MEETING OUR NATURAL RESOURCE RESPONSIBILITIES

Your meeting theme is a long but important one:

--Resources do need to be conserved...we haven't finished the job after four decades of good work.

--Resources do need to be used or developed to provide food, fiber, timber, and a wide range of other community needs.

--The needs...the impacts...are obvious; but time passes rapidly.

--The duty is everyone's to care for our resource heritage.

Your conference will focus clearly on each element of your theme, and you will give and take some useful suggestions for district programs back home.

I hope your conference will further solidify what I consider to be your greatest strength in a time of heavy pressures, great demands, and awesome responsibilities--your tremendous cooperative spirit.

In 1921, Woodrow Wilson said: "The highest and best form of efficiency is the spontaneous cooperation of a free people." He was talking about the role of U.S. industry in wartime. But it fits the subject of resource conservation equally well. It clearly captures the essence of the soil and water conservation district philosophy, and the reasons for your tremendous record of district achievement.

Material for talk by Norman A. Berg, Associate Administrator, USDA Soil Conservation Service, at the annual meeting of the Alabama Association of Soil and Water Conservation District Supervisors, Huntsville, Alabama, December 6, 1976.

After next January 20th I will begin working for my eighth President and tenth Secretary of Agriculture. Mel Davis is the fifth SCS Administrator I have served. In all the changes in leadership and programs through these years, free and enthusiastic cooperation has been the common thread. I hope we can re-emphasize and strengthen it now.

As the President-Elect's transition team begins its work preparing for the January changeover, the future will depend on several things the next President has in mind...in what directions and with how much zeal he will try to reshape the Federal government structure...how much priority he will give to soil and water conservation or environmental improvement as compared to all other demands on Federal money and manpower.

The future also will depend upon trends in worldwide climate... population...social and political forces.

The future in Alabama will depend to a large degree on you...on how you improve or accelerate your individual district or state association programs... on how you are able to shift emphases or priorities...on how you can sustain strong and innovative leadership. I would like to spend my time this morning discussing a few ideas on how to concentrate your attention for a more meaningful contribution to conservation in Alabama.

<u>First, get more conservation installed on the landscape where people can see that it works</u>. This is what makes our movement successful. Planning is an important step...but plans on paper won't stop any sediment by themselves.

The landowner or urban developer or mining company has to turn what he has agreed to do into work on the land. Meetings are important steps...but proceedings or resolutions by themselves won't feed many cattle or improve land-use patterns. You have to take the ideas and encouragement and commitment home and so something with them...on the land.

This is a challenge in Alabama, where more than 60 percent of the gross soil erosion comes from the 37 percent of your land that does not have conservation treatment, according to a recent SCS estimate. It is a challenge throughout the seven states of the South Atlantic-Gulf water resource region, which is among the four most severely eroding areas in the country. It is a challenge across America because we still are too far above the natural geologic erosion rates. Our streams and our citizens will not tolerate it.

Conservation is a matched set of practices or systems in place and being used to meet the specific needs of each farmer or community. Conservation means going beyond miles of terraces or acres of tree planting to achieve measurable reductions in land and property damage and measurable improvements in water quality.

Second, focus on keeping important farmlands in agriculture.

The best acres--"prime," "unique," and other designations--are usually far easier and cheaper to protect from wind and water erosion than other lands. They produce high-quality crops with less energy than do other lands. In some cases, they may provide the only suitable area for high-value specialty crops..

For food and fiber...for environmental protection...for energy conservation--it makes good sense to keep an eye on our supply of good farmland and the competing demands that grow each year for its best use.

Total U.S. cropland has hovered around 400 million acres for many years, declining very slowly. But some of the 400 million acres of cropland in 1976 are not the same acres that were farmed in 1949. Cropland has been abandoned in some regions at an average rate of some 2.7 million acres each year, while in other regions new cropland has been developed at the rate of about 1.3 million acres annually. Thus, the cropland in the United States is a moving and changing land base, even though the total acres remain roughly the same.

A recent SCS study of potential cropland indicated a significant decrease in cropland acreage between 1967 and 1975. This decline, from 431 million acres to around 400 million acres, appears to fly in the face of the "fence-to-fence" planting trend observed since 1973. Closer examination reveals some possible answers. The CNI definition of cropland includes land in rotation hay and pasture, conservation use, summer fallow, and temporarily idle cropland. In 1967, 301 million acres out of 431 million were actually harvested. That left around 130 million acres that were either in other uses or suffered crop failure. Moving to 1975, the SCS cropland estimate indicates a reduction to about 400 million acres of total cropland, while the estimate of acreage harvested increased to around 330 million.

Thus, cropland harvested may have increased 10 percent in the past 8 years (accounting for the fence-to-fence planting) while the total supply of cropland declined almost 10 percent in the same period. This could indicate that, rather than adding new cropland to the inventory, farmers responded to the need for increased production by planting cropland normally held in rotation hay or pasture, summer fallow, or conservation use. In Alabama this year, farmers turned 225,000 acres from pasture to cotton, corn, peanuts and potatoes.

Indications are that much of the newly planted land over the past 10 years was marginal cropland, and that bringing it back into production has resulted in intensified erosion problems. If this is true, it means that U.S. farmers have used up much of their readily available "expansion" acres, and now have less flexibility than ever before. It also means that our current expansion has not been without its environmental costs.

Meanwhile, if these are accurate interpretations, what about all those other acres of potential cropland? The 1967 CNI identified a total of some 631 million acres of Class I, II, and III land, or 200 million acres more than is now being cropped. Why are these acres still in grass or trees? The answers are complex, of course, but economic factors obviously play a heavy role in whether or not private owners decide to go into crop production. Good land may exist in small units, or small ownerships, or in areas where the agricultural infrastructure does not exist. It may be held for other important land uses, or by owners who have no intention of using it for crop production.

About 2 million acres of farmland are being "irreversibly" lost each year to urban buildup, with an additional 1 million acres going under water in ponds, lakes, and reservoirs, according to the potential cropland study.

We learned some other interesting things. There may be about 385 million acres of "prime farmland" in the Nation. Of that total, about 250 million acres of land that rate as prime farmland are not now being farmed. Why is this, in light of apparent demand for food?

Twenty-four million acres have no apparent reason for not being farmed. No significant development problem could be identified. In addition, an estimated 45 million acres are committed by the landowners to noncropland use. Thus, 70 million acres of prime farmland are not being cropped simply because the current land users do not see it to their advantage to do so.

Do we really have over 200 million acres of potential cropland that can be fairly rapidly brought into production if needed? Apparently we do not--somewhere around 100 million acres is more realistic.

Some 24 million acres of "prime farmland" could be converted simply by beginning tillage. These soils would require little or no protection from erosion and, with normal rainfall, should produce high yields.

Another 54 million acres of "high potential" land would require some soil and water management to prevent erosion and sediment or to dispose of unwanted water.

Another 33 million acres has "medium potential" for conversion to crops. These acres pose more serious erosion hazards and water disposal problems and would cost more to convert. Yet, with application of current technology, these acres could be used for crops if the need arises.

This still sounds like a lot of land, but keep in mind that almost half that amount has been added to the cropland harvested in just the past 4 years. So, while it appears that we still have an ample land base for the reasonable future under normal conditions of climate, demand, and foreign trade, it is equally obvious that the days of complaceny about America's cropland supply are over. Prime land is not a surplus commodity. It is time to rethink programs, policies, and priorities!

The Department has started this process, with the issuance of Supplement 1 to Secretary's Policy Memorandum No. 1827 on Land Use. This supplement, dated June 21, 1976, is a strong statement on prime farmland, range, and forest land. It directs the Department's agencies to "advocate the protection of prime lands from premature or unnecessary conversion to other uses," and to "review their programs to insure consistency with the intent" of this new policy. We see this as an important first step, but only a first step, in a continuing process of involvement in land-use questions involving America's prime land.

A second step was taken when the Council on Environmental Quality asked all agencies to keep prime farmlands in mind when they propose major Federal actions...to assess the effects of their actions on prime farmland along with other environmental impacts.

Another important step is represented by SCS efforts to help state and local groups understand what and where important farmlands are, so that decisions can be made on their use.

By 1980, we plan to publish county-wide maps of important farmlands for a third of the Nation, focusing on areas that have the most intense development pressure. Greene, Baldwin, and Lawrence counties were part of a pilot study last year. Along with the maps, SCS can respond to questions and provide other technical information or review.

The rest of the steps are up to you. You can and you must be an outspoken advocate for agriculture. You need to be thoroughly acquainted with and immersed in prime farmland designations. You need to know the political and economic situation in your district, and to help design fair, effective ways of retaining farmland where you and the landowner think it should be retained. You need to make your voices heard. You need to make your resource information known to all the governments and planning officers who are asking for help...and to some of them who don't know they need your help.

Land that will ultimately be urbanized and that to be retained in agriculture rests with the private owners of the property, operating under land-use controls of local and state governments. And that is the way it should be.

Third, improve pasture land and the grazing opportunities of woodlands. There is great pressure on these lands--from shifts in use to rowcrop production or out of agriculture...from too much or too little moisture... from increased livestock numbers. There are sound reasons for pasture as a land use:

--It is a profitable use for many acres that are less well suited economically or environmentally for other uses.

--It saves energy in transporting feed to animals, because they walk around and collect their own nutrients.

--It saves energy in collecting, transporting, and applying animal wastes.

Conservation districts and your state association can make certain that pasture and grazeable woodland get full attention in conservation programs...that they fit each district...that they address all the uses and benefits of these lands...that they involve all of the people who have an interest in these lands.

You already have carried out pasture and hayland management on more than half a million acres in 1976. Your record is impressive...and the challenge ahead is clearly more of the same.

Fourth, demonstrate and design a rural water quality program that will work. Public concern about water quality is evident in Public Law 92-500 and in all the conversations about that act. In soil and water conservation, we have focused on problems of water quantity--problems of too much, such as flooding and drainage and soil erosion...problems of too little, such as drought, wind erosion, loss of vegetation, and irrigation needs.

At the same time, our programs have had immensely favorable effects on water quality. We have done less well in documenting and publicizing those effects. We don't have all the answers on the relationship between land and water, between soil loss and water quality, how and where to test and monitor.

Nonetheless, I am convinced that we know quite a bit about how agriculture affects--and is affected by--water quality, and how to go about improving water quality.

Conservation districts and SCS need to be especially close partners in defining our role in nonpoint source pollution control, or "208 planning and implementation." SCS and NACD are working with EPA at the national and regional levels. We have assigned several people under Intergovernmental Personnel Act agreements to work with EPA or state agencies. We also are providing river basin data and other kinds of information.

You need to shape your own role in 208 planning and implementation. You need to know the staffs of the local designated 208 planning areas and the Alabama Water Improvement Commission. Let them know of your services and your ideas. Set some priorities in your whole conservation effort so that you can give 208 the attention it needs right now and as 208 funds are provided.

When 208 plans go into full effect, be ready to meet the challenge of implementation. All the plans in the world, as I said earlier, won't stop an ounce of sediment. You can improve the implementation phase by helping design a 208 program that has maximum reliance on voluntary participation. No program should be allowed to carelessly drive farmers or ranchers out of business. America can't afford the costs of a purely regulatory program--too much monitoring and paperwork, too many policemen needed, too much effect on food supplies and prices at the supermarket.

Districts also can help by seeking cost-sharing or other incentive programs for pollution abatement, and by seeking more district employees to help install best management practices. We all will have to live with dollar and people limitations for some time--but that should not stop us from making our needs known clearly and forcefully.

Fifth, we can concentrate on even wider citizen participation in all phases of soil and water conservation. The conservation movement must be everybody's movement, as your meeting theme suggests. The conservation movement must have active participation and involvement and support from young people, townspeople, country people, women, and members of minority groups. It must have active participation by environmental or other groups who may disagree occasionally or frequently with values held by the district board.

You must not only be willing to hear the suggestions of others, but also try to reach more people with information about district activities, meetings, and concerns. Your mind must be open as well as your door. You can hold meetings yourselves on some issues, and create a forum for citizen participation in environmental or land-use affairs. You can seek out helpful contacts with colleges and universities, private organizations, local and area-wide governments. Your work with the Alabama school systems is very strong already.

You also can help by working closely with professional engineering societies, contractors' groups such as the Land Improvement Contractors of America, and others--to bring in more outside professional expertise to supplement our own.

You can help maintain our level of conservation activity in a time of emphasis on efficiency and cost reduction and personnel ceilings in government.

SCS has drafted an SCS public participation policy and named an SCS public involvement techniques committee to help insure that the public has an active role in SCS activities. We are after varied information techniques...understandable information issued on a timely basis...more opportunity for people to express their views early and throughout the planning process...more opportunity for people to roll up their sleeves to help instead of to get ready for a fight.

Sixth, keep your programs flexible.

Concentrate on the future while you handle today's hot issues. Up-to-date long range programs for districts and the agencies you deal with can help make sure we all work on the right things in the right order. They can help us all quit playing "crisis catch-up" and move ahead on our own initiatives...if we act carefully to implement the goals we have set. The "Working Together" booklet recently revised by NACD and SCS can help fine-tune our relationships, if we use it with new people and with some of the older hands.

You can sharpen your district programs by keeping up to date on the increasingly complex science and art of conservation and the ever-growing body of technical information:

--Attend district association workshops and annual meeting sessions;

--Read magazines and university and USDA bulletins;

--Trade information regularly with teachers and USDA employees and district cooperators;

--Be innovative in reshaping practices and programs to grow more food and fiber with less energy; to design inexpensive conservation practices; to handle changes in ownership, land-use patterns, crops and tillage methods, machine technology, and climatic cycles or upheavals. The new no-till planter developed in Alabama is a good example of fresh ideas.

--Be a little skeptical about the value and effects of conservation practices...don't accept any practice as all good or all bad. Minimum tillage and sprinkler irrigation are making great advances throughout the country--but they don't in every case fit the landscape or the landowner. I'm glad that the Agricultural Research Service is working to answer some of the minimum tillage and other questions in your state.

I am confident you will continue to sharpen your programs and to use them in putting more conservation on the land. You will help Alabamans make a living from the land while protecting environmental values...you can keep agriculture as Alabama's number one industry...you can help make Alabama the South's number-one state in business climate and in living space.

You can do whatever you believe you can do. You can accomplish whatever you have the heart and the courage to try.

As an Auburn University publication on population trends concludes, "There is no better time than the present for the citizens of Alabama to consider the kind of life they wish to have for themselves, their children, and their grandchildren."

I know you will consider...and act on your convictions.

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