

PRIORITIES IN SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION

Co-workers in Conservation

Autumn is a particularly enjoyable time of year in almost every part of our country. This goes double for Washington State, where the climate, people, and general problems are almost a microcosm of life in the other 49 States.

But ^{fall}autumn isn't all fun and games. It is also the customary time of year for putting administrative houses in order. For Government planners, this means getting future ⁷⁶⁻⁸⁰budget requests into final form and preparing to justify support for every program and project. It means a painstaking process of weighing priorities and identifying the greatest needs. And waiting for appropriations to be decided for this fiscal year.

The job gets more complicated every year, and events of the past few months have done nothing to alter this trend. This year, as you are well aware, has seen a series of "crises" perhaps more critical than any we have experienced since the 1930's.

Production -- Energy -- Inflation

Consider the magnitude of three major difficulties that America is now experiencing. American agriculture has launched an unprecedented national effort to achieve full production -- only to run head-on into a series of adverse weather conditions that could not have been foreseen. Then, we experienced the first rumblings of an energy crisis that -- if anything -- is getting more critical.

Speech by Norman A. Berg, Associate Administrator, Soil Conservation Service, at a meeting of all SCS employees in the State of Washington, Pasco, Washington, October 29, 1974.

Partly as a result of both of these problems, we are currently witnessing an inflationary spiral that has blurred our national economic picture.

Soil and water conservation programs have been necessarily affected by all these things.

The full production effort, for example, has come up with a mixed bag of results. With the setbacks caused by weather, farmers have not been able to achieve hoped-for production levels of such important crops as corn and soybeans. Generally, though, things are not as bad as they might have been if the full production effort had not been undertaken. In most cases, production is higher on a year-to-year basis. In some cases, though, these gains are being achieved at the expense of environmental quality. As I'll mention a little later, we need to give real priority to helping farmers and ranchers protect the land while they work to produce from it.

Energy shortfalls have also hampered farm operations, even with agriculture's top priority for fuel and the fact that farm fuel supplies are generally good. Energy-related difficulties ranged all the way from the scarcity and high cost of some fertilizers to spot shortages of pesticides, machinery parts, and even tires.

The energy storm has abated, but it has not gone away. Farmers still need guidance in energy-saving practices. We can help -- because many conservation practices save energy as well as soil.

Inflation is the No. 1 problem right now. Just about everyone -- farmers, processors, consumers, and others -- is smarting under its impact.

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As far as the Federal Government is concerned, one of the most standard if not most potent weapons against inflation is reduced spending. Belt-tightening is always painful: which projects ought to be maintained? which cut back, postponed, or eliminated? There is a whole range of potential headaches here, and not the least of them concerns our ability to continue providing technical soil and water conservation assistance. We need continuing soil and water conservation research to keep our assistance up to date. USDA usually has had to fight for every dime of research money, even though American farmers could not have reached their present high level of production efficiency without technology. Research and technical assistance are not programs that can be turned on and off from year to year. Both are long range. Both are continuing. And both take time to achieve the desired results. We'll continue to fight for adequate support; but we'll have to find other ways to get some of the high-priority jobs done.

SCS Contributions

SCS has a role to play in national efforts to deal with production, energy, inflation, and other concerns. In fulfilling this role, we need more than ever to function as players on a team, to make sure our total effort is greater than the total of its individual parts.

A good example of continuing cooperation on an international scale is the International Joint Commission. The Commission, composed of representatives from the United States and Canada, makes reports and recommendations to the governments of both countries regarding water quality in the Great Lakes.

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A major effort during the coming year will be devoted to achieving balance in the kind and amount of assistance provided to local units of government through conservation districts. The interest that states are showing provides great opportunities for meaningful inputs by conservation districts and SCS. We have to make sure we are meeting all aspects of the total workload, as best we can.

There are other problem areas where an effective team approach might be put together. One lies in the subject of surface-mined land reclamation, where legislation and research and technical help are underway. Another is USDA's "red meat study," which is aimed at achieving higher livestock production and where the SCS effort will probably weigh most heavily in attempts to step up production from grasslands.

Soil and Water Conservation Program -- FY 1975

In many ways, cooperative efforts have done much to strengthen the SCS program. And the total program is moving ahead strongly. Last month, at this year's State Conservationists' Meeting in Kentucky, Ken Grant made six major points concerning program needs and limitations during Fiscal Year 1975. They're worth repeating.

First, we do not anticipate any significant increases in manpower, even though we face continuously enlarging responsibilities. To get the job done, you must approach it in the same way that you allocate your personal budget and resources: Decide what is most important and what is least important, and either prune off those low priority items or find somebody else to help do them.

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Soil surveys can be an important contribution -- if we get surveys finished, if they are accurate and in useful formats, and if they are in the hands of the people who need them.

Fifth, we need to move the watershed program forward by concentrating our help in projects that offer the best hope for quick action -- where local people have done their homework on land-use goals and conflict or disagreement is at a minimum, where local sponsors are ready to do their part during construction and afterward. Your role in every watershed project is to help the local sponsors understand the things they're going to have to get themselves, from land rights to community agreement on problems and solutions. The harder they work, the quicker they'll get SCS help and the better the projects will be.

Sixth, SCS people and district leaders have successfully completed watershed projects and many other conservation actions because they took the time to establish personal, face-to-face relationships with people. We need face-to-face personal relationships with a lot more kinds of people and groups. There is a world of difference between imagining what agency personnel, organization leaders, businessmen, and university staffs think about soil and water conservation -- or even finding out about their views secondhand -- and getting it straight from the horse's mouth. All of you can help make these personal contacts and strengthen them. You'll make your own job easier.

Some of the views you get will be unfavorable. But a little education on both sides can help -- and the world changes so fast that one couldn't stay wrong or right all the time if he tried.

We can't avoid criticism even by saying nothing, doing nothing, and being nothing. Getting to know people face-to-face can help make sure any criticism is specific and based on facts or honest opinions. That kind of criticism can be dealt with creatively and openly -- and that's the best way.

These, then, are six specific areas where we will be applying ourselves most intensely in the coming months. They are not the only things competing for our attention. We will continue to be asked to adapt conservation principles to different kinds of challenges, different land uses. We'll continue to be asked to adapt conservation practices to fit technological changes in agriculture and other forms of land modification. We'll continue to be asked to do a better job of relating ecological principles to the environmental actions we recommend. And we'll be asked to do better in relating environmental considerations to people's needs.

Land Use

A current example of the importance of our work is SCS involvement in the subject of land use. I haven't been able to avoid it in my remarks up to now. Communities across America find themselves unable to avoid land-use issues and questions and controversies -- and the subject will become more prominent.

I'd like to talk about the setting for some of the land-use questions, with the help of slides, and discuss the interest and involvement of USDA. Then I'll mention a few specific issues and examples.

LIGHTS OUT

SLIDE RUN BEGINS

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1. Of all the nations on earth, the United States is among the richest in terms of its land and water resources, its beautiful countryside, and its tremendously favorable and varied climate.
2. What is the ownership of our land? Fifty-eight percent of it is in private hands -- owned by individual farmers, ranchers, businessmen, homeowners, and industry.
3. From this land comes most of the food, fiber, and timber that we consume and export.
4. One third of the private land is in forest.
5. Twenty-seven percent is grassland pasture and range.
6. And about one-fifth is cropland.
7. Despite an almost 200-percent increase in U.S. population since 1900, these proportions in land use have changed very little.
8. The reasons include agriculture-related technology, government programs, and the private enterprise role.
9. The second largest segment of land -- 34 percent -- is under Federal management. The Forest Service in USDA manages 187 million acres, but the largest segment is public domain under control of the Bureau of Land Management. The total also includes military land, national parks, and wildlife refuges.
10. More than 15 million acres of Federal land have been set aside as wilderness and primitive areas where timber is not harvested and most other uses are banned.

11. Much of the Federal land, however, is under multiple-use management. Recreation is a growing use of public and private land.
12. Another 6 percent of land in the U.S. is in State and local ownership. (Outdoor classroom area, Cathlamet, Wash.)
13. And 2 percent is Indian land.
14. For the most part, America's land is sparsely populated. Over the last 20 years, 1,500 counties lost population.
15. To find the concentrations of people, we still must look to the cities -- to the metropolitan areas. Here, on 3 percent or less of our land, more than 70 percent of the population lives.
16. This includes land for transportation -- superhighways, railroads, and airports. Land for transportation is highly visible although it takes up only 1.4 percent of the total land area. And it has taken some of America's prime agricultural land, irretrievably.
17. Here's a summary of land use in America by acreage totals. We have quite a mix of public and private, rural and urban, good and bad uses.
18. The way in which Americans use land has been, for the most part, good! Businessmen, homeowners, public land management agencies, colleges and universities, and especially farmers and ranchers -- with your help -- have had a big hand in using land properly.
19. But in every state people still use land in ways that are not to their credit, that bring crop failure and land damage, that are costly to America economically and esthetically.

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20. We use land in ways that cause significant pollution problems that just aren't going to be tolerated in the years ahead.
21. We tear up land for building without considering what it does temporarily or permanently to the landscape.
22. We pave over large areas with no provision for managing storm water -- and wonder what the problem is.
23. We scatter communities about until eventually they squeeze the farmer out of business. People aren't going to put up with these mistakes, and they don't have to.
24. People want a sensible kind of land use planning that will assure a high-quality environment where they live as well as where they vacation.
25. They want high-quality food, and therefore land-use policies need to consider the needs of a high-quality sustained agriculture.
26. They want space and facilities for a variety of recreation experiences, for fish and wildlife habitat, for learning America's history.
27. They want communities they can take pride in.
28. We can have all these things if a land-use planning process is established that seeks out and uses natural resource inputs, recreation needs, population trends, economic factors, and related data.
29. Such a process would have to provide for all the technical and financial assistance available from the Federal government, and would blend Federal programs with State and local objectives.

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30. A planning process would provide for interchange of data and ideas and training programs among agencies of all kinds -- for example, useful new imagery from the Earth Resources Technology Satellite.
31. Such a process would call for exchanging information and ideas with the public, too -- people will not support plans that they don't understand and that they had no hand in formulating.
32. States will need to consider in their planning process whether some of the land-use decisions that have always been totally private decisions in a free-market system with limited local overview...
33. May need a stronger overview in the form of regulation, control, legislative or State approval, or perhaps litigation.
34. The private landowner may need reminding that he has duties as well as rights in the matter of using and caring for the land and water resources he manages.
35. Above all, we must not forget that land use planning begins and ends with people. After all, land use planning is for people.
36. USDA is the people's department. We've been helping people manage their land better -- and live better -- for a long time.
37. To outline USDA's interest and objectives in the land-use field, Secretary Butz last October issued a major policy statement, that we discussed at five regional conferences this year. I'd like to mention its major points.

38. The first four sections stress the responsibility that rests with State and local governments and landowners and outline the Department's ability to exchange ideas through several thousand local offices.
39. The definition of land-use planning is most important. We're not talking simply about zoning, but rather "...the total of all those national, state, and local laws, ordinances, and attitudes affecting the short-term or long-term uses of land, private or public, through such mechanisms as ownership, inheritance, taxation, condemnation, zoning, redevelopment, building regulation, master planning and legislative fiat."
40. Several important policy decisions are listed in the next section of Secretary's Memorandum 1827.
41. For example, prime agricultural land is going to have more attention...
42. Water will be important...
43. Conservation protection will be vital as America works to produce more food and fiber...
44. Facts will be vital in decision making...
45. Plants and animals will get high priority too...
46. And land use decisions relating to them.
47. The next section of Memorandum 1827 talks about the kinds of facts about land that USDA will work to get. For example...
48. A standard system...
49. Inventories and projections by county, state region, and the nation.
50. What are the problems? Which wheel is squeaking the loudest?

51. What are the issues? And where is the physical, social, and economic information to help understand them and what to do about them? USDA will find out.
52. The next part of the memorandum lists some of the objectives that agencies will have in redirecting their activities and policies.
53. For example, soil survey facts faster, and other help to guide urban growth...
54. More attention to making land-use practices assets rather than liabilities to the environment...
55. More attention to compatible uses of land.
56. Finally, the memorandum lists several broad purposes to guide all our work, to improve resources and living standards for all Americans.
57. Conservation district leaders and USDA people together will need to exercise leadership in all of these actions to help make daily life better for people. That's the assignment we all have.
58. In the Soil Conservation Service, as one of the USDA agencies carrying out that assignment, we work through conservation districts to tell landowners and users about the technical information they need, where to get it, and how to use it in improving their land and their lives.
59. There are many examples of local and state governments beginning to find and use all the natural resource information they can get from SCS and others to incorporate in their planning process.

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60. They are increasing their financial inputs to get information and assistance more quickly -- almost \$50 million was appropriated by State legislatures for conservation action in fiscal year 1974.
61. Landowners and operators are investing heavily in conservation, too -- several dollars for each dollar of governmental assistance programs.
62. As the amount of land Americans have per person continues to shrink -- from 22 acres in 1920 to 11 acres today to perhaps 7 acres in the year 2000 -- we will all have to help find and advertise the kinds of information needed to make valid land-use decisions.
63. Just as important, we will all have to help communities and governmental units have the discussions required to settle differences among interest groups over land-use patterns and levels of water development.
64. Finally, we will all have to help get the decisions made, the plans implemented, and the land and other resources protected. The result can be the kind of America we want tomorrow.
65. There is a long way to go, and the clock is moving. The time for SCS employees to take a strong role in forming land use policy and aiding land-use choices is right now.
66. It's up to you.

END SLIDE RUN

LIGHTS ON

The Secretary means business -- we should take a strong stand in the process of land use. When you stop to think about it, if we don't speak up on behalf of agricultural and forest lands, if we don't concern ourselves with water management, who will do so in the Federal Government? We are advocates of good farming and ranching practices, and if a particular land-use policy is clearly inconsistent with those practices or not in keeping with the national interest, I think we would fail in our duty if we did not speak out.

Then, too, we have the capability for taking a strong stand in many areas of land-use policy, and we need to increase that capability. At the same time, we need to strengthen our lines of communication -- to let people know that we can provide the information and technical assistance needed to formulate effective approaches to land use.

We also need to be more assertive in helping lawmakers at all levels of government to identify rural positions on land use. After all, our people have the background and experience with rural people and institutions to act as pretty good advisors on what is acceptable to rural America in the way of land use legislation.

On the other hand, we would not normally want to take sides in a local battle over the location of a highway or airport, or insist on one particular site for a sanitary landfill or a low-income housing development.

We have done our job when we supply the planners and the public with the facts and interpretations in our possession. It is up to the local people which of various alternatives they want to pursue.

What we can do is encourage them to consider a full range of alternatives and to hear from all segments of society that have a stake in the land use decision.

The "Taking" Issue

Of course, any time you talk about using land more carefully, you are talking about some encroachment on a landowner's rights. This is a legitimate concern for private property owners, and it is necessarily present in any attempt to conserve some of America's better cropland.

Historically, land ownership meant that a man could do anything he chose with his land, so long as he did no harm to his neighbor. As late as the 19th century, a number of factors -- including the influence of the frontier, the huge expanse of available land, and a relatively small population -- gave landowners this kind of latitude.

An almost complete reversal of the situation has occurred since then. Today, we have a far greater variety of social goals -- many of them conflicting. They include economic profit, suitable living conditions at reasonable prices, environmental quality, and the location of such necessary facilities as roads, industry, and power plants. Furthermore, the U.S. Constitution indicates that private property may be taken for public use, provided that the owner is given "just compensation" -- ordinarily interpreted as meaning a fair market price.

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The fact that both of these states -- and others -- are developing such approaches to land use indicates a certain degree of failure in the past to achieve compromise on a voluntary basis. Social needs are obviously going to be met, whether it be on a voluntary basis or through legislation. This is an area where you people can provide a valuable service -- that of helping land owners to recognize that they have duties as well as rights. It's a big job, and it's getting bigger.

Looking Ahead

In dealing with land use and other related issues, SCS and the Nation's conservation districts are taking on more and more responsibilities. Together, we are meeting increased demands for conservation facts to help make sound planning decisions in a broad spectrum of land uses. We have a unique opportunity to help improve resource use and management around the world and to contribute to the betterment of mankind.

All these assets and opportunities add up to strong reasons for approaching our job with optimism and enthusiasm. The future depends largely on you -- and on your ability to motivate others. I'm confident you will be equal to the task.

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