated with soil erosion were in the text and obviously I was aware of that, not on a firsthand basis but simply from classroom discussion. I was fortunate too in that some of the staff had had some experience in Washington in USDA. I also worked in the soils lab and spent one summer on the mobile soil survey. At that time I had decided to work in the soils field.

**HELMS:** You were in the military. Then how did you end up coming to work for the Soil Conservation Service?

**GRANT:** When I came back from the service, I went back to the University as a graduate assistant for a short time. The Soil Conservation Service was really just getting started in the state of New Hampshire. The district law had been passed and Al Collins was the one employee here in the state that represented the Service. I got to know him and so I applied for a job. In fact, I had been on the rolls before I went into the military as a soil scientist. And so I accepted a soil scientist position in Keene, New Hampshire, in March of 1946.

I only stayed a soil scientist for a relatively short period of time because I found out that my real interest was

more in terms of working with farmers on their land than it was in mapping. And so after about six or eight months, I switched over to soil conservationist and became the work unit conservationist in Keene. I stayed there for, I suppose, about two years, when Al Collins asked me if I would move up to Grafton County, which was a much larger county and larger workload. And I did. I stayed there for another year or so. At that time, there were three district conservationists in New Hampshire who had three or four counties under them, and I became a district conservationist for the three northern counties in the state.

**HELMS:** In those capacities, were you working mainly with the farmers? What were the main programs to be pushed and the objectives to be accomplished?

**GRANT:** Most of the land, particularly in Cheshire County and Grafton County, and in the northern part of the state that was being actively farmed was in dairy farms. Now, there were some potato farms. At that time, Coos County, the northernmost county, actually was called Little Aroostook. Aroostook County was a very large potato area in Maine. On some of those farms we had a fairly intensive erosion control program in which we were involved in diversions and terraces and so on. But that type of agriculture didn't really persist very long and so basically we were working with dairy farms. There

were exceptions. There has always been in some of the counties considerable acreage in apples. There was also a fair number of truck farms. But in terms of total acreage, it was basically the problems associated with those of the dairy farms, which was grassland management and water control. Practically every farm had a woodlot that we were involved with.

I'd say one of the most serious erosion control problems, and one of the ones we had great difficulty in really coping with, was streambank erosion. The Connecticut River Valley is a very productive agricultural area. I've studied some of the old maps and histories of these towns along the Connecticut River. They had large contiguous fields of several hundred acres, which, at the time I was working with the Service in the late 1940s, were pretty badly cut up by gullies. Except for fencing and trying to get some vegetation established, the individual farmer didn't have the resources to control gullies the size that you had on the Connecticut River. Basically what we were trying to do was to exclude cattle from those areas and get some sort of vegetation back on them. Very little actual structural work was done because the gullies were just too large. We did some streambank work in other sections of the state with some degree of success. But these were minor parts of the program in terms of actual time input. Basically we were developing complete farm plans based on the farmers' needs, and promoting sound land use.

**HELMS:** You didn't have lots of money to spend on that sort of thing either, is that correct?

**GRANT:** The staff consisted of soil scientists, a district engineer, a soil conservationist, and an aide. Except for what money was available to the farmer through ACP (Agricultural Conservation Program), which was not really into the structural program at that phase, there wasn't any money available. A farmer would have had primarily an out-of-pocket expense.

**HELMS:** You mentioned the farm woodlot. In the Soil Conservation Service it's been debated through the years as to who is in charge.

**GRANT:** Absolutely.

**HELMS:** What was the situation in New England at the time?

**GRANT:** Well, in New Hampshire it was pretty complex as a matter of fact. The Extension Service had the extension foresters and there was the state forester with a staff. Of course a large area of the state was administered by the U.S. Forest Service. So you had a lot of people with some activity in woodland areas. We were unique in that we were providing a soil survey which could be used in planning. We always tried to encourage the farmer to recognize his woodland as an integral part of his farm and to use it in such a way that he could not only protect the land but make an income from it. Although we

had people trained in forestry and some of our district conservationists were foresters, the relationship had to be, of necessity, one of working together with the Extension Service and the state forester. In situations where a farmer needed fairly detailed forestry management plans, it was basically done by someone else, usually the Extension forester.

**HELMS:** Speaking of other controversial matters, how did the district organization go here? You hadn't started yet when the Standard Act was sent out and then you were in the war, but I guess you know of the background on that.

**GRANT:** Well, the Soil Conservation District Act was introduced into the state legislature first in 1943 and it failed. I think it failed largely because people thought that it was going to mandate land use control, in particular in the forested areas. It was opposed by many of the large timber owners and forestry groups. I think it was simply a matter that there hadn't been enough personal discussion for them to understand what the act was. Then when it did finally pass in 1945, it passed creating the state of New Hampshire as one soil conservation district, and the state committee by its action had to actually set up sub-districts in each of the counties. Then they had to hold referendums in order to establish the districts and elect the board of supervisors. But the board of supervisors was still approved by the state soil conservation committee. It

was a fairly cumbersome way of operating at the start. Districts were then fairly well accepted, once there was a better understanding of what the real mission of the Service and the role of the district supervisors were going to be. Later the law was changed and each county became a district.

We had to develop working relationships. I was involved in this because I was the first work unit conservationist in the state. We had to go through a period with the Extension Service of dovetailing together the kinds of recommendations that we were going to make in completing conservation plans. We had to work with the Extension Service foresters and others in terms of what role we were going to play in the forestry picture. So there were obviously times where we had some conflicts and disagreements that had to be worked out. I think I had some advantage in doing that in that I was a native in the state. I knew a lot of the people. I graduated from the university. I knew the Agronomy Department, which was where many of the recommendations were made on which varieties and crops and so on were best suited for the land, and on fertilization and management programs. So, I would say that within a fairly short time we had a pretty good working relationship with the state and the local agencies. We didn't go through the real problems that some of the states experienced.

**HELMS:** That's interesting. You're saying that the initial opposition to the district law was not so much by established farm organizations or agriculture agencies but by the timber interests.

**GRANT:** Well, you have to remember that by that time the state was probably 80 percent forested, so they controlled a lot of land and anything that looked like it was going to be government-controlled in any way, shape, or manner was suspect. Remember the Standard District Act did have land use controls as one of the options and it raised a flag. Before people really understood the Act there was a lot of opposition. However, they were some of the strongest supporters of soil and water conservation after we started. And the Farm Bureau, which was a very strong organization during that period of time, eventually became a very strong supporter of the whole soil conservation program.

**HELMS:** I asked you about forestry in particular, because I guess the Extension Service here would have been much more involved in forestry than in other parts of the country. Also, what was the level of cooperation with the Extension Service?

**GRANT:** The Extension Service was very much involved in woodlands. They had a county forester in every county and it was an area where we had to spend a lot of time working out

how each agency would proceed. I believe we eventually developed a very good understanding and working relationship.

The Extension Service was also obviously very much involved in working with farmers in terms of fertilization programs, management techniques, and so on. Inevitably, when you develop a conservation plan, you get into those aspects. So we tried very hard to take our technical guides through a committee system with the Extension Service and get agreement that this was a recommendation that was supported by both agencies, and that we weren't offering the farmers different alternatives from somebody else who was working with them on a daily basis.

**HELMS:** Just one small point, from the mid-1940s on, was contour farming pretty much the general practice or was that a slow change?

**GRANT:** No, contour farming was not used often, except in very specialized circumstances. This state is not nearly as agricultural as the states where contour strip cropping was a big part of the program. Now, we had some in the state. One of the first farms I worked on in Walpole, the R. N. Johnson farm, had one hundred to one hundred and fifty acres of potatoes. That was all terraced and contour strip cropped. We had some situations where strip cropping applied. But basically in grassland

agriculture your rotations were long and corn was on the field for a year or two and then it was in grass for long periods of time. So the emphasis was not on that particular aspect of the program.

**HELMS:** You were district conservationist. How long did you stay in that position?

**GRANT:** I was a district conservationist. We've changed titles at times between district conservationists and work unit conservationists. But I was in charge of a county program in 1946 in Cheshire County and then in Grafton County. Then I was the district conservationist responsible for the three northern counties for about three years. In those days, the district conservationist, while he had responsibility for the three-county area and worked with the district supervisors and others, still was very, very much involved in the field program because we only had a small staff. At that point the Service began to reorganize some of its field activities and area conservationists came into existence. I was appointed the area conservationist, headquartered in Durham, for the entire state, which was a rather unique arrangement and one that I think from a management standpoint was not a very wise decision. That's probably the reason why it didn't last too long. You had an area conservationist covering exactly the same area, the total state, as the state staff soil

conservationist, the state engineer, and other specialists. It was an organizational pattern that was set up in such a way that a lot of conflict was possible between the area conservationist and the state office. Al Collins recognized that fairly quickly and I moved from the area conservationist position as it was abolished to the state staff soil conservationist position. This was after the reorganization of the regional offices.

**HELMS:** From what you could see from your vantage point and from what you saw after that point, how did you view the regional office structure as compared to the structure we ended up with--the state offices?

**GRANT:** That was a period of considerable controversy in the Service and a couple of regional directors were so upset that they left the Service. I'm not sure it was a couple, I know at least one did. The regional office probably was a good organizational setup when it was first conceived and we were in the process of getting soil conservation districts organized and state laws passed. But personally, I think we strengthened the program administration rather substantially when we eliminated the regional offices and went to the state offices with technical support from the technical service units around the country. If you were to ask a lot of people at the time that I was in the Service how they viewed it, those that were associated with a regional office



would probably take a diametrically opposing view and say that the regional office was a very good organizational structure. But I think the time had come to move to the state level. I'm a strong supporter and always have been of the idea that the ties from Washington to the states, with support from technical service units, make for a much stronger organization than when we had the regional offices. Most conservation programs, while you have regional differences, really ought to be national programs. And I think it became far more a national program when we went to the structure of the Washington office working directly with states.

**HELMS:** You eventually became the state conservationist here?

**GRANT:** Yes, I became the deputy state conservationist and in 1959 I became the state conservationist. At that time I guess I was the youngest state conservationist in the country and at the first state conservationist meeting that I went to, my wife and I were called "the kids." Many of the state conservationists at that time were professionals who had joined SCS from other agricultural agencies, universities, or professions.

**HELMS:** Did you have a certain idea as to what you wanted to try to do and certain priorities?

**GRANT:** In this state you have to recognize that you are not dealing with a program that could be picked up and placed in Iowa, Texas, the Midwest, or anyplace else. We didn't have the serious erosion problems that you had elsewhere. We didn't have problems with wind erosion. We didn't have snow survey programs. We didn't have many of the programs but, at that time, the Service was moving pretty aggressively into the water management field. Public Law 566 came along while I was state conservationist here, and we found several places in the state where 566 programs did fit and could be supported very well by local organizations. The first was Ash Swamp Brook in Cheshire County where I had worked when I entered the Service. Another was Oliverian Watershed, which was in Grafton County. There were several others around the state. We always tried to make them as multipurpose as we possibly could since the demand was very high for recreation. We tried our best in every watershed structure that we built to build into it the recreational aspect as well. There are some real fine examples in this state where the Forest Service cooperated with one of our watershed structures near the campgrounds, or where the state or cities built real fine recreational facilities around the watershed program.

That was a really popular program, but of necessity it's somewhat limited. The topography in the state, and the

lack of areas where you could build flood control for agricultural areas, was rather limiting. The program, while it fit very well, fit only in a limited number of cases.

**HELMS:** This was before recreation became a purpose for cost sharing?

**GRANT:** I don't think so. It so happened that some of ours were on Forest Service land so the cost sharing was basically by another federal agency. Cost sharing was in terms of the Forest Service putting in the recreational facilities. The state did support by appropriation some assistance in the watershed program. Very frankly without reviewing notes, I don't recall exactly what the cost share arrangements were on some of them.

**HELMS:** The impetus for the program has been agriculture. Did you have any difficulties in dealing with Washington getting your watersheds approved, since they had multiple purposes and objectives?

**GRANT:** No. I don't think we had any difficulty in that. We had to come into agreement with them that our watershed program did not involve the techniques that we used in cases where you were primarily trying to provide protection to large areas of agricultural land. We had agricultural land protection in all of them but to a limited degree. That's why the program itself in terms of numbers was limited. You just simply could

not project a program that wasn't designed for the kind of land use that we had, except in a few places. We could tie in the protection of cities and towns in many cases for recreation. Agricultural protection was not a large part of the program.

**HELMS:** Were there other situations where if you hadn't needed the agricultural land you could have gone forward with the projects?

**GRANT:** I think there's no question that if some of the criteria had been different and you could have developed the programs around recreational water management, you could have developed a different kind of program which would have served a very, very useful purpose and probably would have been widely accepted. But that was not the intent of 566. Recreation was a part of it, but not really the basic premise.

**HELMS:** What was your next career move from being state conservationist here?

**GRANT:** My next career move was that the Service sent me to Harvard for a year where I earned a master's degree in public administration.

**HELMS:** Are you a believer in that sort of program?

**GRANT:** I absolutely am. I think the Service has a very excellent program and that it was a very wise decision to have mid-career people given the

opportunity to go back to school. There were many reasons for that, but I suppose basically, it's that most of us in the early days of the Service were primarily trained as scientists. As you moved into a soil conservationist position and other positions in the Service, the opportunity to expand your horizons in the field of public administration was one that was repaid to the Service many times over in better personnel and people who understood government and what needed to be done in management. So I whole-heartedly say that it was an excellent program, and I supported it all the way through my career into the time that I was administrator.

**HELMS:** Where did you go after your degree in public administration?

**GRANT:** I went to the state of Indiana. I was the state conservationist.

**HELMS:** That's a different area for you.

**GRANT:** That's an entirely different area and an entirely different experience which was extremely valuable to me because Indiana is a good agricultural state. It had entirely different land use, entirely different soils, and entirely different problems. We had an extremely active 566 watershed program with two full-time watershed planners and a very substantial appropriation in the construction aspects. Many of the watersheds had six, eight, or ten

structures in them. Many were multipurpose structures. There was outstanding cooperation in the state of Indiana between the districts and the local organizations. The three years I spent there were three of the finest I had in the Service. It exposed me to a section of the country that was new, and to a whole series of problems that was new. Plus the program was much, much larger and I got the experience there of working with nearly a hundred districts as contrasted to the ten that we had in New Hampshire. Of course, the staff was substantially larger in all respects. The management of funds in a program of that size was experience that I needed and could use when I went on to other assignments. We also had an excellent program there in RC&D (Resource Conservation and Development) projects. In fact, we had the number one RC&D project, Lincoln Hills, in the country. It was one which the Secretary of Agriculture visited at the outset of the program. A great deal of progress was made, again with strong local organization. One of the things I remember about the state was the fact that local people really got involved in a program and followed through and did a wonderful job. They did marvelous jobs, in many cases getting land easements and rights-of-way which were always a problem in a structural program such as 566.

I want to say this, too. I was fortunate in that I had a top-notch staff there, some of whom went on to become

state conservationists after that and brought experience from different sections of the country which was quite helpful to me. We had one assistant from the state of Texas. We had another one from Pennsylvania. The opportunity to work together with those kinds of people was extremely valuable to me. Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz was then the Dean of Agriculture at Purdue University.

**HELMS:** As you know, our agriculture in some areas has diminished and in other areas it's picked up. In parts of Indiana, like much of the Midwest, they'd just go to two crops. Maybe 90 percent of the land or more was taken up with agriculture. Was that perceived as a concern?

**GRANT:** Indiana is a state divided in half. Southern Indiana is just very different from northern Indiana. There is no question that northern Indiana was intensely cropped. I suppose you could say that there were many, many farms that were almost in a monoculture because they were raising corn or soybeans all the time. But that land is generally reasonably flat. Water management programs were essential. A lot of drainage was needed and an awful lot of underground drainage through tile systems were put in. The land that did need erosion control on it, in terms of terracing and strip cropping, was generally very well accepted by farmers. So while it was recognized

as a problem, I think we were making very good progress at it. Some parts of the southwestern part of the state were really models of conservation on the land. They had intensive systems of strip cropping and terracing. Some of the southern part of the state had large areas of cropland but basically on the flatter sections. On those that did need erosion control we had good acceptance. A lot of that land was going into grass, and was better suited to grass.

**HELMS:** You mentioned Secretary Butz being the Dean there. You had gone from a small state where you didn't have a big agricultural college to a midwestern state where they have a big agricultural program, like almost all the land grant schools. What was the relationship of the Soil Conservation Service to Purdue?

**GRANT:** Excellent. I've been away from the Service for a long time now, so the things that I'm talking about were the relationships that existed during the period of basically 1963 to 1967, when I was in Indiana. The Dean was very much a part of the soil conservation program. I knew Earl Butz quite well personally. He knew and understood the program. The director of Extension was a close personal friend of mine. We worked together very, very well. We had a constant understanding that whenever we had a problem we would get together and iron it out. The soil conservation staff at the university were always very much involved in

the program and I can't say enough for the state agencies as well. The director of natural resources at that time, John Mitchell, was a close ally and supporter of conservation. I never worked with anybody in the states who was more directly involved and more supportive of the programs. I think that's why Indiana during that period made so much progress in the watershed program because the resources of the state agencies were 100 percent in back of us. I can't say enough about the relationship that existed between the Farm Bureau, the Extension Service, the state government, and the university. I think it was marvelous.

The Extension director and I got together when I first went there and began to work out a memorandum of understanding. You find so many conditions that just don't lend themselves to being reduced to a paragraph as to how you are going to operate. So eventually he and I just sat down across the table and said, "Look, why don't we just handle this thing with a minimal outline here and when we get a problem we'll sit down together and work it out and decide how to do it?" He said, "You don't hesitate to call me anytime you think one of my people is out of line and I won't hesitate to call you when I think one of yours is out of line, and we'll just work it on that basis." That was exactly how we did it for the three years I was there.

**HELMS:** You mentioned a strong watershed program, were any of the controversies that came up later present in the Indiana operation? I'm referring to objections by the environmental groups.

**GRANT:** There's no question about it. We had some of the objections even at that point. The environmental issues, which related primarily to drainage and stream channel alignment, were very much a part of the watershed program. In fact, in some cases the programs were held up for a considerable period of time while rather exhaustive studies were made as to what the impact was going to be.

I don't want to create the impression that everything was smooth sailing in terms of the details on these things; however, all the time that we were working with these groups they were basically supporting wholeheartedly most of the soil and water conservation programs. They were attempting to get money to move ahead in the soil surveys, they were attempting to work with us as closely as possible in the land use to be sure that we were getting the application of practices on the land in the watersheds and so on. The biggest differences of opinion were those involving water management on the drainage and stream channel work.

Let me tell you one reason why I think watershed programs and RC&D programs were so successful at that

time in Indiana. I was the Service representative and the USDA representative in the Ohio River Basin and Wabash River Basin. Now that actually covered Indiana and parts of Illinois. The Wabash River Basin had a very strong organization. They had a large membership and they did a lot of work in terms of getting local people informed as to what could be done on a river basin basis. The 566 watershed program became an integral part of their activities. People were used to thinking about soil and water conservation problems on a watershed basis. Many of the people who were strong supporters of the Wabash River Basin also were on the board of directors of the local watershed projects. So there was a great deal of interplay back and forth between them. I think some of the problems that existed in other sections of the country were better understood because of the closeness of the people to the total concept of the program. From the land treatment program right straight down through to the outlet, you had people who were involved and understood the total programming effort that was going on. I think that was quite helpful in bringing about better understanding of where they all fit together.

**HELMS:** I'd like to ask you about the matter of the river basin commissions during your days as administrator. You were saying that the whole process of having the commissions promoted the program by bringing people together. Is that it?

**GRANT:** I think it did for the simple reason that the same people who had to be involved at the local level had also been involved at the larger programmatic level. For example, when you worked in the Wabash River Basin, you had representatives from all of the other Federal agencies, such as the Corps of Engineers, in there too. The Corps had projects that they were involved in. You always had the problem of relating what you were doing in a 566 program into the other ongoing activities and structures that were being built for flood control by the Corps, and other work that was being done on a local level. On that basis, I think they were more used to thinking of a whole complex of people who were working together on a watershed or river basin area. I don't want to minimize the problems. There wasn't any question that you had areas of possible overlap when you were talking about upland controls, drawing the lines as to where the 566 program begins and ends and the Corps program begins and ends, and so on. It's complex. It's not easy. I found a better than average understanding as to how those things fit together in Indiana than we had in some other sections of the country.

**HELMS:** You mentioned RC&D. Since it was a new program, started on an experimental basis, you didn't have a well established set of rules, regulations, and guidelines. In Indiana, exactly what did you do with this new program to try to get started?

**GRANT:** As I recall, the first year nationwide the number of projects approved was ten. Lincoln Hills was one of them. We appointed an RC&D coordinator and a staff who were resident in the area. We had a person on the state staff assigned leadership for working with them. But the bulk of the responsibility in developing a new program like that, as I view it even now, was really a job of working with local people who recognized that they had certain kinds of problems or opportunities and had demonstrated a willingness to go ahead and put in some effort into coming up with a solution. They were far ranging. Some of the problems involved an acceleration of the conservation effort in an area. Others involved water management that was necessary to protect a small community. We got into such things as economic stimulus by helping establish a sawmill. The project covered a whole myriad of opportunities for economic development in that area with some money coming from RC&D funds. But the necessity of providing land easements, rights-of-way, operation and maintenance, and some matching funds was at the local level. The project coordinator was one of the key people. He had to move into areas in which the Service had not worked before, and in many cases hadn't had a lot of experience. He had to be one who was able to motivate the people who recognized the local problems with a willingness to expend their own time and effort because these people were non-paid people. They put in an

enormous amount of time working on things for the local community good. I didn't stay with that particular project long enough to see it brought to fruition. I saw examples of RC&D all over the country. Practically every state that I visited had RC&D projects and they covered a tremendous number of diverse problems that people were working on--some cultural, some economic, and some physical.

**HELMS:** You went from the job as the state conservationist in Indiana to the associate administrator. Could you tell us when that happened, and how you were selected for the job?

**GRANT:** It happened in 1967, after I had been in Indiana for three years. The selection for all of these positions at that time was part of the career system. I was asked by the administrator if I would be a candidate for that particular job. And while I'll admit I was somewhat surprised because of the grade differential, I certainly as a career employee was interested in being considered if that was his wish. I also knew that several others were also considered--as it should be in the selection of anyone for that job. There should be multiple candidates. Sometime after that I was asked to prepare a paper and I'm sure all the others were also, of how I viewed the job of associate administrator and some of the things that, if selected, I would like to accomplish. I wrote and submitted the paper, along with others.

**HELMS:** You have reason to believe that this process was taken seriously and they actually read the papers?

**GRANT:** I have absolutely no reason not to believe that this was true. As I look at it, I think it's a perfectly legitimate request to ask of people who want to be considered for that position about some of the things they viewed as part of the job of associate administrator and how they would personally like to attack some of the problems that confronted the Service. I have every reason to believe that the papers were probably seriously considered by both the administrator and the assistant secretary.

**HELMS:** Now, what did you do in the job as associate administrator?

**GRANT:** Well, for the first year or year and a half that I was in there, the Department was deeply involved in a study of agriculturally related pollution. Shortly after I went to Washington I was asked to head up that particular study. It was a very time consuming study because it was a field that involved disciplines in many agencies. I had a very, very wide ranging and able group of people from other agencies in the Department who participated in preparing the report. We produced a fairly lengthy and comprehensive document on agriculturally related pollution. I went to Don two or three times and said, "Don, I don't really know how much I am really helping you as associate administrator, it seems like all my

time is spent on this study." His reply to me was that that study was important enough in his judgment to both our agency and to the whole Department that he was perfectly happy for me to continue to spend as much time as was necessary on the study and so I did. And except for a couple of special assignments that I did for him--one of which was an overseas assignment--that was my principal occupation for the first year.

**HELMS:** This is interesting because this is only a couple of years before the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) was passed, which had a strong emphasis on both air and water pollution. In terms of the time we are talking about, water quality has never gone away but it certainly has resurfaced as a priority.

**GRANT:** Yes, the whole agriculturally related pollution area.

**HELMS:** The next step is that you became administrator.

**GRANT:** Well, there was a period between the time this study was completed and when I became administrator. During that period, Don realized that he was going to retire in a short time. He made every effort for me to become deeply involved in all of the programmatic aspects of the Service. I participated in hearings on Capitol Hill, I spent a lot of time going to the field, becoming acquainted with the programs and studying some sections



of the country that I had not previously worked in. It was a period of one and a half years or so that was extremely important to me in familiarizing myself with the job of the administrator. Now there was no commitment to me at that time that I was going to be administrator, but nevertheless, as associate administrator I shared the responsibility for the total program with the administrator. Regardless of whether I succeeded him or not, this was an important part of my career in terms of preparing myself for the job.

**HELMS:** There was a good chance that you would become the administrator when Mr. Williams retired?

**GRANT:** When I was moved from state conservationist to associate administrator I certainly assumed that at least I would be a candidate for the job, providing my performance during the time I was there as associate administrator measured up to what the Department felt they wanted in an administrator.

**HELMS:** In preparing for our interview, I looked through some of the reports of the annual state conservationists' meetings, although for a while we haven't been doing them. I think it is a good jumping off point for your tenure as administrator. You made a point to me about the Service and one of the changes you intended to make on the use of the state conservationists' meeting.

**GRANT:** I think an organization can be operated successfully in a number of different ways. Strong leadership at the Washington level is obviously very important. But, having been a state conservationist, I knew there was a tremendous reservoir of talent among the state conservationists. I felt that I could strengthen the program of the Service by focusing at the state conservationists' level on problems that we saw facing the Service in the year ahead, and getting the best judgment and thinking from the combination of Washington office people, field representatives, and the state conservationists. I was really, I suppose, trying to enhance the position of the state conservationist as a part of the policy making group of the SCS. I was very candid with them in terms of talking over some of the very real problems that we had in the management field, some of the problems that we had in terms of budgets, and how I viewed some of the programmatic directions that we were going to have to take. I must say they responded in a very, very fine way. I think we strengthened the linkage between the field and the Washington office by this process.

I had one other technique that I tried to use continuously as administrator. I tried to take a certain part of my schedule each year and go and spend a week in some state or some geographic area of the country reviewing the program. For example, one year the Great Plains Program, in another year we were looking at the

range program, in another year I'd go to a state that I was not too familiar with that had very urgent problems that needed to be solved. During the time that I was in that state, I always asked the state conservationist to bring together as many of his field staff as he possibly could, particularly the district conservationists. We did this in one large meeting if the state was reasonably small, or we did it in a series of meetings otherwise. We always did it at breakfast time. I would bring everyone up to date on what I saw for the Service in the year ahead. And then I opened it up to any and all questions. That was the part of the program that I felt was one of the best things that we ever did. Because it provided me with an opportunity to see what people at the working level, right out there with the farmer and the rancher, were asking the administrator in terms of what they wanted clarified, or what they thought were problems. It gave me a chance to have a dialogue with them on why we were doing certain things and why, in some cases, even though it looked like we ought to move in a certain direction, because of objectives that were important for the whole department, we had to move in different directions.

I've found many, many times years later when I would go to a Soil Conservation Society meeting or somewhere else, some DC (district conservationist) that attended those meetings would come up to me and say, "You probably don't remember me, but I want to tell you how much

we enjoyed the fact that we had a chance to ask any and all questions with no holds barred." I have no idea whether this is being done now or not, but for me it was a linkage from the field all the way through to the Washington office that gave all of us insights that I don't think we ever could have gotten in any other way.

**HELMS:** You take out several layers through which views of the field staff could be filtered before it reaches you, is that correct?

**GRANT:** Absolutely true, and the written word frequently is caged in very careful terms, whereas a fellow who stands up after having eaten breakfast with you is apt to be pretty straightforward as to what he says and what he wants. One thing I always did was, I never tried to say, "That question is off the record and I can't discuss it." I tried to answer as truthfully as I possibly could every single concern that they had. A fellow that is in his twenties or thirties and starting out a career in the Service has a different series of concerns than someone who has been in the Service for twenty-five or thirty years and is worrying about the next budget hearing with the Congress.

**HELMS:** One thing I noticed in the reports. You said the number of studies, be they soil surveys, conservation needs inventories, or various other special ones that the agency was doing and devoting quite an amount of time, money, and effort

to needed to be reviewed to see which ones needed to be continued and which ones needed to be cut back. Was that a major effort for you?

**GRANT:** I think that was a continuing process without any question. Reports written for the sake of reports have never been very important and obviously some things get started and they keep going. I think you need to review about once a year what you are doing, and if you can't identify how extremely important it is you better discontinue it. One of the things that I thought needed to be accelerated and we worked very hard to find the techniques necessary to do it was to get the soil surveys published much, much faster than we had in the past because the information was so valuable and was becoming so useful to so many different groups. I wanted to get them out of the mapping stage and into the publication stage. We worked long and diligently in trying to find the techniques that would enable us to bring those reports to completion. I think we greatly accelerated the publication schedule during the time I was administrator.

**HELMS:** Don Williams, I think, had been interested in the loss of prime farmland and he made that something of an issue. In the early 1970s we had a couple of land use policy bills that came out. What was your position in the Service on those?

**GRANT:** Not only we in the Service, but many organizations were

beginning to get very much concerned about the loss of prime agricultural land. A lot of studies were done in the Department and by other groups which showed how much agricultural land was being lost. This is the kind of thing that greatly concerns some people but others felt that the country had a tremendous resource, and with the new technologies that were coming into view, that it wasn't nearly as important as other things. In fact, there was not unanimity of opinion that we needed to be all that concerned about the loss of prime agricultural land. Land, labor, and capital are sometimes melded together so that you can come up with some answers that show that as long as you've got sufficient capital incentives you can get the job done on a lot less land than we have historically used.

I guess my position is geared more to the fact that prime agricultural land is a very precious commodity and the well-being of the nation for generations and generations revolves around its ability to produce food at reasonable costs. To protect the land is an ethic that we all should endorse. My experience in underdeveloped countries brought home very vividly what happens when the land is not protected and how the well-being of the people is so adversely affected. I felt that the major uses of land that were taking our prime land out of production should be looked at very carefully. The land that our total highway system eats up is fantastic in relationship to the size that most

people would think about. Not that we don't need the transportation system, but sometimes alternatives that don't cut a farm in half or can go on land which is not class one land are alternatives that need to be studied carefully. We need to consider the alternative possibilities in terms of flood prevention, when we flood large areas of prime land, as to whether there are other alternatives that might be acceptable. I was concerned. We tried to accelerate our soil survey in areas where we needed that information. However, I'll have to say this. I can remember back when there was a program that showed a dining table with four plates, and then a fifth plate. It was called the fifth plate--are we always going to be able to produce enough food for that plate? I can remember when some were saying we were on a collision course in terms of whether we could produce enough food at a reasonable price. We had policies at the time Secretary Butz was there where he had said we need to consider, in order to meet the demands domestically and internationally, farming fence row to fence row. All of these things are associated with the problem of whether we need to preserve as much first class agricultural land as we could. Producing food on poor land and land that is more suitable for other uses is more expensive. And yet I would have to agree that over a long period of time that I have looked at this, thirty or forty years, we've always had surpluses and we always keep having surpluses. The cropland

base of first class agricultural land continues to shrink. So obviously our technology is taking care of some of the land that we have taken out of production.

I guess philosophically I'm still of an opinion that we ought to look very, very carefully at the acceptable alternatives before we take significant acreage of first class agricultural land out of production in those areas where farming is going to continue and the land is going to be needed in producing food and fiber.

**HELMS:** You mean a structure that leads to federal laws and policy?

**GRANT:** Not necessarily federal law but a policy requiring full consideration. But I'm not one that's going to promote scare techniques and say that we are going to run out of the ability to produce the food and fiber in a short period of time if we don't do that. I think we should take a long-term point of view and not turn over those acres that are best suited for the production of food and fiber at a reasonable cost.

**HELMS:** You made reference in passing there to the point in the early 1970s when the grain sales were made to the Russians. The price of some feed grains went up dramatically and there was more plowing of land that had been in pasture and other uses. We dealt with the fallout of that. I guess at one time we thought it was a new era with all these foreign markets.

We dealt with the fallout of that from a conservation point of view for some time. I know the Service did some studies which appeared in the *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation* on how much land was converted. I'd like for you to give me your recollections of whether this was something of a shock and what the Service tried to do to respond. Some of the land had had old style terraces which were lost, and windbreaks, the whole gamut.

**GRANT:** Well, it's a very complex issue and obviously not one that lends itself to an easy answer. Some of the land that had many, many years ago been in intensive agricultural production--cotton, tobacco, and so on--had old terrace systems and had reverted to woodland. It had probably reverted to exactly what should have happened. The land was not really suitable for long-term production. Bringing it back into production couldn't help but increase the erosion potential. If the land wasn't suitable before, even with intensive conservation practices, it seemed to me that your rate of soil loss was going to accelerate. We had to adjust some of our thinking in terms of conservation for new land coming into production and land being used more intensively, as to what systems of soil and water erosion techniques needed to be put into effect. It seemed to me that our farm and ranch planning handbooks and technical guides provided our field people all the information necessary to make those

adjustments. If land had to be used more intensively, you put more intensive conservation practices on it.

Now, when you reach the point that you begin to break out land that simply was not suitable for agricultural use, and we had some of that during that period, the program gets a lot more complicated. Because even if you can control erosion to an allowable soil loss, it generally is going to cost the farmer considerably more on that particular property because the intensity of the practice is going to require maybe some structural measures that hadn't been needed previously. His profit is going to be affected by that. Not only that, the country has become very conscious of not putting silt into the streams and not providing an excess of agricultural runoff into streams. You have to be concerned with the good of everybody else just as you would with the economic aspects of the farm. I know the Service was at odds in many cases with the people who wanted to break it out or put it into more intensive farming. I know in my own personal experience in planning farms there's been a few times that I've simply said to the farmer, "We cannot really devise an economically sound soil and water conservation program on this type of land to use it as intensively as you are proposing, and therefore, I would suggest that we can't develop a conservation program that is suitable on this land that is going to be practical for you. You ought to consider leaving it in grass or

putting it into woods." That's a tough situation when the price is good and somebody wants to do it, but nevertheless, I think that as a professional soil conservationist you have a responsibility of calling the shots as they are. If you're on class four, five, or six land, it's usually going to create a problem for him on a long-term basis, and a problem for his neighbors downstream. You'd better call a spade a spade.

**HELMS:** Was there any way in the Department you could try to influence them not to be so enthusiastic in their advice to plant more and more land?

**GRANT:** Well, I think our philosophy in the Service has pretty much been that there are some lands that are suitable for almost any crop that adapts to that area, and they can be farmed intensively providing you put the conservation program necessary on the land. There are other lands that from all reasonable and practical standpoints should not be put into the category of cropland. I think we always have taken the position that you had to be sure you could adapt a conservation program to provide adequate protection to whatever land was going to be farmed. If the land was simply not suitable for that purpose and was going to create long-term problems for the country, you had better look for alternatives, that was all there was to it. We certainly promoted this philosophy at the department level and in hearings before congressional committees.

**HELMS:** I guess it was Bennett's idea to have a plan for the whole farm and conservation practices for the type of crops you are trying to grow, and it does make a great deal of sense. But the Service always has had the dilemma of when does writing the plan become the objective, as opposed to getting it accomplished on the farm. I noticed at one point you raised this in one of the meetings--that it needed to be studied and looked at. You had worked as a district conservationist. Was that something that the Service had to pay attention to?

**GRANT:** You have a tendency to always measure progress by certain landmarks. And one of the measures of progress we've always had is the number of conservation plans developed. The DC who develops twice as many as someone else is usually considered to be doing an outstanding job of developing conservation plans. But once your focus on the numbers gained becomes the most important thing, then you begin to lose sight of some other objectives.

It is vital to develop a plan that provides adequately for the protection of the soil and resource base and fits into the farming scheme of the individual farmer or rancher. It may be possible to make all the necessary decisions in a fairly short period of time. But in many cases it is better to work with this person over a period of time to develop those things which you can agree on now, then expect to

follow up and continue to develop that plan until it does meet the objectives of the complete conservation plan. The numbers game is one that needs to be very carefully considered. An important measurement is the total amount of conservation that is applied to the land. If that comes from fifty completed plans and some more that are in a stage which is not yet finalized, why so be it, you are getting conservation on the land. I would have been far more impressed with a district that had ten thousand acres of an essential practice applied than I would have been with twice as many conservation plans and only half as much conservation on the land.

It's difficult to generalize. Some areas of the country, because of long history, topography, and the problems associated with farming that land, are very difficult to handle. One of the areas, for example, that I spent some considerable amount of time in had some of the most serious erosion problems in the country. I am speaking of the Palouse area. This is one that you have to approach very carefully. There are some areas of the country where you can make adjustments in the farm operation between livestock and crops and so on that don't adversely affect the farmers' overall program or income. And you can do it rather easily. There are other areas where you are almost walled in to the current program on the farm because he may not have buildings for livestock, fencing, suitable equipment, or markets, and he simply cannot

make the adjustments that are necessary to develop a conservation plan that would adequately control erosion and satisfy his income requirements. In those cases, you are going to have to approach the conservation plan on a very long-term basis, and in some cases, look for unique ways of doing it.

**HELMS:** You were from an era, the Kennedy-Johnson years, when there was emphasis on rural development, on the rural-urban fringe in using soil surveys, and on the sorts of expertise built up in the Service to help proper development and assistance to communities, small towns, and so on. Then we go into the Nixon-Ford era. Was there a change in the philosophy in the Department or did it continue as it was? What was the attitude in Congress as to where the emphasis of the Service should be?

**GRANT:** We did have a tremendous amount of emphasis on rural development, working with small towns and communities. I think that's one area in which the Service is quite skilled and one in which the more people you can get involved in the decision making process on programs the better off you are. Once you begin to pull away from that overall philosophy, programs then don't have quite the same support base and relationship between the local, state, and federal levels. You are more apt to get programs which are either federal in nature or entirely local in nature. There are probably a lot of

things that can operate on that basis. But to me the strongest point that you can make in analyzing the success of a soil and water conservation effort, a rural development effort, a Great Plains program, or a watershed program is the linkage and interrelationship that exists between federal, state, and local people. If the program is not one that generates a tremendous amount of effort at the local and state level, I think progress is going to be considerably slower. I don't really believe that we experienced any significant changes in philosophy in the Department. There always were questions in the Congress by individual congressmen or senators about the use of funds. The representatives from strictly agricultural areas wanted assurances that farmers and ranchers received full attention. Those from more urban areas were more interested in soil surveys and interpretations and assistance to communities. Overall this probably resulted in greater support for the total program.

**HELMS:** The Resource Conservation and Development program has had a lot of local support. Sometimes our administrations and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) haven't been as supportive. I think earlier you mentioned to me your views of assessing the economic impacts of the programs like that.

**GRANT:** Well, I think that's very true. When you get to economic analysis and start with the basic

assumption that every dollar spent should return more than a dollar back --and programs are frequently analyzed on the basis of a cost-benefit ratio--you get into analyzing so many different things and making so many long-term projections that anybody else who looks at your figures is almost certainly going to come up with a different answer. Frequently, projects that were looked at with a favorable cost-benefit ratio, when analyzed by different economists, would not substantiate the favorable ratio. However, there are so many things that are done in small communities and small townships that generate a feeling and a willingness to cooperate and move ahead that I find it very difficult, and I think almost everyone else does too, to put to an actual cost-benefit test. When you subject these things to a rigorous examination, such as OMB frequently does, in terms of deciding where each dollar should go relative to program merit, they frequently will not measure up favorably. Yet sometimes a small federal or state input generates a tremendous amount of accomplishment in meeting needs in a small community. It may be because of personal effort on the part of local people. You go into a community where two or three leading farmers have established a real fine conservation plan, without expending another nickel, there are a lot of farmers in there who can see the benefits of what happened and it generates an enthusiasm to go ahead and apply some of that themselves. I



think that some of the rural development programs that we are working with have to fall in that category. It's a building of a spirit and a willingness among people to work together to get something done. Once you pull away the little bit of incentive or maybe the one-man leadership that can really generate enthusiasm with these people, you lose a great deal in the program, even though you can't justify it the way some people would like to see it justified on a dollar and cents basis. This is not to say that cost-benefit analysis doesn't have an important place in determining program priorities. It does. But some important actions do not lend themselves easily to such rigorous examination.

**HELMS:** Originally, with some of the programs of the 1960s the supporters of the SCS and the National Association of Conservation Districts were concerned about taking resources from more traditional activities. Was that their attitude in the 1970s? What were the priorities of the Department, the Service, and the districts? Were they pretty much on the same wavelength?

**GRANT:** This was a time when the field personnel were receiving a great number of requests for assistance from other than farmers and ranchers. Anything that detracted from that activity was certainly of concern to districts and to Congress. I touched on that briefly in an answer to one of

your earlier questions. However, I believe more and more it was becoming apparent that soil conservation needs did not stop at the farm or ranch boundary. Erosion problems in developing communities, on highways, on steep land being developed for housing, and in other locations all contributed to the total sediment load. Many local groups and communities recognized the need for soil survey information and technical assistance. A significant development had been taking place for some time and was accelerating rapidly--the willingness of others to share in the costs of soil surveys, technical assistance, and office personnel. We encouraged this activity, as did the districts, and very significant amounts of money were appropriated at the state and local level. The end result was a strengthening of the soil conservation program and the base of support was broadened. All of these actions required many meetings between SCS, districts, and state and local governments. It required explanations for the Department and Congress. But I believe good understanding was generally achieved and we were pretty much all on the same wavelength.

**HELMS:** I think you mentioned earlier that you believed that one of the problems for the Service during your era was the fact that the job had become so much more complicated for the person in the field office.

**GRANT:** I completely agree that it has become more complicated. When I first went to work for the Service, if you could deal with the problems associated with developing a conservation plan on an individual farm or ranch, you could be a very successful district conservationist. You had a great deal of respect, and practically everybody in the community supported exactly what you were doing. In this day and age, it's not that simple.

**HELMS:** You were referring to the 1970s?

**GRANT:** I'm referring to the 1970s. We had environmental groups which frequently took a diametrically opposed position to some of the things that we had been doing. We had strong support from district supervisors and from farmers and ranchers for a program that needed agricultural drainage and yet the people who were concerned about the preservation of wetlands took quite a different point of view. Our people, it seems to me, had to learn to become very skillful in dealing with the myriad of groups in order to develop an effective program. They had to deal with controversy, which is something that most of them had very little training or skills in. You couldn't ignore people simply because they disagreed with the position you were going to take. You had to deal with them because many of them were the leaders in the communities. So somehow you had to reach an

accommodation that would meet as many objectives as you possibly could with the various groups you were working with. There would be no question that a channel might be flooding an area and causing a lot of damage. So it needed to be worked on. The problem arose when you asked, "How do you do it?"

Historically, with an engineering bias, I suppose we were inclined to put in beautiful two-to-one side slopes and a fairly straight ditch that would get the water off as quickly as possible. We found we could accommodate and get the water off and instead of putting both sides on two to one slopes we could leave one side in native vegetation, and we had to aesthetically deal with leaving some areas untouched. We had to modify the program to still reach the objectives that were needed, or as many as possible, and also satisfy the legitimate concerns of other people.

In some cases these concerns went, I think, beyond the point of reasonableness. When this was so, our people had to learn how to recognize this and deal with the problem. I received letters as administrator from people who criticized the program in their state and said that we were destroying large areas of streams when in fact we had practically no stream channelization at all in that state. They were just alerted by a national organization that was focusing attention on this issue and asked all their members to write to the administrator or write to

Congress and protest something. We tried to develop training programs and we tried to discuss with our people how to handle this. I think over a period of time, step by step, we brought competing forces closer and closer together. Nobody was completely satisfied with the final solution, but perhaps most were in agreement that this was the best alternative that could be achieved.

**HELMS:** I know you started some training courses on the environment, but did you also have ones on how to deal with conflict?

**GRANT:** I took the environmental course at Georgia that you are referring to. Practically all of the people from the state conservationist level and into the Washington office took this program in order to better understand environmental concerns. But we did stress over and over again with our people in meetings that whereas they had been dealing with programs which at one time had almost 100 percent support right across the board, they didn't now. So they had to learn how to deal with controversy. We contacted people that we knew, and invited them to our meetings to talk to our people about the fact that they were living in a very complex situation and how best they could get people together and work toward a resolution of these problems. It wasn't easy. There were some days that I could get pretty discouraged about some of the letters I received. It's not easy when you are being sued

for millions of dollars in terms of projects which you think are environmentally sound. It's not easy when a project that had been planned had a price tag of \$5 million on it, but after constant delay, modification, further delay, and more modification, was now a \$10 million project and may or may not have a favorable cost-benefit ratio. But this was a growing process and it was probably beneficial to the long-term soil and water conservation program. It helped educate and bring into understanding more and more people as we moved down the road. But at the time that the conflicts first existed, it certainly created some problems.

**HELMS:** Was there opposition within the Service to changing policies on watershed work?

**GRANT:** Oh, you bet your life! You couldn't possibly have the changes that we experienced during the 1970s and not have people in the Service who felt that we were moving in the wrong direction or that as long as we had a consensus with some groups, we ought to push right ahead and not be too concerned about some of the flak that we were getting. But by and large, before we were too far into the program, everybody began to realize that you just simply could not take a program that had as much support in the country, in groups, and in Congress, and let this sort of controversy get so important that it begins to destroy it. In some cases people who were being pulled both

ways actually would no longer be as supportive of the program as they should be.

But I have to say that by and large, even the environmental organizations that we had the greatest difficulty with in our watershed program continued to support almost unanimously other aspects of the Service programs. So they were separating out that part of the program that they didn't like and they wanted to change, but they were not withdrawing their support for the agency as a whole. For the soil and water conservation work that we were doing on-farm they were supporting, even on the watershed, the need for all of the upstream work. Now, some people were absolutely opposed to impoundments. They simply didn't want impoundments, whether they had a rational reason or not. When you get to that point that a person is unalterably opposed to some aspect of a program that really can't be changed if it is going to be effective, then you just have a difference of opinion and you have to proceed. That's about the size of it. Eventually they may come around or they may not. On practically every issue in this country there are people who are 100 percent against it, and people who are 100 percent for it. I think the Service probably strengthened itself by going through the environmental 1970s, and certainly for those people who still didn't want the continuation of certain programs, at least they had a far better understanding of what we were attempting to do.

**HELMS:** Now the people in the watershed program tell me they think the amount of drainage that was done with the soil and watershed program has been greatly exaggerated.

**GRANT:** It has.

**HELMS:** The other thing that there was objection to was the channelization and how that was done. You say modifications were made. If that was the source of the controversy, then it would seem that since it created so much controversy about the agency, why didn't we just modify that right away and take care of the problem? But you can't change that quickly?

**GRANT:** It wasn't that simple.

**HELMS:** Yes.

**GRANT:** It wasn't that simple for the reason that the interrelationship between the upstream program and the downstream program was such that if you could not do something in the downstream area, it might mean a whole major modification in the upstream area, because your water release rates and everything else were tied to a different set of circumstances. For some projects that maybe were 75 percent without controversy, while the critical part of the program may have only been 25 percent, it was such an essential part of the program that you could not proceed unless you made major modifications in the rest of it. But the point you make that

drainage and channelization was exaggerated is a very, very good one. I talked with one organization that I won't identify, that simply told me, "Ken, the only way that we can get our total membership concerned enough to try to change what you are doing is to so overstate the case it would get everybody involved in it and willing to write letters." So, that's an admission that you get people upset when you create a major controversy, not a little controversy. I think we dealt with that. I mentioned earlier a letter that I received. This letter said, "You are one of the greatest despoilers of nature that we have ever had, hundreds of miles of streams are being destroyed in my state." The total in that state was less than five miles!

**HELMS:** There's another issue which goes beyond the Small Watershed Program, which is that few people in the 1930s were questioning the long-term results of drainage. SCS had inherited from the Bureau of Agricultural Engineering the units that worked with that, and it had not been looked upon disfavorably in the soil conservation movement. So beyond the Small Watershed Program, don't you have a problem to deal with in terms of a traditional activity that people were looking at differently, such as the cause of the loss of wetlands?

**GRANT:** Well, I think that perhaps two things are mixed up in the question that you asked: historical drainage and wetlands. Now with

wetlands obviously you may be getting involved in pothole country and on that basis there has always been a considerable amount of controversy relative to destroying habitat for ducks and the like. At the same time, some of these groups that are so concerned about that almost totally overlook the fact that we created a couple of a million farm ponds, a high percentage of which are also duck habitat. These are the things that you have to try to bring together. The historical drainage that we've done, like in northern Indiana, on flat agricultural land or land that you need to put tile systems in, I don't think has ever been very controversial. It's only when you begin to get into the interrelationships with wildlife habitat that you have controversy. Most people haven't really been too upset about the farmer who has forty acres of flat land who needs to install a tile system.

**HELMS:** But within the watershed programs, it was the southern projects which would have contributed to that.

**GRANT:** Two things were involved in these. We were involved basically because of the interrelationship with wildlife or a wild stream--don't destroy a stream that's always been like this and so on. Frequently those were the outlets for watershed projects, so you had a real controversy right there. But you also had people who said that the stream would never, ever recover and that it would be an open sore or an open ditch for time

immemorial. Now, I did a little thing one time in one state where we had a group that was promoting the never recover theory entirely, and instead of having a before and after picture, we had an after picture and a before picture. I showed a beautiful stream with banks stabilized and clear water-- just a picture perfect natural stream. And then I showed a picture of that stream with a steam shovel right down the middle of it. This, incidentally, was not done by the Service. Torn it all to pieces, spoiled banks laying out on the side, and everybody gasped, "What a destruction of a beautiful stream!" I said, "That's very, very true, the only thing I want to point out is that this is the before picture that was done years ago by a private group, and this is the way the stream looks today." Nobody could believe it. For streams that are completely clogged up with no outlet at all, if people want to keep it in that situation forever, there's no way you can accommodate them if you are going to provide drainage for watershed projects. The only answer to that one, really, gets down to "Are the benefits sufficient to justify going ahead with the downstream work, or are the wildlife benefits and others so unique and so beneficial that you can't do it?" If that's the case, maybe you can't do anything in there. And that's the decision you have got to reach. Now that's, I think, the unusual case. I am really totally convinced that in most cases we could develop a program that would accommodate the needs and desires of most of the people and

reach agreement and proceed. Sometimes, after long delays and sometimes at a much greater cost, but nevertheless it could be done.

**HELMS:** If you are looking at a multiple purpose project, often it is going to be more expensive than simply protecting agricultural land.

**GRANT:** That's right.

**HELMS:** Mr. Grant, I want to ask you a question that relates to what the philosophy and the work of the SCS should be. If you look at a little bit of the recent history, you will see trends in the 1960s where we have concern with rural development, work on the urban fringe, and helping small towns and small communities with their resource problems. Then we'll have other groups, maybe some of the agricultural groups, saying our work should be strictly agriculture. We have things like the Resource Conservation Act (RCA) process that says soil erosion is a bad thing and we need to target these scarce personnel and resources to that. Other groups say identifying prime farmlands to try to influence their use is not the proper role of a federal agency. You've seen this throughout your career. What was your opinion during your time as administrator and now?

**GRANT:** Well, some of the things that you related are becoming even more in focus now than they were at the time I was there. However, the beginnings of most of these things

were in place during the time I was administrator. I found that we had little problem in less agricultural states meeting some of the resource needs of groups other than farmers and ranchers, because it was recognized that they were going to have a bigger impact on what happened in the state than the few farmers and ranchers. And we were still able to service the farmers' needs, I think, quite effectively in most of those states. At the same time, we could provide basic resource information to the groups that were trying to make solid land use decisions based on town planning, and such problems as urbanization, housing development on very steep land in the mountainous regions, and all of these other associated environmental problems.

Where you really ran into the problem was in those states where the staff was inadequate to meet the workload of the farmers and ranchers at the same time they were being bombarded by needs that were surfacing from other resource groups. And in some cases, we actually reached the point where district directors and the Service would have to sit down and sort, determine, and allocate how much time should be spent on one and how much time should be spent on the other. Of course, I was encouraging, to the maximum extent possible, that the district supervisors and others should also take some of the burden off the Service by providing the leadership in those areas as well. I met with the president and board of

directors of the national association at one time because there was so much discussion taking place as to what percentage of our time was being allocated to farm and ranch planning and what percentage was being allocated to these other resource needs. The Congress was also concerned about that. There were some congressmen and senators from the heart of the agricultural areas who were quite concerned that we service all the farmers and ranchers that we possibly could, and that would be our highest priority. Whereas you'd get into other areas where one senator insisted that the highest priority in his state was that we needed to complete the soil surveys as quickly as possible so they would be available to all the groups that were making land use decisions, many of which would affect what happened in the state for years to come. You always had the side issues that were time consuming. As important as they were, you had to determine whether you could get into such things as the strip mine problems. Animal waste was another problem in which we had a great deal of interest. At the same time, practically all of my career as administrator I was fighting personnel ceilings. We had restrictions on the maximum number of permanent positions we could have and the number of temporary positions we could have, and so it was a juggling act.

In my judgment, the Soil Conservation Act and the Soil Conservation Service were supposed to take those actions with the farmers, ranchers, landowners, and users of land in such a way that the greatest good for the greatest number of people was effected. Land use problems outside of the farm and ranch were never outside of our province. We were working in soil conservation districts. All of the land within that district was land on which we could develop plans and provide basic information through agreements with districts. A person that owns five thousand acres of timberland and maybe is the controlling interest in a whole watershed that feeds town water supplies is deserving of attention if he needs information about the soils and how to manage them. So is the farmer or rancher who has a serious problem with agricultural waste management and in times of heavy runoff his overflow is going into streams that go down into towns that can affect water supplies. We had those problems and we had to contend with them. I tried to write policy guidelines in such a way that SCS people with the district supervisors would cooperatively make decisions as to where the highest priorities were. Some districts were quite different than others. That's not bad because the ultimate decision maker is whoever owns the land or controls the land and determines what's going to be done with it. I heard Dr. Kellogg say one time in one of the metropolitan areas that he'd just been in that he saw more soil erosion

as a result of road construction than there ever was from agricultural land in that area. Well, if that's true, it seems important that we supply the information necessary to try to correct that problem.

**HELMS:** What pleases you most and what were the strong points of your administration? To end, tell us your reflections on spending your career in the Soil Conservation Service.

**GRANT:** Well, my reflections on a career in soil conservation are all on the positive side. If I had my life to live over again, I would certainly not hesitate in the slightest to repeat the career that I had. Some things have happened now which I am not enthusiastic about. Since I made it a public statement at the 50th Anniversary of the Service, I guess it's no secret that I feel rather strongly that the Service has career people who are eminently well qualified in the field of soil conservation as administrators, and would have liked to see the agency remain headed by career professionals. That hasn't happened and I'm not saying that as a result of it the Service can't continue to do the job it had, it's just that my personal feelings--which are what I am expressing now--are simply that I would have preferred that the Service be headed up in a different manner. That is no expression of personal animosity toward any of the political appointees. I told one of them when he was appointed that I would do anything in the world that I could do



to help him, but he might just as well know that if I had had my choice of how we selected administrators, he would have never had the job. He replied, "I appreciate that and understand it fully."

I worked rather hard for quite a long time to get the Service out of "Schedule C." Finally, just before I retired, it was done by Secretary Butz, which is I think the way it should have been. It didn't last long and so now it's a different way and there's no sense of me lamenting that, I just say it as a fact. I think the Service offered a career opportunity and an opportunity for advancement commensurate with how much effort a person wanted to put into the job and how hard they wanted to work.

I had a hand at one time when I was a state conservationist in redrafting the personnel program of the Soil Conservation Service, when Miss Verna Mohagen was the director of personnel. I have always felt that in order to get people who had the strongest qualifications and best background to do the job, that we had to be a reasonably mobile Service. Now I realize that a lot of people disagreed with that. A lot of people would not move or were concerned about the impact on their families. I wasn't asking people to do things that I hadn't done myself. I observed the impact on my own family. I moved my son out of one high school when he was a sophomore and quite interested in staying in the athletic

program. I moved my daughter when she was a senior. I think, and both of them agree, that while temporarily there's a little impact from it, it was favorable to them in the long run because they went into a new environment. Particularly my daughter, who was going on to college, felt that a year in a large metropolitan area school, which happened to be Indianapolis, was very beneficial to her before she started Indiana University. However, every situation and every family is unique.

I made a statement one time and I guess there's probably no scientific basis for backing it up. But I thought that you contributed the most that you were going to contribute to a particular job in about six or seven years. After that, in spite of changing conditions, you would have to be making changes to programs that you yourself had implemented and there was always the natural resistance to change when something has been successful throughout a certain period of time. But my observations were that people in the Service who went into the most responsible positions were basically those who had the broadest kinds of experience. From the time that I was an area conservationist, I encouraged all the people that I supervised to very carefully consider moving on to additional jobs in different locations in different states if they intended to move up the ladder in the Soil Conservation Service. And probably some of the most satisfactory things that I can

remember are selecting certain people in New Hampshire and certain people in Indiana and certain people that I ran into in the field as I traveled around the country, offering them the opportunity to advance their career in positions of greater responsibility, and seeing them be successful. Even today, when people are being appointed to some job in a state, I had frequently recognized the talents of that individual back when he was a district conservationist. So did others, I'm not unique in that. At one time we had in the career system a program where every state conservationist was supposed to submit to the Washington office three names each year of people he thought the Service should watch over a period of time because they had great potential to advance in the Service. It's remarkable how many times those decisions turned out to be good ones. So the career system is something that I fought for, and I tried to develop that attitude in the employees of the Service. One of the things that I have been probably as proud of as anything in the Service is what we did do in career development for a lot of people.

One of the things that always was of keen interest to me and for which I developed a great deal of admiration was the dedication of the district supervisors around this country. The time and effort that these people put into a program--basically unpaid or only expenses paid--is unbelievable. I think it is one of the best examples of citizen involvement in the entire

agriculture field. Some of these people have served ten, twenty, or thirty years. I've seen them show up at meetings in snowstorms and drive fifty miles to sit in a meeting till eleven o'clock and then drive home and have to get up and milk cows in the morning, or go on to some other activity. I have the greatest admiration for them. I think we developed with the presidents of the NACD (National Association of Conservation Districts), when I was administrator, a real spirit of cooperation between SCS, SCDs (Soil Conservation Districts), and other local organizations that were involved in the total conservation efforts. Some people criticized this a little bit, I suspect because they got the opinion that it was almost one, that SCS and SCD was just the same thing. The difference between the responsibilities of the districts and the national association, and the Soil Conservation Service and its national office is very pronounced. Their hopes and aspirations may be tied to the same star in the sky, but the road they travel to get there is quite different. And I think that another thing that I tried quite hard to do was to develop a program with our people so they did not take over the responsibilities of the districts. At the same time, I resisted in a few cases when districts tried to get too far into the business of SCS like selecting people, and so on. So it was a two-way street.

Now, I guess somebody who starts in the field, working with farmers and ranchers, is always going to say that that's the time you felt like every day you had an opportunity to make a tangible contribution, one that was written down, and one that would last for a long time. As you drove around you could see your own landmark on the land in what the farmer, himself, had accomplished. So you took a great deal of satisfaction out of that. I personally liked the state conservationist job just about as well as any job I had in the Service, because I felt that it was a job with enough parameters to it. You could develop a far-flung program, one that involved a lot of people and one that made a lot of accomplishments. You had enough latitude to make independent decisions on both personnel and program activities so that you got a great deal of satisfaction out of the job.

I might just say as an aside, my wife always was with me in every career move that we made. She used to drive our personal car oftentimes to meetings while I was writing my notes for the speech on the way there, so she got pretty involved and she always said, "Be sure you keep one state conservationist position open for you because that's one we really could always enjoy."

The Washington office is different. It's unique, there is no question about it. It's a position where you have tremendous latitude for independent

decisions but at the same time you are within the guidelines that are being laid down by the Department and OMB. Sometimes you have the problem of explaining and justifying to Service personnel why you can't move in certain directions because there are other programmatic responsibilities in the Department that also have to be considered. That's why I always tried to be as frank and straightforward as I possibly could with the state conservationists and considered them members of my immediate staff. I made out their efficiency reports and so on. I felt that they contributed to the policy decisions, therefore they should know the background as to why certain decisions had been made when they weren't particularly the ones that they wanted to hear. Like personnel cuts, which nobody likes.

I worked with a number of secretaries and a number of assistant secretaries. And like every position, you develop closer working relationships with some than others. But I always felt that in the time that I was administrator we got a fair hearing from each Secretary and we got a fair hearing from each of the Assistant Secretaries. They all had different ways of operating. Some would go to hearings with you and simply turn the whole procedure over to you with Congress. Others would make a statement themselves and would get

deeply involved in the discussions throughout the whole hearing, which anybody can find out by reading the congressional hearings.

I enjoyed the years that I was administrator. I enjoyed the overseas assignments and I enjoyed the opportunity every year to occasionally get back into the field with field people. I walked away from my career with no hard feelings and no misgivings. I worked as hard as I could and did the job as best I could while I was there. I've maintained that interest in conservation ever since. I would, as I told you earlier, criticize the Service to some degree and maybe a part of it is my own fault too, because I was an administrator. I do not think that we captured the talent, the know-how, the background, and the experience of enough of our people when they retired. I know in my own case I felt that after being away for only a short period of time it was difficult to talk with other people about the programs the Service was administering because things were changing very rapidly and there was little if any effort that I could see to keep me or others like me informed. That may be something that future administrators ought to think about. Now, I will say in all fairness that every administrator since I've retired has invited me to attend their annual meetings and I have attended some of those. I have, I think I'm correct in saying, visited at least once or more with every single administrator. But I would also say that the opportunity to

contribute to the program after retiring has been pretty slim.

One state conservationist once said that they ought to call the period that I was administrator the "environmental period." Even though depositions with lawyers and things of that nature are not necessarily the things that you like to go through every day, nor are interviews with national magazines when they are obviously trying to focus in on the problems associated with soil and water conservation such as channelization and you can't even get a line in there about all the other things which the Service has accomplished, I do think that someone had to serve as a focal point to try to bring some rationale to the positions that the Service, the Department, and many of the environmental organizations were taking. I tried to do that. I tried to stay on a working basis with the heads of the agencies in the Department of Interior and with many of the national wildlife organizations, even though at times we were receiving sharp criticism for some aspects in the program. Nevertheless, I thought we had too much in common to fail to make a maximum effort to reach some sort of accommodation and agreement.

Oftentimes people have played environmental groups against farmers and ranchers. Nothing could be further from the truth. Farmers and ranchers control the land and most of the resources on which the wildlife in this country exists. They have

certainly as much reason to be concerned about the environmental problems as anybody does. I think the interests of the owners and the users and managers of the land, and the environmental concerns of other groups are such that they are natural groups to work together if they are ever going to solve some of the problems that they face. You know, the pothole country is one example. Farmers and ranchers own much of that land, but many other groups have very real concerns about what takes place. It's much better if we can work out a series of policies and actions that allow these groups to participate in the decision making process. And I think I contributed something to that aspect. I know I received a couple of citations and awards from environmental groups that at one time probably wouldn't have even come to my office, so at least we made some progress. And I know that the people that followed me have moved much further than we had an opportunity to do. I feel good about many of the things that we accomplished even in a period of considerable controversy.

The strength of an agency such as SCS with its many different programs and responsibilities, and with its presence in so many locations, is entirely dependent on the excellence of its personnel. As administrator, I was always proud of the outstanding quality of SCS people at every level of the organization and their devotion to soil and water conservation. The future will always be full of new

challenges. I'm sure the program will take new directions, but the need for dedicated men and women will always remain.



