

LAND MANAGEMENT AND RURAL AMERICA

Jim Buck Ross

Moderator Socy. of Agr. & Phil Campbell

Thank you for inviting me to join in your annual meeting. ^{he's alternated} It isn't often enough that I have the opportunity to meet with an individual conservation district. We tend to focus our efforts on the state groups and national associations--to save time and travel money, I suppose. But although those collected groups make a significant contribution in natural resource improvement, it is ~~people like~~ you who have the day-by-day challenge and opportunity to put meaningful improvements on the land.

--You ~~get to~~ watch ~~as~~ a landowner becomes a cooperator and begins to reshape his property for the eventual benefit of many people.

--You ~~get to~~ talk to an urban resident or agency planner or educator or business executive, and witness changes--gradual as they may seem sometimes--in the way many kinds of land-use and management decisions are made.

--You bring a conservation approach to the lives of individuals and corporations; and

--You bring a special touch of genius to the appearance and the productivity of land.

Material for talk by Norman A. Berg, Associate Administrator, USDA Soil Conservation Service, at the annual meeting of the DeSoto County Soil and Water Conservation District, Hernando, Mississippi, September 11, 1975.

Rec. Bill DeARD
- 2 - Rep. Whitten

It's a special pleasure for me to meet with you and to say thank you for many jobs continually well done. Among other things:

--You ^{in Mississippi} have been recognized for your outstanding work in promoting conservation education in the schools, and P.T. Eubanks is chairman of NACD's education committee.

--You are in the running frequently for Goodyear awards.

--You have motivated a realtor enough to earn your Conservationist of the Year honor.

--Bill Hawks and others are out front in testing and demonstrating mulch tillage for saving soil and energy.

--You have capped off a continuing woodland activity by strong support of the State Tree Planting Week.

--You have provided state and national leaders such as Ray Turman. And I could go on.

Your commissioners have asked me to talk about some of America's land use issues, many of which you certainly have faced squarely as your county's population grows at a pace of 5,000 a year. I'd like to talk ^{first} ~~about some~~ of the issues and proposals in general terms, with the aid of slides. Then I will try to define a rural viewpoint on land-use questions and suggest the need to blend urban and rural viewpoints into a workable package.

Harold

LIGHTS OUT. SLIDE RUN BEGINS.

1. Land use is a ^{debated} ~~big question mark~~ today...in publications, news media, meeting halls and legislatures, ^{and Universities (it is the nat'l debate topic)}
2. Some ~~of the~~ reasons are instant changes that trouble us...
3. Some ~~are~~ troubles that have been around a while...
4. Most land-use issues are a culmination of many local irritations old and new. Let's take a look at some of them.

5-9 (Agricultural problems) - ^{tradition}

^{But} 10. Conservation districts have ^{long} demonstrated that farmland can be managed well...

11. To provide many products...

12. Including trees for healing land and for many other uses. ^{you & M.H. coop} ~~We~~ have done remarkably well. We need to reach ^{even} more people with our knowledge.

^{Never again} 13-26 (Problems with land ^{use} in transition)

27. Conservation districts have pioneered in techniques for building suburbs in a way that minimizes erosion and sediment...

28. Manages the increased urban runoff safely...

29. And helps make new communities worth living in. We need to continuously refine our expertise and get help to communities in time.

^{In some areas} 30-36 (Problems with surface mining and other activities that harm resource quality)

37. Districts have experience in reclaiming mined lands...

38. In choosing sites and methods for waste management, and in preventing

other resource ills.

^{Most M.S. citizens relate to} 39-44 (Problems of creating an urban madhouse)

45. Conservation districts can help provide many facts and alternatives in land-use decisions to build satisfying communities.

46. The American people deserve the best in land use--~~and most of them~~ *many* have ideas on what they want.

47. They want a quality environment--where they vacation...

48. And where they live, whether it's rural...

49. Or urban America.

50. They want a quality environment where they can learn about nature.

51. They want high-quality food...

52. And fiber...

53. And timber products; and that means there must be a high-quality, sustained agriculture.

54. The American people want space and facilities for a variety of recreation experiences.

55. They want space and habitat for a variety of wildlife species.

56. They want to preserve areas where they can learn about America's history, certainly an important activity in our Bicentennial observance.

57. They want most of all an environment for people--to give them a satisfying present and a satisfying future.

58. ~~We can~~ ^{we} have all these things? Look at the huge and varied natural resource base that we have. We ~~can~~ ^{should} use it wisely. We ~~can~~ ^{should} make *any* changes wisely.

59. ~~We can have~~ ^A land-use planning process that includes technical and financial aid from federal and state government. *in proposed*

60. We ~~can have~~^{need} a process with more interchange of ideas and data among agencies.
61. We ~~can have~~^{need} a greater interchange of ideas with the public. Local people have good ideas to offer--and they won't support plans that they don't understand and they had no hand in formulating.
62. Some small percentage of decisions that have been wholly voluntary ~~may need~~^{eventually} some form of regulation or regional or state approval.
63. Importantly, federal programs that interact with private efforts should be consistent with state and local objectives.
64. A land-use process that blends many of these needs is underway today at all levels of government.
65. The interchange among state governments is beginning to bring results.
66. SCS will work with other state and federal agencies to compile natural resource information and techniques for using it.
67. We will help local groups--including conservation districts--look at resource needs and make good decisions.
68. We will coordinate with other USDA agencies to keep a ~~weather~~^{weather} eye on national trends such as farm population, which is beginning to hold its own thanks to rural development efforts...
69. On changes in land use to accommodate America's growing need for food and fiber...
70. And on land use shifts to other purposes, particularly from our prime agricultural lands.

71. We will work with educators--as your district has done very strongly--
to give young Americans an interesting environment and an understanding
of it to apply in all subjects.

72. But the local community primarily must decide its future...

73. And figure out ways to get there.

74. Most of the land-use decisions today and tomorrow will still be made
by the landowner and his neighbors--and that's the way it should be.

75. ~~I think we~~ ^{we} ~~can~~ meet all our needs for land and still have room to
spread out.

76. I don't think the land-use "crisis" will get our goat if we help
each other decide what America wants and go after it.

77. The Soil Conservation Service is pledged to that end. We deeply
appreciate the close partnership of conservation districts.

78. (BLANK SLIDE)

END SLIDE RUN. LIGHTS ON.

I've tried to point out both problems and progress, and to suggest that land-use problems are not distinctively "urban" or "rural." This is one country, and 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. We have--or are developing--the necessary scientific knowledge on which to base long-term land use decisions. ^{as you know} 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.

When rural people are reluctant to support land use planning, their attitude may be due partially to lack of a clear understanding of what land-use planning really is. Isn't land-use planning basically a process carried out by a general-purpose government that has the responsibility and broad police power to insure the health, safety, and welfare of all people? Isn't the main purpose of this type of planning 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? *1968 Rural Dev Comm says LUP is a process by which*

decisions are made about the proper use of lands where land resources are committed to
The general answer to these questions is, of course, "yes." But *a particular*
any ~~really~~ ^{definition} ~~definitive~~ answer means taking a closer look at the components *use for*
and structure of land-use planning. *a period of time*

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

One group, consisting primarily of private landowners and public landowning agencies, sees land-use planning as a means for utilizing land for their own best interests, 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 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.

Compatibility between the land use plans of the owner-manager group and the land-use plan of general government is most important. The continuing ability of landowners and managers to plan effectively can be greatly strengthened when the general government properly exercises its authority to do its kind of land-use planning.

To operate effectively, this land-use planning structure should have the fullest possible degree of cooperation between rural and urban interests. There are some basic differences in outlook between the two, but these differences ought not be irreconcilable.

To the average urban developer, land is simply one important element in his business. He must buy^s it at the lowest possible price, keep^s development costs as low as possible, and sell^s 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 *usually* the land it occupies.

To the farmer, however, land is the resource base that must remain productive year after year to support his business. In addition, 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 this 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 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. Maybe the ultimate design of the city would be greatly enhanced if it were. But are the reasons for conversion really compelling? Economic conditions change, people's desires change, and opportunities arise that can't be foreseen. Fulfilling the plan's goals may require hundreds--even thousands--of private decisions about investments, sales, developments, and even life styles.

Furthermore, who is to say that 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 more important than this?

Questions like these bother rural people when they hear about land-use planning. One farmer out of every six lives in a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area ^{like the Memphis 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. For years, they've been developing cropping systems, conservation systems, and land and water management systems of all sorts. They have a talent for selecting the most efficient system necessary to do a particular job and for implementing the plan!

When necessary, they have also 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~~ ^{they} are often skeptical and likely to remain so. This skepticism is reinforced by past experience where farmers have had little--if any--voice in the decision-making 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 ^{forever} oppose added land-use regulation and management. In the past, they have led the way in designing such community decisionmaking programs as those that conserve and help develop ^{their} land and water resources. Rural people will still help guide 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. ^{Some} ~~Several~~ States with sizeable rural populations have enacted land-use legislation. Such legislation could not have passed without rural cooperation and assistance.

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 ⁱⁿ priority. This recognition was ~~almost~~ ~~certainly~~ responsible for introduction in the California state legislature of a bill that would prohibit urban expansion on 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~~ ^{for} ~~to~~ agricultural use. And the Suffolk County legislature in New York has authorized \$45 million in new bonds for local development rights acquisition.

These activities, in total, 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 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.

will As far as the development of national legislation is concerned, this ~~has not been~~ an easy task.

Groups like the National Association of Conservation Districts do recognize the need for some clearly defined action at the Federal level. Yet many rural interests are still suspicious of national land-use bills that seem to foreshadow Federal control and Federal "plans" for private land. To dispel this fear, present proposals encourage new land management programs specifically designed to include landowners, users, and the general public in the decisionmaking process.

Indeed, current proposals do not establish Federal land controls over private land. They support State and local arrangements to make land-use decisions and commit the Federal Government to respect those decisions when Federal investments affecting land use are being considered.

The current drafts specifically recognize private rights and take a much softer approach to Federal or State dominance over local and private decisions. Whatever the outcome of deliberations on a Federal land-use bill, it will be some time before the Federal Government is in a strong position to help local people in making truly meaningful land-use decisions. It will have been a long and exhaustive process.

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 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. 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 to our partners the 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 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.

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.

Best wishes for further success in your own efforts to help chart a meaningful future for DeSoto County.

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