

LAND MANAGEMENT AND RURAL AMERICA

It's good to be in the Bluegrass State, where people look upon resource conservation as a way of life.

This tradition is in evidence everywhere. It's visible in Kentucky's leadership in no-till farming practices to reduce erosion. It's visible in your State's efforts to manage water resources more effectively: this year's construction budget for watershed projects is the highest in your history.

Kentuckians are also conversant with the issues surrounding land-use planning. There's plenty of interest in how your landscape will look a few years hence. Your General Assembly has created a mechanism through which an advisory committee on land-use planning can be called into session by the Governor. In taking this action, the General Assembly recognized the potential dangers in unplanned growth and the obvious advantages in planning ahead.

Statewide interest in land-use planning was aroused by rapid population growth and urban expansion in many areas. Organizations such as yours have intensified this interest by alerting people to the need for local planning.

Material for talk by Norman A. Berg, Associate Administrator, USDA Soil Conservation Service, at the Annual Meeting of the Kentucky Association of Conservation Districts, Bardstown, Ky., October 1, 1975.

Your President, Bob Wade, has been making a strong pitch for land-use planning. And he's been getting firm support from the other members of your Executive Board--George Crafton and Kenneth Bean. Hugh Jones serves as Kentucky's voice on the Board of the National Association of Conservation Districts.

With this kind of leadership, it's not surprising that your Association's attitude toward land-use planning has such a powerful impact on this activity within the Commonwealth. Like you, those of us who work at the national level feel that local land-use decisions are almost invariably the most effective decisions. Local people know what they would like the future to hold for their areas. They can communicate their wishes to State leaders. And the State, in turn, can coordinate the needs, desires, and actions of various communities. As we see it, the Federal Government should respond to these needs--not dictate decisions.

Bob Wade has asked me to talk about some of America's land-use issues and how conservation districts are involved in them. This is a timely topic for discussion in your State. Many areas of Kentucky are already undergoing a period of rapid population growth and urbanization, and many other areas face a similar prospect in the years ahead.

Similar transitions are under way all across the country. I don't need to point out to you what this calls for in terms of resource planning. There is a strong need to blend urban and rural viewpoints into a unified, workable package.

Land-use problems do not lend themselves readily to "urban" or "rural" classifications. Land-use difficulties afflict rural and urban areas alike. Good land-use decisions benefit rural and urban areas alike.

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

Some rural people are reluctant to support land-use planning, an attitude that often derives from lack of a clear understanding of what land-use planning really is. Basically, land-use planning is a tool used to take a penetrating look at a community, decide what its strengths and weaknesses are, and develop plans and strategies that will encourage the continuation of desirable things and discourage the start or continuance of undesirable things. But developing a clear insight into the land-use planning process means taking a closer look at its components and structure.

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

One group, consisting primarily of private landowners and public landowning agencies, views land-use planning as a means for utilizing land for their own best interest, for the interests of their 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 latter group normally delineates areas of land for residential, commercial, industrial, agricultural, and public uses. It also regulates the intensity of those uses.

In order for this land use structure to operate at peak efficiency, rural and urban interests should cooperate fully. There are some basic--but not irreconcilable--differences in outlook between the two.

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 good price in order to maximize his profit. To the homeowner, land supports his family's largest investment, but the biggest value is the home--not the land it occupies.

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

Given this background, many rural people look at the land-use planning process as urban oriented. And perhaps in the not-too-distant past, it may have been. But no longer. Our total land resources--including prime agricultural land--are simply too valuable to be managed with only urban growth in mind.

In many instances, who is to say that it would not be better to keep a given parcel of good agricultural land in the long-term business of producing food and fiber? Given today's projections concerning population growth and good supply, is there anything more important than this?

For the time being, at least, it appears that there is enough land--either in cultivation or available for cultivation--to meet current needs. But with the world's population rising by about 80 million people annually, how long can the land presently available be regarded as "enough"? This is not a hypothetical question:

- * Many land use changes are almost irreversible.

- * Localized changes in agricultural land could throw the entire production-marketing process out of kilter.

- * Future increases in yields per acre may be held down by energy and environmental constraints, thus reducing the effectiveness of more intensive farming.

- * Crops requiring specific growing conditions may go out of production altogether if lands where they are produced are diverted to non-agricultural uses.

To help provide a basis for evaluating the situation, SCS has already started an inventory showing the extent and location of prime and unique farmland. Combined with land use and land ownership data, it will outline the dimensions of the Nation's reserve of highly productive land.

Earlier this year, USDA took leadership in a Seminar on Retention of Prime Lands.

Discussions and papers presented during the Seminar went a long way toward identifying what the prime lands are, issues related to them, steps that should be taken to assure careful decisions about their use, and the likely consequences of those actions. Participants recommended that prime lands be considered specifically in preparing environmental impact statements. They also agreed that a national organization similar to the Water Resources Council should be established for land.

Specific recommendations for USDA adopted during the Seminar include:

- * Intensified agricultural research aimed at improving productivity.
- * Formulation of a national policy for meeting food and fiber needs to the year 2000.
- * Development of a policy on the "retention of prime and related land for agricultural use" where urban and rural areas meet.
- * Development by USDA of a land classification system, based on soil surveys, to assist in making land-use decisions.
- * Continuation of the present policy of making final decisions at the State and local levels.

In order for these decisions to be effective, local people need to understand the process. They need to know what is happening to land in their area, why it is happening, and what the effects could be. They need to devise a total program for retention of prime lands--through tax structures, zoning, and other means. And they need to insist on high-quality urban development, while making properly located open land available to developers and homebuilders. Some communities have already taken such a stance.

Suffolk County, New York, for example, has developed a farmland preservation program.

Rural people are well aware of what can happen in the absence of effective 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 adversely affected the value of his land--and sometimes even his ability to stay in business.

Rural folk don't have much patience with 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. For years, they've been developing cropping systems, conservation systems, and land and water management systems of all sorts.

When necessary, they have learned how to make 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 likely to remain so. This doesn't necessarily mean that rural people are going to oppose added land-use regulation and management. They will continue to help in designing such community decisionmaking programs as those that conserve and help develop land and water resources.

But 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--Kentucky among them--have enacted legislation related to land use. Such legislation could not have passed without rural cooperation and assistance.

It is encouraging that so many people recognize an urgency in the need. Most States have to cope with land-use issues now. There is little time left to await the development of new approaches or new methodology. I do not believe that we will ever see the day when every mechanism is in place and every land-use resolved. Because of the social, environmental, and political implications, and the constant metamorphosis, it may be better to keep any textbooks on the subject in loose leaf binders.

This recognition was almost certainly responsible for introduction in the California state legislature of a bill that would prohibit urban expansion of any prime agricultural land. A similar land-use bill in the State of Washington would prohibit urban development in agricultural areas "unless there is no alternative." Several States and localities, including New Jersey, Connecticut, and Maryland, have under consideration programs that would use public funds to buy up the development rights to farmland, thus leaving land restricted to agricultural use.

All these activities 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 policy statement--Secretary's Memorandum 1827--which was issued by Secretary Butz two years ago. Our stated policy is one of preserving and enhancing for agricultural use the prime farmland in this country. We try to keep up to date with the situation as it develops.

We 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, this has not been easy. One thing we have learned from experience is that it is next to impossible to regulate Americans into doing anything they don't want to do. Laws can be ignored, regulations conveniently overlooked or forgotten. But some coordination of local and regional activities is certainly needed.

Groups like the National Association of Conservation Districts recognize this need. So does the League of Women Voters. This latter organization recently took an official stance on land use. Their position is that the Federal Government should exert leadership to:

- * encourage formation of land resource goals;
- * develop policies and standards for conserving land resources;
- * foster coordinated planning and management by all levels of government;
- * encourage cooperation between agencies and governments to insure consideration of all public and private rights and interests affected by land-use decisions;
- * minimize conflicts of interest among those who make decisions about land resources; and
- * insure more effective citizen participation.

Yet many rural interests are still suspicious of national land-use plans that seem to foreshadow Federal control and Federal "plans" for private land. Indeed, "control" is a word often used to inspire shock or fear.

When applied to Federal actions, it invariably describes something leading to no good. One of the dictionary definitions of "control" is less restrictive. It describes control as "effective and reliable skill in the use of a tool, instrument, technique, or artistic medium." In this spirit, current legislative proposals encourage new land management programs specifically designed to include landowners, users, and the general public in the decisionmaking process.

These proposals do not establish Federal land controls over private land. They emphasize a need to keep the Federal Government out of land-use decisions, while using Federal dollars to help State and local governments develop new programs. They support State and local arrangements for making land-use decisions and commit the Federal Government to respect those decisions when Federal investments affecting land use are being considered. And they recognize a need to restructure the process so as to provide ways for handling issues that have more than local impact.

USDA's position regarding current national proposals is that they are generally improvements over proposals made in previous years, but that the timing is not good. Implementing them would require expending too many new Federal dollars in the midst of an economic climate that dictates more care than ever in planning expenditures.

Over the long term, however, some kind of Federal role seems inevitable. A large chunk of land-use planning involves public works investments, such as airports, highways, parks, and power plants.

And as the Nation's largest single land holder, the Federal Government's actions on public lands can have a pronounced effect on private land use. A big objective in any Federal land-use program ought to be to reduce some of the conflicts that now result from patterns of Federal investments, programs, and actions.

This might be done by providing a Federal coordinating mechanism for reviewing and settling conflicts in Federal investment decisions. It might be done, too, by providing some Federal funds to improve the data services upon which local land-use decisions are based. A Federal coordinating mechanism could also help in developing a model state "package" of land-use laws. Federal grants might also be made available to those States that have enabling legislation modern enough to meet the model requirements.

Whether or not a land-use bill does emerge from this Congress, the Department of Agriculture is committed to continue its programs of assisting rural land users and local governments with their responsibilities in land-use decisionmaking.

We deal directly on a day-to-day, face-to-face basis with private land users and local and state officials. These people make the private and public decisions that determine this country's land-use patterns. The factual data that these decisionmakers utilize--soil surveys, flood hazard analyses, vegetation maps, and other environmental assessments--come largely from USDA specialists.

As new demands face local decisionmakers, it is a local USDA office or conservation district 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. As new state and local programs are developed, they need more and better data upon which to base land-use decisions. For much of this, they turn to USDA and conservation districts. Although this has often stretched our resources, we give high priority to assisting state and local governments in their land-use management responsibilities.

We are also basically concerned with the long-term prosperity of American agriculture and forestry.

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, but some see the need for a limited State role on the larger questions that extend beyond local boundaries. They do not want the Federal Government telling them what they should or 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. 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.

Land-use planning is everyone's business. It is a constructive step toward helping America meet the demands being made and the opportunities being presented. We must now, more carefully than ever, allocate 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.

We must not let a "crisis mentality" stampede us into developing this vital resource in ways that solve today's problems while creating tomorrow's. The time for debate appears to be running out--the need for action growing ever more urgent. The Department of Agriculture and Rural America are committed to be constructive partners in that action.

Here in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, you are fortunate that so many of your State and local leaders have recognized the magnitude of the job and the urgency of the need. This foresight--along with your natural instinct for taking preventive action where it is needed--can help your State avoid many of the difficulties experienced elsewhere.

Keep up the good work.