LAND USE

(From January 28 New Jersey speech)

In every state I've visited in recent years, land use is one of the prime problems and the subject of much discussion and proposals and legislation.

Professor Raymond Vlasin of Michigan State University characterized his state's land use problems this way:

"First, they are urgent. The incidence of land use problems and the conflicts arising from them appear to be growing in number and severity.

"Second, land use problems are broadly pervasive. They affect both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas. They affect all manner of public agencies, private groups, citizen groups, and charitable and religious groups. They affect all manner of persons involved in the production, processing, and consumption of goods and services from land.

"Third, the problems are complex and interrelated. Urban, suburban, exurban, and rural problems are intricately interrelated. Some of the most crushing problems arise from the complex of metropolitan area demands on nonmetropolitan regions and communities. Metropolitan areas look to non-metropolitan areas for waste disposal, housing, industrial location, utility corridors, transportation, power generation, water supplies, recreation, and second homes in rural environments. Many of the difficult problems arise at the interface between urban use expansion and adjacent rural uses impacted by that expansion. Other problems arise from urban demands or urban developments that "leapfrog" great distances into rural areas.

"Fourth, the land use problems are statewide. No area of the State is free of them. All areas experience one or more major land use problems."

Doesn't this characterization fit New Jersey as well?

Our partnership with conservation districts has resulted in land improvement, and changes in rural land use, to a degree almost beyond belief for a voluntary, cooperative program. Conservation plans cover nearly 600 million acres. More than 30 million acres have been shifted for conservation reasons to grassland, woodland, or use for wildlife and recreation.

But we have not solved all the rural land use problems with these efforts. Other concerns have been voiced over the years...cycles of overproduction...maladjustments in taxation and credit, with attendant rises in farm mortgage debts, tax delinquencies, bankruptcies, foreclosures...radical shifts in the geography of production, meaning large-scale abandonment of farmland in the East and creation of new cropland in the Plains, the Delta, and the Far West...and wholesale migration, especially of our young people, from farms and ranches to what they hoped would be greater opportunity in towns and cities.

There are two sides to the migration coin. On the one side, the tremendous capability of American agriculture to produce food and fiber has freed Americans to follow other pursuits, other careers. In no other country do so many eat so well from on-the-land efforts of such a small percentage of its population. Agriculture has freed Americans to take up 30,000 different occupations and perhaps as many avocations in pursuit of a better life. The result has been the tremendous industrial and commercial

outpouring to which New Jersey also contributes strongly. Ninety of the top 100 industries in the nation have facilities in New Jersey. We have all seen other results in medical breakthroughs and trips to the moon and new heights in music and many forms of art.

On the other side, of course, migrations over decades have produced changing demands on the use of land, changes in the demand for community services, changes in the ability of a community to support those services. A society with 30,000 different occupations has given us at least that many different outlooks or interests in how natural resources ought to be used and managed, where highways or new churches or new schools ought to be located, and many other concerns. People are different. They have different desires and different needs. Consensus is increasingly difficult to achieve.

Another result of American progress has been a great increase in leisure time. Demand for land for recreation purposes has mushroomed. The most popular national parks have all the problems of a city--congestion, crime, pollution, and so on. Private land is increasingly being called on to fill the demand for recreation.

That's a tremendous opportunity for a new source of income for rural landowners, and it's an excellent chance to make multiple use of natural resources -- farming and fun. USDA has been working with landowners to manage for recreation. But Americans in most cases haven't been willing to pay the full cost of providing the recreation service. In many cases they haven't been very good citizens when making use of another person's property. There are questions of liability and taxing procedures and others that haven't been fully answered.

A related demand has been the continuing increase in land purchase in rural areas by people from the city desiring second homes. An estimated 95,000 second homes were started in 1971 -- up from an average of 20,000 per year in the 1940's, 40,000 per year in the 1950's, and 75,000 per year in the 1960's. Second home starts are expected to reach 150,000 per year during the 1970's. Further, at least six recreational lots were sold in 1971 for each second home started. This may suggest purchases for speculative investment rather than as building sites to someday use and enjoy. It may further suggest differences in the care that is taken of the property involved. Absentee ownership is a very real problem in many States.

Other sources of conflict in rural areas are related to the increased awareness by most Americans of the importance of environmental improvement. Soil erosion, sedimentation, animal waste, and agricultural burning used to be accepted as the normal course of events. Today, people are becoming more aware that bad land-use practices damage air and water quality and harm the productivity of the land. People even in the most rural areas thus are less likely now to put up with these pollutants. In Iowa, a landowner can be stopped from exceeding soil-loss limits that his soil conservation district has set. Every state will be subject to standards for non-point-source pollution that are being developed by the Environmental Protection Agency in cooperation with USDA and other agencies.

These conflicts are small potatoes in comparison to the fringe areas around major cities and in populous states like New Jersey, where conflicts increase dramatically:

--Because of differing ideas and pressures on how land should be used, and

--Because thoughtless, unplanned, uncontrolled land use practices have created visible and extensive damage to the environment and the landscape.

The primary demand in the urban fringe has been for places to live. Housing subdivisions have grown up everywhere to try and meet that demand. In New Jersey, the number of housing units went up 20 percent in the 1960's--and it wasn't enough. Demand for housing is still high. Prices therefore are high, making it difficult for low-or even middle-income people to buy new homes and upgrade their living conditions.

All over America, subdivisions and shopping centers and community services have spread out across adjacent counties, often leapfrogging over agricultural land and creating helter-skelter communities that are difficult to service effectively. Urbanization has spread out into counties whose zoning laws or other land-use plans and policies either did not exist or were not prepared for the onslaught. Too many decisions to develop land were made outside the public forum. Too many decisions were made considering land not as a variable, damageable resource but as a standard commodity to be traded at will for dollars or political favors.

In New Jersey, land-use policies such as zoning have varied greatly among your 567 municipalities, each proud of its own ideas and goals, its home rule. With a tax structure based on property, many municipalities have been strongly motivated to attempt to attract "ratables" -- industry. When industry and people arrive, more services have to be provided. More

problems arise. More conflict in the use of land. In some municipalities zoning has been exclusionary; requirements for extra large lots have tended to waste land and have driven prices up.

Across America, growth happened before communities were ready for it, before they had figured out what resources they had and how they wanted them used and managed. The result has been significant loss of natural resources, many of them irretrievable. For example, between 1954 and 1964 Long Island in New York lost 29 percent of its coastal wetlands. Wetlands mean different things to different people. Some see marshes as areas to be bought cheap and filled in or drained to make "good", profitable land for development. Others see the marshes as vital for fish and shellfish spawning, for recycling or secondary wastes, for flood control, for natural beauty. One group at Louisiana State University has calculated that marsh lands along the Gulf and South Atlantic shores are worth $83,000 an acre.

Another ready source of conflict is good agricultural land -- level, well drained, with few if any soil problems. The same characteristics that make it choice for farmland may also make it highly desirable for urban uses because construction costs are lower. Should the best land be reserved for agriculture and houses be put on the less desirable land, thus increasing the cost of housing still further with no penalty to the farmer? Or should the demand for housing take precedence and farmers try to maintain crop quality and yields on the poorer land that may have conservation hazards as well as being more difficult to work with machinery --

with no penalty to the homebuyer except perhaps higher prices for hard tomatoes?

A difficult question to answer is: How much prime agricultural land do we need? On a nationwide basis, we still have plenty of good land. We're producing record crops while converting up to a million acres a year to urban uses. But -- some crops require specific soil and climatic conditions that can't readily be duplicated elsewhere. Orange country... grape country...avocado country...cranberry country. Once that land is gone, it's gone. Further, some of the prime land is in small scattered parcels that are not economical to farm with today's machinery.

Farmers don't like the high land costs, high labor costs and high property taxes that go along with creeping urbanization. Many farmers have been forced or enticed to sell out and move on.

The transition to urban uses in many cases is itself contributory to environmental damage, mainly:

--Through sediment pollution caused by tearing up large tracts and leaving them exposed to the threat of soil erosion for long periods of time, and

--Through paving over much of the land without considering the likely effect on stormwater runoff, the water table, stability of stream rights-of-way, and the like.

Many states including New Jersey are developing laws and programs to deal with sediment and stormwater management problems from urban construction as well as from other sources. Conservation districts are assisting in review of developers' plans in many counties. Of course,

sediment control and stormwater management measures are a new way of doing business for developers, and they do cost money -- another source of conflict between builders and public agencies.

It will not be easy to find solutions to all these questions and conflicts in land use. Some big decisions are going to have to be made. Who will make the decisions? On what will they be based? How much control will be needed? Exercised by whom? Over what land uses?

There is national land-use policy legislation at the U. S. Congress. The Senate passed a bill last summer. The companion bill in the House is awaiting a rule so it can be discussed on the floor. The committee is holding further hearings this week on the bill, and several interested people are urging that hearings be held around the country -- to get more two-way communication on what's wanted and what's intended before the final bill is marked up. Meantime, another House bill has been introduced on the same subject.

Other Federal legislation has been introduced or enacted recently that will impact on land use policies. The Coastal Zone Management Act is law, and some funding is already going out to the States. Some of those allocations are pretty substantial. Bills to aid in reclaiming surface-mined lands and control future mining are being discussed.

A lot of specific state legislation regarding land-use policy is in effect or on the way. More will be needed to resolve some of America's land-use conflicts.

Most land use decisions, however, will still be made at the local level. It will be up to communities to decide for themselves what their resources are and what they want to do with them. This means two very important items will be needed:

--Facts about the natural resource base, such as soil surveys, inventories of soi and water conservation needs, geologic data, and a host of other kinds of information: and

--A way of finding out what the people in a community really want for their future. Increased public participation and increased public awareness will be the key.

Governmental units will have to allow as many people possible to express their views and goals, and then try to determine what is the best total interest of the community, in a planning process that has some flexibility in it. No one will get everything he wants -- there will have to be some tradeoffs.

But America does have enough land for all uses for all citizens and a high-quality environment -- if a planning process is developed and used at all levels of government, and if each landowner accepts responsibilities as well as rights in the land resource he manages. There is room -- and need -- for more urban growth, even in New Jersey.