

OUTLOOK FOR RESOURCE ACTION

Your fifty-second meeting comes at a time when there are many questions about 1977 and the years beyond:

--Some areas of the United States are experiencing the worst winter drought in decades, with the light or absent snowpack impacting on recreation and the economy of tourist spots right now as well as causing some real concerns about water supplies for this spring and summer.

--Other areas are crisscrossed by tunnels rather than highways as snow drifts reach ridiculous heights--causing nuisance and injury now, and raising concerns about how streams will handle the runoff when 15 feet of snow starts to melt.

--Many regions are facing an emergency in energy supplies or distribution as the winter cold lasts longer and dips farther south.

--Citrus and truck crops are in trouble in Florida and other southern states, raising concern about prices and supplies for this summer and beyond.

--Despite problems in some counties and states in 1976, American crop harvests during the year overall were very favorable, as were domestic and international markets for them. They kept oil and other imports from wrecking our balance of payments.

Material for talk by Norman A. Berg, Associate Administrator, USDA Soil Conservation Service, at the 52nd annual meeting, Red River Valley Association, Shreveport, Louisiana, February 17, 1977.

--We have a new Congress and a new Administration, and for the first time in eight years they are of the same party. That will be a plus in terms of moving programs ahead, but we all are speculating about the priorities they will have and the ideas they will have for agency programs and structure.

I think we can take a cue for our outlook in the Red River Valley and the rest of America from Mr. Carter's Inaugural Address:

"We have learned that more is not necessarily better, that even our great nation has its recognized limits, and that we can neither answer all questions nor solve all problems. We cannot afford to do everything, nor can we afford to lack boldness as we meet the future. So together in a spirit of common sacrifice for the common good, we must simply do our best."

The members of your association have never lacked boldness in bringing about the kind of future you want for the resources and the people of this great river system. You do recognize limits in natural resources, and that is why you press so hard for protection and improvement. You do recognize limits in agency programs, and that is why you help us keep our priorities in fine tune and why you help us work together to do more faster and better than we could by acting separately. You do your best, and you have the right to expect the same from the agencies and organizations that you and I represent.

I would like to discuss today some of the land and water resource programs in which the Soil Conservation Service assists, and mention some progress, trends, and likely changes.

First, we will keep moving in river basin studies.

The Red River Above Denison Dam report now in the review stage will complete coverage of the Red River Basin with comprehensive river basin studies. You then will have identified problems and recommended solutions throughout the basin.

SCS has made a number of improvements in the USDA cooperative river basin program, to encourage a greater variety and flexibility in types of studies. Most of them up to now have been extremely broad and comprehensive, addressing the whole spectrum of water and related land resource problems and taking four to six years or more to complete.

Under our new policy, SCS state conservationists can undertake some briefer studies to address specific problems or local situations. These can be oriented more toward critical needs and can be completed much more quickly.

We will continue to actively explore program policies and procedures to make the public more aware of and involved in USDA river basin studies and to produce studies that can be turned into practical water-resource projects installed and operating.

Second, we will help explore more alternatives in flood plain management in river basin studies, small watershed projects, and Resource Conservation and Development projects.

SCS began doing flood-hazard analyses and flood insurance studies in 1970, to help communities across the country make wise decisions about the use and management of flood-prone areas. Up to now we have started 198 analyses and published reports on 98 of them.

We have started 289 flood insurance studies and completed 156. One flood insurance study was for the city of Paris in Lamar County, Texas, for HUD's Federal Insurance Administration. Two of the flood hazard analyses underway are:

--The Washita River and Rush Creek, city of Pauls Valley and vicinity, in Garvin County, Oklahoma, about 70 percent complete.

--The Washita River and Rainy Mountain Creek, town of Mountain View and vicinity, in Kiowa County, Oklahoma, about 65 percent complete.

We have assisted government agencies at all levels with land-use questions, including many related to flood plain management. There are all kinds of structural and non-structural ways to change an area's susceptibility to floods, alter the characteristics of floods, or reduce the consequences of floods. We need to help communities look at more options and pick a set of them that will work fairly and efficiently.

Third, we will give more attention to the planning process.

We have worked to make the environmental impact statement more specific and more concise. The document should not have a bigger effect on the reader than the project does on the landscape! We aim to make it deal more in alternatives than in proposals, and more in tradeoffs than in impacts. SCS also has been working to blend in the new "Principles and Standards" of the Water Resources Council to bring more environmental concerns into project planning.

In 178 Resource Conservation and Development areas that cover a third of the United States, SCS provided 720 man-years of assistance to local sponsoring groups in a variety of actions toward better communities.

For fiscal 1977, more than \$16 million is earmarked for technical assistance in RC&D planning and more than \$11 million for measures that need financial aid. The latter amount probably will cover less than a fourth of the requests for financial assistance, so the interest in resource improvements is clear. The benefits are clear, too, for communities like the town of Benton, Louisiana. With \$102,000 from SCS through the Trailblazer RC&D and \$90,000 from the town itself, Benton solved a nagging flood problem. The results have been higher property values, lower street maintenance costs, reduced health hazards, and improved environmental quality.

In RC&D as in watershed projects, SCS has made some shifts in the planning process not only to improve and broaden the planning but also to speed it up and get it implemented. SCS state conservationists now can offer financial as well as technical aid in planning, so long as the plan design meets RC&D program requirements.

Shifts in the planning process in water and land activities should result in positive gains in coordination among agencies and local groups that will bring about better projects with more favorable total effect on communities, at minimum cost and with minimum delays.

Federal programs should provide a broad and long-range perspective in water planning and evaluation. They ought to encourage major water resource actions at the state, local, and private levels--and aid those actions when called upon. They ought to consider joint or multiple authorizations for water resource projects. In any case, they ought to blend rather than compete.

Fourth, we will give more emphasis to land treatment in water-resource projects.

Since the earliest days of my agency--and the first days of your association--it has been clear that land and water are closely interrelated and that decisions made about one directly affect the other. Yet conservation land treatment too often has taken a back seat in water-resource projects to the construction of dams, channels, and other structural items. These have been more visible, more quickly identifiable, more likely to be paid for or cost-shared with Federal dollars.

Land treatment must be a full partner. It helps the structural measures last longer and be more effective. It helps control sediment and other pollutants, and that is a most important step in guarding water quality. That is why the National Association of Conservation Districts, SCS, EPA, and others have waged a major campaign to get states to adopt comprehensive sediment control programs.

Those programs are based on conservation land treatment measures combined with sediment traps, stormwater management devices, and other structures. SCS is working on some new approaches to choosing the best land treatment system for a specific tract or project area.

Conservation land treatment systems...or "best management practices"... are of prime concern to the EPA and SCS in achieving water quality control under Section 208 of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act Amendments of 1972. In designated "point-source" areas and in statewide "non-point" or diffuse sources of water pollution, land treatment will be an important part of management planning and implementation.

As Ed Thomas pointed out at your meeting last year, SCS and local conservation districts already are active in well over half of the designated areas, serving on advisory committees and providing basic soil, water and plant data as resource inputs into the planning process. Districts are working with councils of government and state designated agencies. The National Association of Conservation Districts and SCS are working closely with EPA at the national and regional levels to help fashion a workable "208" program. USDA agencies in each of your states are coordinating on "208" activities. If your association has opinions or assistance to offer on this topic, now is the time to make yourselves heard.

We will give more attention to water quality in water-resource projects, with the aid of land treatment and structural measures and to the maximum extent with the aid of voluntary programs. The USDA cooperative river basin program is now being used in many areas to study specific water and related land resource problems related to water quality. Examples are overall non-point pollution control efforts and salinity control.

The land and water improvements made in watershed projects and in RC&D projects--particularly the control or stabilization of seriously eroding areas--have contributed significantly to water quality. There are more opportunities to store, spread, or move water specifically for the purpose of improving water quality--and local sponsors are giving them more attention.

Local organizations and land and water users have a number of new water quality requirements to meet. SCS is going to make a stronger bid to help them meet the requirements and still stay in business. We need realistic agricultural water quality goals that balance economic efficiency, food-and-fiber production needs, freedom of choice, and other values. SCS supports the EPA approach of relying on farmers to voluntarily develop soil conservation and water management plans that control erosion and water runoff. We and other agencies will be working to find new ways of measuring water quality problems and improvements... on new ways of deciding when to measure, what to measure, and how to interpret the data. We want to make water quality a full partner in project planning--and that is a national priority.

We will give more emphasis in water-resource projects to land use concerns, especially prime farmland.

Making sure America keeps enough of its best land in agriculture to meet future food and fiber needs is a national priority, too. The "prime," "unique," and other important farmlands are valuable because they are easier and cheaper to protect from wind and water erosion than other lands are.

They produce high-quality crops with less energy. 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 demands for it.

The Soil Conservation Service, and all other Federal agencies, are now analyzing how proposed Federal actions might affect farmland as we review environmental impact statements. This is at the request of the Council on Environmental Quality.

In addition, SCS is working to help state and local groups understand what and where the important farmlands are, so that local decisions can be made on the use of these lands. We are compiling and publishing county-wide maps of important farmlands. Several have been completed already, and we plan to have a third of the Nation done by 1980. In the first go-round we are emphasizing those areas that have the most intense pressure for urban development.

We also are busy providing other technical information and reviews, and responding to hundreds of questions about important farmlands and many other land-use concerns. That is where our input ends, because we are not in the land-use planning business. We are not and should not be advocates about any particular tract or land use. But that doesn't stop soil and water conservation districts from being very strong advocates for agriculture and for good land use.

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With their help, and with strong support from groups such as yours, land use considerations can get a lot more of the attention they deserve in all kinds of project activities.

Local people and government agencies involved in a water-resource project need to make workable judgments about many other areas of special environmental interest besides important farmland: Wetlands...historical and archeological sites...habitat for rare and endangered plants or animals...and others. Watershed projects and RC&D projects have made important contributions in aid of these concerns, and we will step up the pace.

The issues regarding land-use patterns are very complex, as you know. They involve private rights and the public good...dollars and common sense...fact and rumor...hidden effects and motives...motion and emotion. They must be faced in the Red River Valley as they must be addressed everywhere else. The SCS will do all it can to help, but these are primarily local questions that require initiative, facts, communications skills, persistence, courage, and hard decisions within each community, county or parish.

We will give more emphasis in water-resource projects to identifying and achieving the aims of local people.

We are in business to serve the local people, so how well any of us achieve our goals and objectives depends on how well we assess and serve the needs of local people. As former SCS Administrator Ken Grant said at your 1971 meeting, assessing the public interest is not an easy exercise.

People see their environmental needs in many different and sometimes contradictory ways. They change their minds...they change their priorities or wants from day to day. Some interests are not always well articulated... some segments of the public are not as vocal as others. SCS and many other agencies have been working to find ways to bring more and more voices into the discussion and planning and decision-making process. This is the intent and the success of the National Environmental Policy Act.

We were interested in and actively seeking public participation before NEPA came along. Organizations such as yours have been active a long time in providing a valuable avenue for public participation in many project efforts. But NEPA did give the movement more impetus. It got more agencies and organizations to share good ideas and procedures for assuring the successful input of local suggestions and concerns.

In the more than 70 watershed projects on which Red River groups want SCS assistance and in the 20 RC&D areas in your four states, we will actively seek to involve more people--from the beginning, through completion of the Federal input, to the point where local people maintain and improve the projects.

Let us strive together to provide a more meaningful voice for all people in projects to improve their natural resource base and their economy. We cannot satisfy everyone with every end result...but as President Carter said, "We must simply do our best."

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