

NEW WINE IN OLD BOTTLES

I have really enjoyed being with you to discuss district leadership in some very fluid times. You've had an excellent program that touched on many of the concerns that face conservationists today.

I think this is an exciting time in soil and water conservation. Some of the newer problems, responsibilities, ideas, questions in American life seem to tug at and stretch and test the thing we call a conservation district and the relationships that district has with the Soil Conservation Service and other agencies. This is what I call "new wine in old bottles."

Winemaking is one of man's oldest hobbies. The Book of Genesis speaks of Noah's vineyards and throughout the Bible the importance of wine and wine making is stressed. Is it a happy accident or a reward by our Creator that a few fruit juices and a little fermentation and a little time produce a drink that warms the heart and cheers the spirit? Wine has lubricated the wheels of mankind's progress in war and peace and in joy and sorrow.

Amidst a man and his companions, the bottle of wine stands as the symbol of celebration and ceremony. And you know, that bottle hasn't changed much over the years.

Material for speech by Norman A. Berg, Associate Administrator, Soil Conservation Service, at the Pacific Area meeting of the National Association of Conservation Districts, Reno, Nevada, September 19, 1973.

The relationship between districts and their cooperators and the Soil Conservation Service is just such a symbol that has been able to accommodate many new ingredients, the fermentation of many new ideas, the aging in four decades of work. I'm proud that the old bottle of working together seems to get stronger the more we test it.

I'm proud too, that many people in America are discovering the usefulness of some of the ideas in resource management that you and SCS have brought forth a long time ago. Or as T. S. Eliot put it,

"And what there is to conquer...has already been discovered

Once or twice or several times...

There is only the fight to recover what has been lost

And found and lost again and again."

Today marks the passage of 40 years since the beginning of a national effort in soil and water conservation. On September 19, 1933, a Division of Erosion was set up in the Interior Department and was later to become the Soil Conservation Service in USDA. The new office was headed by Hugh Hammond Bennett--even then regarded as the country's leading authority on soil erosion problems.

Mr. Bennett had been connected with the Bureau of Chemistry and Soils of the U. S. Department of Agriculture. He took a leading part in the development of the Soil Survey of the Department. He originated the national plan in 1929 for carrying out soil erosion studies, under which erosion experiment stations had been established. He wrote "Soil Erosion a National Menace," which was the first published account of the full gravity of the erosion problem. According to Mr. Bennett, erosion had already essentially destroyed 35 million acres of formerly cultivated land, and had greatly impoverished an additional 125 million acres of cropland.

In agreeing to Secretary Harold L. Ickes' request that Hugh Bennett be released from his duties in USDA, Secretary Henry Wallace said, "Dr. Bennett is the best qualified man available to take over these duties. He has devoted more study to the problem of erosion than any other man in the country, and it was he who developed a national plan for measuring the destructiveness of this evil under varying conditions of soil and climate, and for working out control measures applicable to the various soils and cropping practices of the Nation."

The work, it was announced four decades ago, would be carried on in close cooperation with the USDA, operating on large watershed areas in various parts of the country where soil erosion was a problem of the first magnitude.

The purpose of the work was not only to cut down land depreciation through excessive washing, but to complement efforts to bring about better flood control. The new Division was to operate on \$5 million allotted by the Public Works Administration.

In 1933 it was a time of drouth and depression. As a farm lad of nearly 16, I was still a decade away from starting my SCS career, but was already gaining valuable training and experience about land, water, crops, livestock, and people. I was destined to be a conservationist. My home county was Pine, my post office and school at Grasston. My first jobs were at Meadowlands and Floodwood in Minnesota--the land of 10,000 lakes. I owe much to my decade of work in Idaho as a district conservationist and area conservationist at Pocatello.

We've been through a lot since those days. Agriculture has been a big yo-yo. Several times the farmer or rancher has been called on to produce just as much as he possibly can...and at other times America has wrestled with very difficult problems of what to do with mounting crop surpluses, how to adjust production. Now it seems we've come full circle again .

Secretary of Agriculture Butz has removed all acreage restrictions and freed the farmer to make his own decisions on planting, because we have what looks like an insatiable and sustained demand at home and abroad for many agricultural products. We should welcome the chance to quit holding back, the opportunity to make more decisions at the market place rather than at a calculator in Washington, D. C. or a state capital. America does need more grain--more beef--more farm income.

At the same time, there are some real concerns here. Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Robert Long raised them very strongly at a recent meeting of the Iowa Soil Conservation District Commissioners. He said:

"While the farmer works to produce farm goods...he has a responsibility not to jeopardize the quality of the land he farms or degrade the air and water which he uses...I am very concerned as we produce that we fail to produce and protect...Right ~~now~~, careless use and short-range exploitation of land to produce more and earn more could bring about a repetition of the staggering soil and water problems the Nation faced earlier in this century."

He was very concerned that as farmers and ranchers try to "fine tune" every aspect of their operations for 1974 and beyond they include very careful conservation planning.

"This is no time," he said, "to have a Great Plow-Up followed by a Great Wash-Away; if our soils become pollutants instead of a resource, the long investment that they and we and you have made will go down the drain and a good many futures with it."

What about the conservation gains you've made over the the years in the Pacific area? Are some of them in danger? Or have you sufficiently instilled a conservation ethic in the landowners out here so that they will recognize the need for continued conservation work and revision of plans to reflect new production goals--not only to protect the land but to get good crops with efficient use of fertilizers and pesticides and labor?

What about the 8 1/2 million acres of the Palouse country where you've gradually gotten landowners to take some of the steepest slopes and drainageways out of of grain production? With a short crop this year and heavy demand, there will be fresh incentive to use every acre possible. Your efforts may be tested.

While we've had continuing concerns about what's happening on agricultural land, of course, there have been a lot more new ingredients in your bottle of wine. Districts have moved out strongly in the field of sediment control--and the more than two dozen statewide institutes that have been held on the subject in the last year and a half have been filled with evidence of district experience and appreciation by many people of the help provided.

Sediment has been recognized, finally, as what Hugh Bennett called it 40 years ago--a major pollutant of water supplies. Water quality standards being formulated by the Environmental Protection Agency call for control of non-point-source pollutants such as sediment.

Public agencies and private citizens all over the country will be watching more closely to see where sediment problems are being produced. Your long-time work will bear fruit here.

Conservation districts are moving ahead in many other aspects of environmental quality, some of which you've discussed in your meeting. You are working to keep Lake Tahoe worth visiting. You are working with planning agencies and other units of government at all levels on resource inventories and evaluations, plan reviews, and the like. In watershed projects and Resource Conservation and Development projects, you are helping both environmental improvement and rural development through conservation action...and getting excellent results.

Conservation districts are experiencing changes in their makeup and structure to reflect these new challenges--thanks in large part to the District Outlook effort that surfaced several years ago, and to your relationships with State legislatures and executive departments. Here in Nevada, with the passage of Assembly Bill 267, the districts have had a name change, the addition of city and county-wide representation on district boards, and establishment of a State Conservation Commission in a new Division of Conservation Districts.

I'm sure you recognize that you have to continue to "fine tune" your relationships with state government on legislation and on financial support. You need to continue to broaden your base of support through closer relationships with other agencies and organizations in the field of natural resources. Because just at the time when conservation demands are greatest and the broadest, budgets and personnel ceilings are tight everywhere. America is in a wide-scale effort to cool off its economy. It is trying to strike a better balance among Federal and State and local expenditures for public business. Within limited budgets, conservation

districts and the SCS are not automatically going to achieve the priorities for funds they need.

The president of the Iowa SCD Commissioners association put it this way at the meeting where Mr. Long spoke:

"During the first three decades of district operations there was a mixture of evangelism along with the job of providing on-the-land services to cooperators. The public awakened, and as we moved into the fourth decade, there was a demand for districts to broaden further their horizons to represent the managers and users of both agricultural and non-agricultural lands for the benefit of the entire community.

"The Iowa legislature, keeping pace with present-day needs, amended the Soil Conservation District Act in 1969 to include cities and towns in districts. Units of government were quick to respond to this new source of assistance in resource management; in 1972 alone, over 1,400 of them requested assistance.

'More recently, the Legislature expressed concern that voluntary action by land users to control soil erosion might not cover all situations where valuable resources are being damaged by sediment and passed the Soil Conservancy Act. This gave SCD's the responsibility for acting on complaints filed by landowners who felt they were being damaged by sediment resulting from uncontrolled erosion from specific sources.

"Soil Conservation districts are now in the unenviable position of having the greatest reduction in their ability to carry out programs at any time in their history because funding of USDA programs is being curtailed at the very time that their needs and responsibilities are greatest.

"During 1972, we asked SCS technicians to serve the broadest cross section of resource users in our history. These resource users and planners included everyone from individual farmers or homeowners to city and county planners to urban developers and highway officials.

These increasing demands for technical assistance stem from the concern of Iowa people, rural and urban alike, for the conservation of their soil and water. They recognize the need for more care in planning the use of these resources. This is especially evident as decisions are made and action taken to bring about greater production in corn and soybeans to meet domestic and world demands. by world demands. As a more intensive approach is taken, the need for soil and water conservation measures on the land is going to be greater than ever.

"Soil Conservation Districts have had a positive action program to wisely use our soil and water resources for many years. We will, however, need technical support if we are to continue and carry out effective conservation programs to support a growing population."

I know you have concerns about the level of support from SCS and others in your activities. You need to look for as broad support as possible, and make your needs and views known.

There is attention at the Federal level in aiding conservation efforts. The Rural Development Act of 1972 provided new authorities in resource inventorying and monitoring, which SCS now is gearing up to begin.

It provided for new aid in land treatment work and structural measures in watershed and RC&D projects. It made changes in USDA financial assistance programs to boost rural development opportunities.

In signing the Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act of 1973, President Nixon recognized the need for a cost-sharing program for permanent-type practices under long-term agreements similar to those used with good success in the Great Plains Conservation Program. USDA probably will begin phasing in the long-term approach this year. In this program, as well as in the Great Plains effort and watershed projects, cost-sharing would be tied to a conservation plan approved through the conservation district.

As far as SCS is concerned, within the funding and manpower limits we have we are doing our best to provide the most direct assistance possible. That means that more than 80 percent of SCS employees are at the field level, providing direct help to landowners and local communities and other units of government. State and regional staffs comprise another 15 percent, and back there in Washington, D. C. we have only 2.6 percent of our nearly 14,000 employees. That is not exactly a top-heavy agency.

We'll work to improve the field-level percentage, and as Secretary Long said in Iowa, SCS field personnel will spend an increasing proportion of their time working with landowners on conservation plans and practices to protect the land while crop production is expanding.

There is other activity at the Federal level in a wide range of bills under consideration that would affect your activities, including land use planning.

You need to acquaint yourselves with these bills and with the issues behind them, come up with some policy positions on them, and let your views be heard. Secretary Long is concerned that the need for preserving prime agricultural land have early and full consideration in the land-use policy bill. If you agree, now is the time to let your legislators know of your interest.

Within your own districts, how good a job are you doing in letting your views and your capabilities and your actions be known by people you serve? As John Wilder said in a recent Tuesday Letter, "Never has the need been greater to show and tell the public about the work of your conservation district and the services it provides."

Today's public is very conservation-conscious or environmentally aware--but may not know much about the soil and water conservation work you've done for so long. Furthermore, the public may not readily understand that some of your actions have a positive effect on the environment. They may question or even oppose your actions if they do not understand them.

Your Conservation district is important to your home county, and to all the citizens in it. You need to prepare yourselves to meet all your responsibilities, and to meet them in full public view. There is no way you can work in isolation. There is no way you can concentrate on farmers and ranchers alone--Idaho is the only State in your region with even 10 percent of its population living on farms.

There is ample evidence that you are gearing up to serve all the people. I hope you will step up your "show and tell" so that all the people know you are serving them.

I hope you will work with SCS people to continue refining the relationship between us. I am convinced that relationship--the old wine bottle of cooperation--represents one of the finest examples to be found anywhere of local self-government working in close partnership with State and Federal government to get things done!

Together we have made dramatic advances in soil and water conservation, on new and old assignments. Our primary mission still must be to seek quality in the resource base for sustained wise use.

Whatever new jobs may bubble up, I think we'll be ready for them.

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