

LAND AND PEOPLE EQUAL ENVIRONMENT

Pres. Lew Sellers

I'm glad to be in Alabama once again and in the company of good friends of the Soil Conservation Service.

I'm glad, too, to be discussing environmental questions with you. I suppose in some quarters it's getting difficult these days to find a different way to express "environment" in a meeting theme or a banquet address, because the word and the concern seem to be on everyone's mind...Even the student who came home with a bad report card and asked, "Dad, Do you think my problem is heredity or environment?"

Your theme is a positive one--and it recognizes that people are an important part of resource conservation. I know you will be talking about problems in your sessions, and I will mention some a little later on.

---

Speech by Norman A. Berg, Associate Administrator, Soil Conservation Service, at the annual meeting of the Alabama Association of Soil and Water Conservation District Supervisors, Montgomery, Alabama, December 7, 1970.

~~But~~ particularly since we started out with awards this morning, I want to dwell for a few minutes on successes and on the better environment that you have been working toward for a long time without much fanfare, and with even less pay. I do understand that district supervisors' salary will be doubled next year...but for those of you who may be confused by the new math you have to help your kids with, two times zero is still the same rate of compensation.

You know, farmers have been getting a lot of criticism for polluting everything and accepting doles for not growing anything, and conservation districts and agencies have been stomped on for this and that.

But let me read you an excerpt from a speech by Under Secretary of Agriculture Phil Campbell earlier this year:

"Somehow our farmers and conservationists with the help of the USDA and other government agencies, despite their alleged ignorance, their alleged fumbling and bungling, inexpertness and inefficiency, lack of ecological knowledge and general ineptitude--somehow they have managed to

create through the stewardship of soil, water, and forest resources the most abundant food supply the world has ever seen--plus safer drinking water for a higher percentage of our people than ever before--plus facilities for recreation unmatched in history--plus vastly increased opportunities for fishing and hunting..."

That's quite a testimony. And a lot of that refers to the good work that you have done here in Alabama. You've changed the face of the land, and you've changed the faces of people because you've helped them to a better life. And if your efforts of the past are of any value in predicting the future, we can continue to expect good things from Alabama.

Even in the midst of headlines and documentaries about our Nation's ills, I think all Americans still have a lot to be grateful for as we near the end of the first year of a new decade. Look with me for a moment at what this great Nation has worked for and achieved:

--Better schools, colleges, and universities.

--Expanding industry and commerce.

- Abundance in agriculture.
- Astounding medical advances.
- Landings on the moon, by men, and safe returns, and with the help of Huntsville, Alabama.
- The highest wages in the world.
- Conveniences by the dozens--in the home, the office, the factory, and on the farm and ranch.
- Recreation opportunities of every description.
- The arts--on canvas, record, film, stage and printed page.
- Over 3,000 conservation districts and 18,000 members of local governing boards, and a growing number of volunteer helpers, men and women and youth.
- And a government concern for resources that is reflected in research, education, loans, cost-sharing, and technical help for more than 2 million cooperators.

Now I am aware as you are that we do have some serious challenges in this Nation. President Nixon has called our environmental problems "very serious, indeed urgent, but they do not justify either panic or hysteria. The problems are highly complex, and their resolution will require rational, systematic approaches, hard work and patience. There must be a national ~~commitment~~ and a rational commitment."

And that commitment extends to you in soil and water conservation districts. As I said, you've made a contribution to environmental improvement, sometimes without having that as your primary aim. But you can do more--you need to do more to stay attuned to the needs of the resources and people in Alabama.

The National Wildlife Federation just issued its second Environmental Quality Index, in which it rates each of the Nation's major natural resources. Every rating has slipped since the first Index last year. The soil is rated the highest--which is a tribute to your efforts.

But, the Index report says, "There are warning flags. Due to lack of broad land use planning, we needlessly cover rich soil with concrete. Soil pollution is becoming a growing problem as we load the soil with nitrates and pesticides and other chemicals, whose runoffs imperil and pollute our streams..." The Federation called for a bold and comprehensive national land and water plan. It called for Federal encouragement to states to develop state-wide zoning. And it called for giving more people a voice in these decisions, to help plan the kind of America they want.

There are warning flags in Alabama.

You gained 100,000 new residents in the 1960's, over half of them in and around Huntsville. You gained many new industries. These gains mean new opportunity and new tax base for communities, but they also mean the need for many new services and many new acres of urban land. Guiding the growth of communities is a job that conservation districts are eminently qualified for, because you are a central source of many kinds of assistance programs that growing communities can use.

You can help avoid mistakes--such as building on soils that will shift around, or will be likely to flood often, or will do a poor job of filtering wastes. You can help avoid sediment pollution from construction practices that leave soil bare for long periods of time.

But you can--and you need to--go beyond that to help communities find new or better water supplies, new recreation opportunity, and meet a host of other positive aims.

You can--and you need to--see to it at the same time that the needs of agriculture are considered in community decision making.

You can--and you need to--play a vigorous role in land-use planning from one-acre tracts to entire planning districts.

Agriculture has its own warning flags in Alabama. The rural scene is changing. Bigger equipment has made some of the old-style terraces a dirty word, and unless the larger, parallel terraces or some form of minimum tillage is substituted, the old specter of soil erosion is back again.

Some of the steeper land has been retired, which is good; but this has been offset by putting many new acres--some of them marginal lands--into soybeans. Other land has been shifted over to pasture for livestock, thus helping the cause of erosion control but creating a new need for the proper disposal of animal wastes.

You and the SCS are moving forcefully into the area of waste disposal assistance. We worked closely with the Extension Service at Auburn, the Alabama Health Department, Alabama Water Improvement Commission, and other agencies in developing specifications for anaerobic disposal lagoons for poultry, hogs, and dairy cattle. Nearly 400 landowners have requested SCS design help and Agricultural Conservation Program cost-sharing for lagoons. SCS also has been giving interpretative soils data to towns and cities to aid in selecting sites for sewage lagoons and sanitary landfills.



Another warning flag in Alabama might be the landowners that you haven't reached yet--people who need your services but don't know they are available or need some encouragement or followup. This is a continuing assignment. And closely related to it is a vital assignment--that of letting more people in Huntsville and Birmingham and every other urban center know of your experience and your role in environmental improvement.

Some of the people there may directly need your assistance. Others may be looking for an involvement--something to do about the environment--and they may be willing to lend you a hand in your increasing workload. And, of course, the day when a handful of district supervisors could do it all ended long ago. You need to welcome new hands and new ideas.

And all of the people in the cities need to know of the importance of your work because they have a large measure of control over policy decisions and fiscal decisions that very much affect you. At a recent meeting of university administrators in Washington, D.C., Secretary of Agriculture Clifford Hardin made the statement that this nation was approaching a consensus about the environment. And it was this sense of

national purpose, he said, that brought about the Soil Conservation Service and conservation districts, that defeated polio, that produced some action in the field of civil rights. This kind of national commitment, the Secretary said, should help to get things done in the environmental field. At the end of his talk, one listener asked why this consensus wasn't making it any easier for USDA and agricultural college departments to get sizeable appropriations for environmental work. Mr. Hardin's answer had two points: (1) we have been in a tight budget situation that affects every national program or issue, and (2) "We haven't convinced the public that we are active in this area."

Or as the Public Advisory Committee on Soil and Water Conservation said to the Secretary in September, better air, water and other parts of the environment result from U.S. Department of Agriculture programs-- and your programs--but not enough people know about our contribution.

You may be doing great things--but who knows about you? How many people even realize they live in a soil and water conservation district? How many people know about the Soil Conservation Service out of the thousand or more Federal programs in 57 Departments and independent agencies?

At appropriation time we compete with those other thousand programs for the hard-pressed Federal dollar, and no one agency gets what it thinks it needs. At a time when the cost of doing business has continually increased, SCS has had to cut back or relocate some of its staff in Alabama and nationwide.

When an average American picks up Life Magazine or Readers Digest and notices a story on SCS and conservation districts turning wild rivers into ugly pieces of machinery or making moonscapes out of streambanks, is he able to sit back and muse, "Well, that's not quite accurate. Restoring the capacity of stream channels sometimes is needed in watershed projects to get enough flood protection. And project sponsors work closely with Federal and state agencies to make sure these improvements can be made with the most favorable total impact on the environment. And in many projects improved channels are providing excellent fishing..."

Too many people do not have that kind of understanding.

Headlines indicate that too many writers and luncheon speakers think there has been nothing done to improve the environment--despite more than three decades of significant soil and water conservation work.

Many individual rural landowners have a ready knowledge and appreciation for the work of SCS and conservation districts. But they are not the only ones involved today in bringing about decisions in the use of land and water. They are not the only ones involved in determining which agencies and which organizations are in a position to help in environmental improvement.

Every citizen is or wants to be involved today. And you in conservation districts must work increasingly to create an image of providing useful--vital--assistance to the community, if you expect the whole community to support your efforts.

You need a little public relations, if you will. And the classic PR textbooks say there are two parts to good public relations:

- 1--Doing good things; and
- 2--Telling people about them.

The first item is not automatic, It doesn't just happen. Are we doing good things?

. If the workload is too large, do you take a continuing look at priorities so that the most meaningful or pressing work gets done first?

. If an environmental or community problem arises, is your thinking broad enough to look closely as how you could help, or do you prefer to stick with the tried-and-true activities?

. Are you working to get more basic information to be helpful with, and to interpret it for your community needs?

! Are you making sure that every conservation practice is planned and installed and maintained in a way that makes the practice's impact on the environment the most favorable possible?

! Are you looking at your long-range program, your state enabling act, your working arrangements with other institutions to see that they are up to date? Districts have been doing this all over the country, and their "District Outlook" activities have been both timely and encouraging.

And if you are doing good things, then you'd better tell people about them--not just in the good old farm belt or other already friendly audiences, but also out where all the people are.

. Does your district have a newsletter? If so, how much time do you spend on it? Where do you send it? Who reads it?

. Do you seek out editors and reporters who always print your stuff, or do you work actively to reach the people who need to know about the information and assistance you can provide?

. Do you know the school administrators in your district, and have you worked with them to put the out-of-doors in every classroom and to put every student in the outdoors so that tomorrow's decision-makers have an environmental understanding on which to base their actions?

There are perhaps more questions than answers. I simply want to stimulate your thinking about matching people and their concerns and interests with yours.

We have embarked on a new decade during which changes and challenges are likely to come very quickly. Concerns new and old will occupy our minds daily--like the fellow whose mother-in-law visited his home twice a year, and stayed six months each time.

But I believe that soil and water conservation districts are capable and viable organizations that will meet these challenges daily--and will get out ahead of problems to help decide the future of their communities. You've shown you can do it--all the rest is practice. And your practice field is Alabama--from the urban corridors to the rural crossroads and in between.

7  
There are resources and people who need your helpful hand all over this State.

3516

Biographical Sketch  
Norman A. Berg

Born on March 14, 1918, at Burlington, Iowa, Mr. Berg received his B. S. in Agricultural Education from the University of Minnesota and a Masters of Public Administration from Harvard University. He began his career with the Soil Conservation Service at Downey, Idaho in February 1943, following experience as an Adult Education instructor in Minnesota. He served in the U. S. Marine Corps during World War II, had experience in various line and staff positions in Idaho and South Dakota, and came to the Washington Office as an Assistant to the Administrator for Legislation in 1960. In the Washington Office he also served as Assistant to the Administrator for the Great Plains Conservation Program and Deputy Administrator for Field Services prior to his present position as Associate Administrator of the Agency.

SCS  
11/19/69