

## LAND MANAGEMENT AND RURAL AMERICA

We meet at a time when our Nation faces economic, resource, and public confidence problems of major proportions. Recession-inflation pressures and the rising spectre of continuing energy and material shortages have created a climate of uncertainty throughout the country. Many are also concerned about the credibility of government itself.

The Department of Agriculture finds itself daily buffeted by proposals to elevate "target prices," launch new spending programs for consumers, or provide more economic "insurance" for low income people and other segments of our society. But there is strong evidence that such new programs would only worsen the already serious budget deficit.

Since many of our national goals and aspirations involve food, it is most conceivable that USDA and the food industry may be in for difficult times. Much depends on our skill in producing and managing food and feed stocks to meet our commitments in an increasingly demanding and restless world. But food production and marketing are tied to other issues, like commodity trading, consumer pressures, energy costs, and environmental protection. In each area, changing conditions and pressures on existing structures are hampering our food and fiber production efficiency.

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Material for talk by Norman A. Berg, Associate Administrator, USDA Soil Conservation Service, at the Land Use Conference sponsored by the Center for Science, Technological Political Thought, Denver Marriott Hotel, Denver, Colorado, May 19-20, 1975.

One such issue is the subject of this Conference -- the use or abuse of land. The entire system of public decisionmaking on private lands in this country is already being scrutinized, debated ---and sometimes changed. From Washington, D.C., to the smallest rural village, decisions that only recently would have been made without much thought for long-term impacts on land are now being considered in a different light. They must be. No Nation, including ours, can long afford helter-skelter, unplanned growth.

It is important that both our leaders and the general public view land and water management in light of growing demands for increased food and fiber production. America may still be the Land of Plenty, but this bounty is not limitless. Is it possible that we could reduce -- or even destroy -- this agricultural productive ability through thoughtless land management decisions?

For the moment at least, no one has a clear-cut answer to this question. But a number of warning signals are flying, and we would do well to heed them.

There is no question but that our present land resources have the capacity to meet future domestic and foreign food and fiber needs. This potential is sizeable, even with less optimistic yield assumptions. In serious question, though, are assumptions of continued increases in yields, as well as the actual availability of potential cropland.

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.

How 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. 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 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 regions.

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. And 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 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. 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.

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?

The general answer to these questions is, of course, "yes." But any really definitive answer means taking a closer look at the components and structure of land-use planning.

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 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. 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.

A Rural View

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. 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 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 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 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 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. 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. 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. And a similar land use bill in the State of Washington would prohibit urban development in agricultural areas "unless there is no alternative."

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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. 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.

#### National Legislation

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.

A few weeks ago, I joined spokesmen for the Department of the Interior, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Council on Environmental Quality, the Federal Energy Office, and the Department of Agriculture in testifying before the House and Senate Committees on Interior and Insular Affairs. The hearings concerned a proposed House bill on land use, H.R. 3510, and a Senate bill, S. 984.

Also under consideration by the Senate Committee was S. 619, a proposed bill that represents part of the Administration's overall proposal on energy siting--hence the discussion of both bills at the same hearings.

The President had earlier 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.

In our presentations, we recommended against enactment of either H.R. 3510 or S. 984, at this time. The Administration does, however, favor enactment of S. 619 to aid in planning sites for energy facilities.

We also recommended that Federal land use legislation assure that rural interests have an equal voice in land use planning processes developed in the States. We stressed our particular concern about the continued conversion of prime food and fiber producing lands to other uses. And we commended the House Subcommittee on the change that has been made in the treatment of this subject.

Specifically, earlier bills designated prime food and fiber producing lands as part of a state's programs for "areas of critical environmental concern." This concept appears most suitable when a fairly small, distinct, unique situation is involved. But prime agricultural lands, to coin an old saw, are horses of another color. These lands may constitute very significant portions of some states. So current land use bills in both the House and Senate propose to treat such lands as a separate major section of a state program. This should make it far easier to develop workable policies concerning these lands.

We also agreed that this year's bill is vastly improved in its recognition of private property rights--an issue that is causing grave concern in rural areas. The current drafts specifically recognize these rights and take a much softer approach to Federal or State dominance over local and private decisions.

At present, the House Subcommittee has finished marking up H.R. 3510 and has a draft for full Committee consideration. Whatever the outcome of deliberations on a Federal land-use bill, however, 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.

One important aspect of the legislation not yet receiving a great deal of attention is the so-called "federal consistency" provision. This small section may ultimately be the most important part of the legislation from the state and local point of view, as well as the most difficult from the federal viewpoint. What it says, basically, is that once a state has developed an approved land management program under the bill, federal actions and investments on non-Federal land will be consistent with the State program, unless it is determined by the President that the Federal action must proceed in the national interest.

Let's construct, for a moment, a scenario that might occur. A state develops a land management program. Somewhere in that state an atomic power plant is to be built with Federal permits and perhaps cost-sharing. It will take 5,000 acres of Class I farm land out of production. Local planners oppose the project and a decision is reached at the state level to oppose it as well. Federal permits or money could then not be utilized to build the plant. But let's carry it one step further.

Suppose the plant serves an interstate region badly in need of power-- or an area where operations of national concern depend on a new power source. Those interests will be pressing strongly for a Federal decision to continue. In USDA, we may hear the other side of the issue, as agricultural interests develop facts around the long-term loss of food producing capacity that will be incurred. We may feel strongly that the plant should be located somewhere else, on less productive land, even if it means an added initial investment.

Who is going to make the final decision? The Administrator of the Federal Energy Administration? The Secretary of Agriculture? The Secretary of the Interior? It seem likely that none of them could make such a decision alone, without lengthy and costly controversy.

Most federal agencies agree that the fundamental principle to be maintained in any land use bill is that one department should not determine the overriding national interest in land-use policies, decisions, or investments. These determinations must be made in the Office of the President. Environmental protection strategies have dominated past discussions about land-use legislation. Now, the time has come for a broader perspective, bringing together the view of the entire Administration, and creating a balanced institutional capability for dealing with the complex and important land use impacts of major Federal investments and programs.

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.

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Under Secretary of Agriculture J. Phil Campbell pointed this out to the Senate Interior Committee during hearings on the Jackson 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 land use is not a new subject to our Department," he continued. "The current awareness in America that land use decisionmaking institutions may need revamping has had considerable impact. 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 our Department. 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.



So 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 a little later. And we are deeply concerned about how well any new legislation will meet rural needs.

Secretary Butz, in a recent letter to the White House, emphasized this concern. "The Department is generally in favor of the concept of Federal incentives to improve state and local land management and decisionmaking," he said. At the same time, he pointed to the lack of a Federal organization for handling land-use problems on a national level. Such a Federal structure--to prescribe effectively the proper role of several key agencies now having significant land-use programs and actions--should not be difficult to develop.

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 the "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.