

## LAND MANAGEMENT AND RURAL AMERICA

I wish I could predict a relatively uncomplicated future for conservation districts. But the conservationist's life hasn't been simple in the past, and there is no reason to expect any drastic changes now. There are just too many variables. Not only is the conservation job getting bigger--and more complicated--but a number of larger issues are causing an impact on many of our programs.

One of these is the possibility of further energy shortfalls. How would this affect efforts to achieve higher agricultural production? At the same time, what will happen on the economic front? Is inflation or recession or both in the cards? Should the Federal Government be getting into new consumer-oriented activities? What about providing more economic "insurance" for low income people and other segments of our society?

Some of these issues are philosophical. But they are also economic. Simple solutions to many of them would put further strain on the public purse. And a lot of private purses just can't take much more stress.

What does this mean for conservationists? Most likely that program support will be harder to come by--at least in the immediate future.

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Material for talk by Norman A. Berg, Associate Administrator, USDA Soil Conservation Service, at the Annual Summer Training Conference of the Missouri Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Springfield, Missouri, July 21, 1975.

And in many instances, we'll have to make do with what support is already available.

A full discussion of these issues could occupy the entire agenda of this Conference. So today, I'll zero in on just one of them: the issue of land management. Nearly everyone has something to say about this: legislators, conservationists, municipal planners, landowners, and just about anybody with a direct interest in the subject.

The national interest in land use and management has many facets.

Probably the most basic is food production. In many ways, our country is still regarded as the world's breadbasket. And in effect, it is. But to produce and market food profitably is tied to a lot of other things: for instance foreign trade, consumer pressures, energy costs, and environmental protection. Substantial changes in any of these would almost immediately hamper our unequalled efficiency in food and fiber production.

The issue of land management is also fundamental. We have traveled a long distance in the past century--from a government policy of land giveaways to help establish homesteads, farms and education to a general recognition of the necessity for conserving natural resources. No nation, including ours, can long afford unplanned growth without much thought for long-term impacts on land.

Consider the alternative for a moment. Is it possible that we could reduce--or even destroy--our agricultural productive capability through thoughtless land management decisions? Certainly that possibility exists. For the moment, though, pressures on our agricultural capabilities are manageable.

Our present land resources have the capacity to meet both domestic and foreign needs, even with less optimistic yield per acre assumptions. But a number of warning signals are flying, and we would do well to heed them.

One critical question is whether farmers can continue to increase yields per acre as they have done so well in the recent past. Another question concerns how much potential cropland will be available for use.

What about more productivity per acre? Since 1950, farmers have boosted total food output by 50 percent. They did this by substituting machinery, fertilizer, and other inputs for land and labor. Technology now in the pipeline should insure continued increases in the productivity of agricultural land. But higher costs of inputs and environmental constraints are putting something of a damper on the growth of this productivity. At best, productivity per acre is not expected to exceed the rates of increase of the last three decades.

What about the availability of potential cropland? Right now, the bulk of our agricultural output comes from 475 million acres of cropland. Excluding cropland pasture, the base for crop production is about 385 million acres. Until 1972, this 385-million-acre base was more than enough to meet food and fiber demand. Since 1972, however, the picture has changed. Even with the "produce more, protect more" effort, a relatively small amount of the total cropland available has been brought back into production. However too much of the land that has been returned to agriculture is susceptible to conservation problems. In the meantime, exports have increased 50 percent, consumption per capita is down slightly, and grain stocks are at a minimum.

At present, the availability of potential cropland in our country varies by region and is strongly influenced by the cost of reclamation, cost of operation, and value of product. In terms of short-run potential, we could probably, with some tradeoffs of concerns, increase the cropland base by almost 100 million acres--land now largely devoted to grassland in the Plains and pasture land in the Corn Belt and the Lower Great Lakes region.

The longer term outlook is naturally more hazy. It depends largely on developments in three areas: productivity, population, and exports. Productivity, as I mentioned, could be adversely affected by energy shortages and environmental constraints. Population is now expected to grow slightly above the current rate, increasing about 14 percent between 1973 and 1985. And export demand, particularly for grains, will almost certainly rise to higher levels.

Our inventory suggests that we have the land resources to cope with these events. The question is: will landowners and managers make the necessary conversions? Given appropriate economic incentives, they probably will. This is where intelligent land management decisions become critical.

Making these kinds of decisions will require help from many different sectors of our economy--both rural and urban. One thing that recent land use controversies have shown is that land use problems are not distinctively "urban" or "rural." This is one country, and land use difficulties afflict rural and urban areas alike.

As far as rural areas are concerned, I believe that we already know most of what needs to be done from a technical point of view.

In recent decades, there have been strong trends toward larger farms, more specialized agricultural operations, and subdivision of private properties. These trends may continue. So both SCS and the districts will have to give continuing attention to making sure that conservation plans reflect land use changes and meet new problems arising from the changes. We can't let up on the job of selling conservation of soil and water.

At the same time, we have--or are developing--the necessary scientific knowledge on which to base long-term land use decisions. The key is our ability to gain the understanding of rural people--to get their cooperation in carrying out sound land management and to harness the vast reservoir of skill, experience, and sound judgment that they represent.

To do this, districts really have their jobs cut out for them. Rural people have not always been willing to participate in the land use planning process--often because they lack a clear understanding of what this process really is.

Such an understanding could well lead to greater rural participation. So a good definition of the process would seem to be in order.

Basically, land use planning is conducted by a general purpose government that has the responsibility and broad police power to insure the health, safety, and welfare of all people. At its best, this type of planning takes a penetrating look at a community and decides what its strengths or weaknesses are.

Then, the process develops plans and strategies to encourage the continuation of desirable things and discourage the start or continuance of undesirable things.

Two distinct groups generally have a hand in planning land use.

One group consists primarily of private landowners (farmers, ranchers, and others) and public landowning agencies. It sees land use planning as a means for utilizing land for its own best interests, or for the interests of its clients, or for carrying out a specific legislative mandate.

The other group has general government authority over land use-- authority limited by state law to what is necessary to serve the public interest. This group normally delineates areas of land for residential, commercial, industrial, agricultural, and public uses. It regulates the intensity of those uses, based on considerations of traffic generation, capacities of public services and facilities, and desired physical and social characteristics of a community.

Basic authority for land use planning lies in the States, although State legislation for decades has delegated this authority in various ways to cities, towns, townships, and counties.

To operate effectively, land use planning should reflect compatibility between the land use plans of the first--the owner-manager group--and the second--the general government. It should also have the support of both rural and urban interests. There are some basic differences in outlook between the two, but these differences ought not to be irreconcilable.

To the average urban developer, land is simply one important element in his business. He must buy it at the lowest possible price, keep development costs as low as possible, and sell at a price that maximizes his profit. To the homeowner, land supports his family's largest investment, but the biggest value is the home--not the land it occupies.

But to the farmer and the district cooperator, land is the resource base that must remain productive year after year to support his or her business. His or her life's savings may be tied up in the land. It is his or her working base. It is also his retirement income a legacy for his children, and the foundation of his way of life. He or she will scrutinize carefully any type of new program or regulation that affects his land, its value, or his or her freedom to utilize it in any way desired.

Given this background, many rural people see the land use planning process as too urban oriented. And perhaps in the not-too-distant past, it was basically an urban growth management technique. But no more. Our total land resources--including our prime agricultural land--are simply too precious to be managed with only urban growth in mind.

Who can look at good farmland near a city and say with assurance that within 20 years it ought to be converted to housing, businesses, or factories? Perhaps it should. But are the reasons for conversion really compelling? Economic conditions change, people's desires change, and opportunities arise that can't be foreseen. So who is to say it would not be better to keep good agricultural land in the long-term business of producing food and fiber? Given today's projections concerning population growth and food supply, is there anything important than this?



Questions like these bother conservation districts and their rural people when they hear about land use planning. One farmer out of every six lives in a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area. As an SMSA resident, he has seen local planning processes come up with decisions that have affected the value of his land--and sometimes even his ability to stay in business. He has seen agricultural values lost in a scramble among developers to make a fast buck. And he has watched many growing communities fall farther and farther behind in efforts to plan and improve community services for a rapidly increasing population.

Rural folk don't have much patience with situations like this. They long ago learned how to make daily decisions in a high risk way of life. They are not novices at land use planning. With a strong hand from district conservationists, rural people over the years have been developing cropping systems, conservation systems, and land and water management systems of all sorts. They have, as you are well aware, a strong talent for selecting the most efficient system necessary to do a particular job and for implementing the plan!

They have also learned how to make necessary compromises for the good of an overall plan. To them, the most useful plan is the one that is most flexible: the one that gives them realistic options and that allows them to react to new conditions, make new decisions, seize new opportunities, and avoid new hazards.

They are wary of any proposal that fixes a firm "plan" for the future and never departs from it.



Where they see land use planning programs as efforts to draw new maps, or make fancier plans, rural people are often skeptical and are likely to remain so. This skepticism is reinforced by past experience where farmers have had little--if any--voice in the decisionmaking process. Now, they tend to look twice at any "plan-drawing" that appears to place rigid guidelines on an uncertain future.

This doesn't necessarily mean that rural people are going to oppose additional land use regulation and management. District conservationists have had a first-hand opportunity to observe rural folks as they led the way in designing such community decisionmaking programs as those that conserve and help develop land and water resources. Rural people will continue to help in guiding community investment decisions that influence land and water use.

So while most farmers, ranchers, and foresters will probably not be unalterably opposed to land use planning per se, they will be demanding a voice in any decisions that are reached.

Many of the new land use programs springing up in the States recognize this. Very few of them propose new map-drawing or plan-making for the sake of a document. Interestingly enough, rural people support these programs under specific conditions: when the programs allow fair consideration for agricultural and forestry interests, when rural people are given a chance to participate in the decisionmaking process, and when public interest is carefully balanced with private rights.

This is not just speculation. Several States with sizeable rural populations have enacted land use legislation. Such legislation could not have passed without rural support. Programs such as we see developing in Colorado, for instance, could not have evolved without the cooperation and assistance of rural people.

Probably the most potent force behind such State legislative actions is a growing recognition that efforts to keep good land for agricultural purposes ought to have a high priority. At any rate, these actions are well worth watching from the viewpoint of national agricultural capacity. Changes in land use and agricultural productivity must be monitored much more carefully than in the past. This monitoring should indicate whether the total public costs of a program of farmland preservation would be less than the total costs of present policy; that is, of bringing new land into production to counterbalance farmland conversion.

The Department of Agriculture in general--and SCS in particular--are very sensitive to these problems, particularly as they relate to land use planning. For one thing, USDA is the only Federal department to have a definitive land use policy statement--Secretary's Memorandum 1827--which was issued by Secretary Butz almost two years ago. Our stated policy is one of preserving and enhancing for agricultural use the prime farmland in this country. Then, too, we try to keep in touch with the situation as it develops and to make inputs where appropriate, especially with regard to agricultural lands and to the feelings of our rural constituents.

As far as the development of national legislation is concerned, proposed bills on land use are currently being considered by committees of both the House and the Senate. Also under consideration on the Senate side is a proposed bill that represents part of the Administration's overall proposal on energy siting.

All three bills face an uncertain future. President Ford has already postponed support for national land use legislation:

- because he had pledged to avoid new programs requiring additional Federal spending, except for energy;

- because present programs involving Coastal Zone Management and HUD grants need further analysis and trial; and

- because several states are adopting their own laws, which need testing.

The Administration does, however, favor enactment of S. 619, that would aid in planning sites for energy facilities.

Whether or not a land use bill emerges from this Congress, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is committed to continue its program of assisting rural land users and local governments with their responsibilities in land use decisionmaking. Under Secretary of Agriculture J. Phil Campbell pointed this out during hearings on the Senate bill.

"The Department of Agriculture is probably more directly involved with land use decisions on more land each year than any other agency of the Federal Government," Campbell said.

"We deal directly on a day-to-day, face-to-face basis with the private land users and local and state officials who make the private and public decisions that determine this country's land use pattern. The factual data that these decisionmakers utilize--soil surveys, flood hazard analyses, vegetation maps, and other environmental assessments--come largely from USDA scientists. As new demands face local decisionmakers, it is a local USDA office that is often called upon to evaluate the environmental capabilities of the land involved. We are also responsible for the management of 187 million acres of Federal lands in the National Forest System."

So USDA is already deeply involved in many aspects of land use policy and planning. And while we support the Administration's opposition to enactment of a Federal land use bill at this time, we feel reasonably certain that some type of such legislation could be enacted... if not this year, then later. And we are very concerned about how well any new legislation will meet rural needs.

USDA takes rural opinions on the subject of land use very seriously. There is a constant sampling of rural opinion flowing into the Department. The feedback we are getting is that land use is a problem--that current methods of making decisions that impact land are not adequate--that drawing more plans isn't the total answer--and that any new program for guiding land use must include all interests. Rural people do want local control of local issues. Some may see the need for a limited State role on the larger questions that extend beyond local boundaries. They certainly do not want the Federal Government telling them what they should and shouldn't do.

Those may be parochial, rural views, but we think they are realistic. Farmers, ranchers, and foresters survive on their ability to make daily decisions and commitments that reflect an understanding of land and how it must be used to provide current and future income and benefit. So rural people have a definite contribution to make in the land use planning process, and we strongly urge that they participate in it. In fact, we would urge anyone concerned to take part in such deliberations. This is as necessary in sensible urban planning as it is in maintaining a viable agricultural economy.

So we come back again to where we started. Our country is in the midst of great demands--and equally great opportunities. We must now, more carefully than ever, allocate our resources to provide the food and fiber, energy, transportation, housing, and other needs of all people. And under all is the land--the one common need of all.

Finally, on the agricultural side of the issue, districts have responded particularly well to the "produce more, protect more" campaign. We appreciate the strong initiative taken by districts in encouraging farmers to select additional cropland judiciously and to put it under conservation plan promptly. There are millions of acres of land in this country that can be added to the cropland total to meet pressing food and fiber needs without endangering soil and water resources.

The potential for increasing production with greater protection is good if the following conditions are met:

- (1) The production techniques employed are part of a long-range conservation system.

(2) Careful decisions are made concerning prime farmland areas-- whether to keep specific tracts in agricultural production or to convert them to other uses.

(3) Natural resource and research information is provided quickly to those who need it in making agricultural and community decisions.

On the other side of the coin, millions of acres should remain in pasture or range or forest because the soils are subject to severe erosion from wind or water.

There are other areas in which conservation districts are assuming an increasingly active role. Here in Missouri, this includes sediment and erosion control. Keep up the good work. I pledge our full support to your efforts, despite our perennial problems with personnel and funding limitations.

Together, we can keep this State an attractive and productive place in which to live.

Let's get to it.

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