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* NEW THRUST IN CONSERVATION *

CONSERVATION at a CROSSROADS-COMPROMISE or COMMITMENT ?

Good morning. I am honored that you asked me to return to Nebraska because I do still find it exciting to be a participant in the quest for ideas to deal with the challenges in Soil and Water Conservation of the future. This is also an opportunity to personally thank all my co-workers in soil, water, and watershed conservation work for the fine support you have given to me through my years as a professional career conservationist in SCS-USDA. The best reason for being here is simply- that as citizens of this great Nation-you and I are privileged to be temporary custodians of both our democracy and its renewable natural resources. Future generations depend upon how you and I view that stewardship responsibility. I feel it is a privilege and take it seriously. I know you do too!

My personal experience in agriculture and in conservation is unique in at least two ways. The modern techniques employed in both (of these) fields were researched, tested, adopted and implemented during my lifetime. Both have changed dramatically, since my boyhood days on a farm in Minnesota in the 1920s' & 30's. Then a quarter of our people lived on nearly 7 million farms. To-day, only 3.3 % of the Nations' 237 million citizens live and work on about 2.4 million farms & ranches. That number is probably going to continue to go down, as it has for years, as the "cash flow" problems continue in rural America. However, despite troubled times, each farmer is 13 times more productive than 50 years ago and supplies enough food and fiber for 76 other people. The Depression and Dust Bowl were very real to me and my family. That time, of economic distress and stressed land, led to the soil and water conservation effort and the start of federal farm policy. The sponsors of this event do stand on the shoulders of those-who for fifty years -have built the foundation for the future. There is need-in each generation, to be ever mindful of those who have gone on before us and of their toil and sacrifice to get us to this plateau. However, as dedicated as they were, the policies of the past are not working well enough to solve today's and to-morrow's

problems-either in agriculture or soil conservation.

Therefore, Governor Kerrey, other sponsors, and the people of Nebraska are to be commended for having this Symposium! Agriculture and conservation are indeed at a crossroads. The news media are informing the public. You could not have had it at a better time. The call for the development of a State Soil & Water Cons. strategy to assure the wisest use of land and water -and your continued agricultural prominence-is sound and important for the following reasons-as I see the picture-based on a lifetime of public service to conservation and to agriculture.

There are several different paths that could be taken to explore the present situation. I do not intend to set foot on some of those paths-for the total field is complex-and even has worldwide impact. Issues are developing even as we attend this Symposium. It is a dynamic area, made even more so by very recent proposals for federal budgets and farm policy. I'll discuss those reasons that deserve priority and may help the discussions that we engage in the next day and a half.

First, although the past fifty years of conservation work in Nebraska has been as good as any-and better than many-the problems yet to be solved are serious.

The 1982 National Resources Inventory ,although only now being interpreted for our use, is the best data we have ever had. It needs to be analyzed and utilized. Nebraska, with its' surface area of non-federal lands of 48.4 million acres-has an annual soil loss of nearly 181 million tons. That is nearly 4 tons per acre per year. The soil erosion on the nearly 19 million acres of cropland, cultivated in 1982, was 5.5 t/a/y from sheet and rill and 1.4 t/a/y from wind. That totals to 7 tons per acre per year. Most disturbing is that 4.5 million acres were eroding at an average rate of 24 tons per acre per year.

All cropland in the U.S.A. had over 3 billion tons of soil loss in 1982-from 421 million acres. That averages to about 7 tons per acre per year. State Conservationist Sherman Lewis can tell us more later this morning.

My first point is :the U.S. has soil conservation problems that need to be solved by someone. There is need for strategy, for soil erosion continues to cost the U.S. billions of dollars annually in damage to agricultural productivity and to water quality and other off-site areas.

Perhaps the most tragic aspect of this extensive, but insidious deterioration and misuse of our most valuable natural resource, is that it is largely avoidable. There will always be some minimum acceptable level of soil erosion that occurs naturally, and for the production of food and fiber. However, if some landusers-and they are relatively few, treated their children-even their animals-like they treat their land -society could move to correct the situation. In todays' environment the question increasingly will asked:

"Should the land-if not properly cared for-remain in the custody of those who abuse and misuse the resource?". That leads to the next reason for "Strategy" to cope with the realities of today-and to-morrow.

Second, according to Dr. Sandra S. Batie and others at the State University in Blacksburg, Virginia (V P I), the publics' perceptions of agriculture, both as a sub-sector of the economy and as a prime user of natural resources have been changing. These views can have profound long-term effects on agricultures' access to natural resources in the future, and upon the design of public policy directed toward the agricultural production sector.

A candid, though disturbing statement from a University of Nebraska economist-F. Gregory Hayden may be representative of one emerging public conception of agricultures' structure and as related to resources. I do not endorse his statement. It is tough enough, for many farmers to survive thru the current economic situation, without this criticism. However the following is a partial quote ascribed to the Professor: "It is an international agribusiness that---destroys top-soil and water supplies with chemicals, pesticides, and fertilizers;--- destroys soil humus and porosity, which means less water retention, which means that the compacted soil needs larger tractors which further compact soil; leaches nutrients from and adds salt to the soil through irrigation; uses more energy than it produces; creates health problems for farmers who apply the toxic fertilizers, pesticides; ---fills the food chain with carcinogenic pesticides, herbicides, growth hormones, and anti-bodies, etc.". That is strong stuff from academic circles-especially from your University.

Some persons who subscribe to this view have identified federal agricultural programs of USDA, in conjunction with federal natural resource policies and programs, as fostering the current structure of agricultural production and the associated resource and environmental impacts on land and water. The R.C.A. act evolved out of criticisms a decade ago, as to the effectiveness of USDA soil and water conservation programs, policies and appropriations for dealing with the natural resource problems that seemed to be growing. While I was deeply involved in the RCA process this is not the time nor the forum to discuss the results. Suffice it to say that the Appraisal data, based on the 1977 NRI, added a great deal to the awareness of the serious conservation problems that needed priority attention. It demonstrated, along with a public opinion poll conducted by Louis Harris, that more conservation was needed, that there should be a partnership between the government and the farmer in the implementation cost of conservation systems, and that the public should pay a fair share of the cost. Many felt then that the federal soil and water conservation efforts were grossly underfunded, The existing programs needed more money, along with some updating to make them more effective. In addition, new approaches were needed to encourage state

and local governments to participate more fully in the conservation effort. The final RCA program sent to Congress in December, 1982 was the result of several years of study and frustration of many who worked to improve policy and programs in USDA. Title XV-Nat. Res '81 Farm Bill is excellent legislation, came from the RCA work, but has not been used to accelerate the good work being done by States and Districts. The "targeting" concept remained, as did the notion that any new programs, such as grants, must be at the expense of on-going conservation programs. In other words, a great deal of concern over conservation has been created, and the Administration's response would be to shift a shrinking budget & technicians to selected areas that could show a higher numerical payoff in terms of tons of soil saved. The federal conservation programs are now being directed more and more from priorities set in Washington and less and less by plans and priorities established by states and districts.

Moreover the end product, to date is that instead of the RCA program being a document to guide the budget process, it was a document dictated by budget limitations. At no time since the setting of the upper and lower bounds of federal dollar needs has the Administration's proposals even met the low level--and the recommendations for FY '86 are ridiculous! The realization has firmly taken hold: the RCA process was a **political** process, not an **analytic** one. That is more than I planned to say about the Resources Conservation Act.

There are many who do not agree with the strident nature of Hayden's criticism of the U.S. agricultural sector; but it is generally accepted that at times, in some ways, agricultures' use of natural resources has manipulated the environment in a manner that is viewed as irresponsible; and the USDA soil and water conservation programs were more production oriented than conservation oriented.

The debate over the accuracy of this type of criticism is not going to be easy to resolve. As an example, in Maryland, farmers and agribusinessmen are being forced to change their practices in response to increased public concern about the safety of ag chemicals. There has been--because of concern for water quality in Chesapeake Bay ---an increase in public "awareness" and, in some cases "paranoia" about pesticide usage. Our States' Secretary of Agriculture (Md.) has said the industry must do a better job of policing itself to avoid future regulation by those outside of agriculture. This is related to the continued progress we need in conservation tillage as a management system for saving soil, oil and toil. It will require additional data and monitoring to resolve the pending problems.

The 1983 Payment-In-Kind (PIK) federal program to reduce surplus crops of wheat, corn and cotton--was also a golden opportunity to conserve soil and water on that large cropland acreage diversion--at least on a short term basis.

However, again the public's perception of that USDA policy came through as very costly, had little impact on soil loss reduction; did not improve wildlife habitat or water quality.

With increasing attention and frequency, the focus of national public discussion will be on the linkage of farm policy, natural resource policy, and other policy.

This is the major thrust of the American Farmland Trust (AFT) project--"Soil Conservation in America--What Do We Have To Lose?" There are 23 recommendations, I'll hit a few later.

Unfortunately, the criticisms of agriculture's use -or misuse of resources-that are troubling-have developed only recently and are, for the most part, still not recognized by the traditional agricultural interests. That may not be a problem in Nebraska, but it certainly will come up during the '85 Farm Bill hearings and discussions. I represent SCSA on the Natural Resources Council of America-recently elected to their Executive Board. There are 52 organizations that do represent every facet of resource and environmental concern and they have strong views and do have clout in Congress.

The third reason for a conference on strategy is that if federal farm-and conservation programs are to receive the broad public support needed for enactment and funding; they must cost less, and work to adjust soil and water resources to changing world and domestic markets, better than demonstrated in recent years.

Current conservation programs provide only minimal protection against the loss of important farmlands. Policies frequently conflict. Government pays for soil conservation efforts at the same time some commodity policies encourage the "plow-out" of fragile lands and help deplete water supplies that we will need later.

Many say the federal farm policies no longer reflect the realities of agriculture in 1985. We do need more equitable and workable policies and programs designed to stabilize farm income and to ensure the long term productivity of American agriculture.

The Farm Bill debate of 1985--and for the balance of the decade--will aim for a better blend of agricultural commodity and conservation policies. The protection of vital soil and water resources and the assurance of a fair return to farmers for their production needs to be up front, not an after thought and relegated to the back of the bill--and then ignored by the Administration. The preamble for the new Farm Policy could well read as follows:

"To ensure the long term productivity of agriculture, while preventing or eliminating

damage to the quality of soil, water, and wildlife habitat, as well as assuring consumers of abundant food and fiber at reasonable prices, and food assistance to low income households; to promote use of all practicable means and measures, including financial and technical assistance to foster and promote the general welfare of a diverse agriculture".

Examples of initiatives that flow from this statement could include how research is viewed, how cross-compliance is viewed, how targetting is viewed and even how budgets are viewed along with numerous other issues. For instance:

USDA research and extension could be redirected to place greater emphasis of farming systems designed to reduce chemical useage, conserve energy, and conserve soil and water.

The idea of denying farm program benefits to those who do not practice acceptable conservation farming methods is getting increased attention. The Sodbuster bill has a great deal of support and could be the beginning of federal recognition of a strategy based on the grounds of fairness and ethical behavior. Conservationists have long argued on the need to stop penalizing the good stewards of the land--especially in allotting the cropland base.

There are, of course, increasing demands for accountability to show that existing conservation programs are aimed at reducing soil erosion and water pollution in the most cost efficient way. Targetting, when it has to be done by taking away from "Peter" to give to "Paul" has been a rough road to travel. It will be even more difficult in FY '86 proposals, as USDA attempts to redirect the severely limited resources in SCS and ACP... The dangers of allowing the conservation program to wither and die in some parts of the country based on today's priorities are real. The institutional framework and delivery system that has been built well in the last fifty years can be dismantled, it is feared if USDA advocates--as they have--the very thin layer of soil conservation programs to be completely moved out--or even seriously reduced--in many areas.. How States and Districts cope with that situation may have an overwhelming influence on the soil and water conservation programs for the non-federal lands of the nation over the next fifty years.

This leads me to my final reason for your strategy session being a most timely effort to be ready to cope with the future in Nebraska.

Non-federal assistance for soil and water conservation has been increasing in a very healthy manner for the last two decades. Several states have enacted legislation that shows they are ready, willing and able to accelerate attention on their conservation problems. Nebraska, with the unique basin-oriented Natural Resource Districts have a planning and

implementation delivery system for a variety of resource programs. The cooperative effort of national, state and local entities is a "marble-cake" approach to solving problems that is unequalled in Government. Now some would view this as a layer-cake, with the objective of removing the Federal layer or drastically reducing its' size.

As angry farmers build political bonfires all over town, over what many observers see as an unprecedented rash of bankruptcies in rural America, the Administrations' proposals to phase out federal farm supports, credit and Conservation Cost-Sharing, Watersheds, RC&Ds', GPGP' and rifting 9300 career conservationists looks like a sure loser in the U.S. Congress. However, this is just round one--for the budget deficit is serious--and the projections for the balance of this decade are not encouraging for Agricultural and Natural Resource Programs from the Federal government. Holding what is now available--a cross-the-board freeze--may be the optimum.

Despite the need to protect what we now consider excellent programs--and the resources to keep them working--there is a window of opportunity that should not be neglected. This action would help States and Local Governments to utilize their resources most effectively.

As a minimum, a national policy for agricultural resource conservation should be established by the U.S. in the new Farm Bill --and adhered to by all agencies of government. As part of this policy, Congress and the Executive Branch should establish goals for the conservation of the nation's agricultural resources. The overall aim of these goals should be to maintain and improve the inherent productivity and quality of soil and water resources, and to minimize the effects related to the use of these resources. Two central themes should form the basis for this policy declaration. Government policies and activities should recognize:

- The long-term nature of agricultural resource conservation and implementation and;
- Inherent differences in the quality and capabilities of land for sustainable agricultural production.

This agricultural resource conservation policy, blending conservation and commodity programs, should also include strong "Sodbuster" rules to discourage use of fragile land for cropping and a long-term conservation reserve to help landusers shift their most erodible lands to sustainable, productive use. As much as 30 million acres of highly erodible cropland could be bid into 7-15 year contracts, and a three-year diversion program could work in tandem with commodity reserve programs in the event that surplus production persists. We are also exploring how credit and tax policies could encourage conservation. AFT's "Future Policy Directions for American Agriculture" stresses that the AFT program uses tools similar to those available under current policy, but costs much less.

As Neil Sampson points out in the final paragraph of his new

book-"FOR LOVE OF THE LAND"-a History of the National Association of Conservation Districts:

"The accomplishments of the first half-century are impressive, but the challenges ahead seem equally awesome.---To many, the challenge seems to be primarily a technical one. The history of the conservation movement suggests, however, that such is not the case. The challenge is moving people to constructive action. Anyone who would seek to understand the political forces that move Americans to action on soil and water conservation issues would do well to understand the potential that lies in the dedication, commitment and skill of those who love the land---".

An editorial in the Omaha Evening World-Herald, in 1960, may have said it as well as it can be said to-day. Does anyone here remember? I have a copy -if you are interested. It was entitled "A Dedicated Servant".

Best wishes for the future of Soil and Water Conservation in Nebraska. Fifty years from now my grandchildren and their families, as well as your progeny, will celebrate a century of progress. They deserve the legacy of having the options for decisions that we were given during our lifetime. The President reminded us "If not us, who? and If not now, when?".