

### The Changing Politics of Conservation

I have not addressed a plenary session of our Society since we met in Minneapolis in 1976. I hadn't planned to be on this program. Along with others, we had recommended, and President Don had invited, Senator Sam Nunn, Senator Wyche Fowler, and Congressman Ed Jones, in that order. We regret that none had time to be in Columbus this morning. However, the topic is one that is of great interest to those, including myself, who have followed the national political scene for many years. Laws, and the policies and procedures that flow from Acts of Congress, are important in democratic nations. The election this fall will turn, in part, upon the public's perception of the role of Government in attempting to solve problems of current concern along with some issues that seem to be just over the horizon.

As I developed my thoughts for this paper, the drought that sears our farm, ranches, and forests has taken some of the edge off the chronic problem of crop surpluses by damaging prospects for 1988 harvests. It also promises to raise U.S.A. and Canadian grain and soybean prices above prevailing world levels. Yet droughts, though traumatic, are temporary, while over production is recurrent. Therefore, my observations are from a perspective that now spans several decades. Natural resource issues, including land and water conservation, are long-term.

Permit me a personal experience. In May of 1934, this 16 year-old Minnesota farm boy, had just lost his Dad. The dust storms rolling in from the Dakotas, coupled with the Depression, were a challenge. Feed was needed for our cows, hogs, chickens, and the horses, that we still were using for power. Government help at least in our community, was unknown. The only cash income was the check from the Land'O'Lakes creamery for butterfat. We owned the land, thanks to my Iowa grandfather. The mortgage on the livestock and machinery, although small in today's terms impressed me more than today's federal debt. Obviously, we did survive. I graduated with a high-school class of 6 boys and 6 girls in 1936, entered the University of Minnesota in 1937, and acquired a B.S. in 1941 from their College of Agriculture, Forestry, and Home Economics (along with Ruth who came from a Red River Valley farm near Moorhead). A reason for recalling memories is that while we were living through that experience the Soil Conservation Service, the Conservation Districts, USDA Farm Policy, Credit, and Rural Electric Programs were being created, by laws that have also survived for over fifty years.

Then, as now, there were conditions, including politics, that led to the enactment of programs for conservation research, extension, financial and technical assistance used even today. There were people, in key positions for decisions, in both the U.S. Administration and the U.S. Congress, who seized that window of opportunity, to meet the challenges posed in the 1930's. We are fortunate that each generation has had that foresight, the leadership, the tenacity to address the issues of the day. Material for use by Norman A. Berg at 43rd Annual SWCS Meeting

Columbus, Ohio

We, in this room and throughout the land, are now those leaders that our children and grandchildren depend upon to act and react to current problems. How will they view our actions of the 1980's as they look back from the twenty-first century?

What will they say about the Food Security Act of 1985, of the Clean Water Act amendments, of a 1990 Farm Bill? How will they view present day initiatives to deal with non-point source pollution, groundwater contamination, acid rain, alternative agriculture, saline water, important farmland retention, and the greenhouse effect. There are emerging environmental concerns having a scale and scope that encompass the great life-supporting systems of the planet's biosphere—the atmosphere, oceans, climate, forests, and soils? Americans have shown repeatedly that they want this country to stand for more than short-term political and economic self-interest. Quality-of-life concerns are real. There should be those, hopefully, 50 years hence who will recall as I did earlier, how effective were the actions taken to manage the results of the current drought that historians may record as an environmental event of this century. Our goal should be to promote environmental protection that conserves the resource base for long-term production, protects public health, and establishes a sound basis for international cooperation on global environmental challenges.

Each decade, since the early soil and water conservation laws of the 1930's, has yielded significant advances in federal and non-federal legislation. The River Basin Planning of the 1940's, the Watershed Protection and Flood Protection and the Great Plains Conservation Programs of the 1950's, the Resource Conservation and Development projects of the 1960's, USDA's authority to Inventory and Monitor, the Water Bank, Forestry Incentives, and the Resources Conservation Act of the 1970's, and the Farmland Protection Policy, and the authority to use volunteers for conservation as sanctioned by the 1981 Farm Bill, these were political actions taken to solve a broad array of unmet resource conservation problems. Add to these the many initiatives enacted to address water quality, range and forest improvements, management of our public lands, and the increasing demand for outdoor recreation and wilderness opportunities. Some would say stop the legislative mill: the laws on the books are already stressed by lack of resources for full and proper implementation. Won't any new initiative further dilute the effectiveness of our "traditional work"?

Our theme, "Responding to Conservation in Transition" is the realistic option that recognizes that people's unending quest for better answers will continue. The seven sub-themes of the concurrent sessions of this conference should give each one in attendance an opportunity for participation. The 1982 SWCS meeting in New Orleans had opened a door for our Society to more fully understand the politics of conservation and to begin more active participation in the process. What do you think? Has conservation politics changed? At your level?

Should SWCS and our members even participate in the process ? I'll indicate my bias by trying to help you better understand why and how the "politics of conservation" changed. My view is that conservation politics is an unpredictable condition. It is dynamic. It will impact the future of advancing the science and art of good land use, worldwide. Will we fully understand, take the needed action, on the challenges that President Don wrote about in the latest issue of our Journal ? His view:

"The conservation community must combine forces and agree upon goals and objectives for integrated resources management and then develop a plan to accomplish these goals and objectives. Only with this kind of joint effort can the conservation community hope to influence and convince leaders and legislators to accept and support such a plan. --- Perhaps the most prominent issue in this period of 'conservation in transition' will be the shift from emphasizing natural resources themselves to the people who manage and use the resources".

The past decade hasn't been of much comfort to those of us who may resist too much change, in almost anything except more income. As one who has reached the Biblical limit of three score and ten years, my experiences are more than you want to hear, so I'll move quickly up some key steps as to why, in my opinion, conservation politics changed and will so continue. The Food Security Act of 1985 is an excellent benchmark. The Soil and Water Conservation Society, as a key member of an informal and continuing Washington-based "Conservation Coalition", did have a significant input to the outcome of P.L. 99-198, signed by the President on December 23, 1985. Title XII, is a combination of incentives and disincentives unlike any prior federal direction to influence the proper use of land. For many it has already had a dramatic impact on your work. At the SWCS meeting in Billings, Montana last year the almost nostalgic observations from the heads of Soil Conservation Service and Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service as to whether they were administrators or regulators sharply identified the changes coming to conservation. Both find they are deeply involved in a conservation movement in transition. It now goes with the job. Balancing the two tasks, during implementation, is a challenge. Evaluations and judgments are already underway and there will be more to come.

#### In the 1970's-Public Lands:

-The Resources Planning Act for the U.S. Forest Service lands led to assessments, and proposed programs for continuing resource problems, that provided for involvement from both the Executive and the Congress, along with public participation.

That Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act (1974), which generated the RPA process, is landmark legislation. It has been amended, and the concept was later expanded to include research, extension, and BLM lands. A key requirement is long-range planning. The RCA process was to come later.

The initial RPA law set 2000 as the target year "when the renewable resources of the National Forest System shall be in an operating posture whereby all backlogs of needed treatment of their restoration shall be reduced to a current basis and the major portion of planned intensive multiple-use sustained-yield management procedures shall be installed and operating on an environmentally sound basis".

#### In the 1970's-Private lands:

- The substantial drawdown of agricultural commodity stocks, and the all-out push for increased production of the '70's, again revealed the inability of public policy to properly link economic, commodity, and conservation objectives by USDA.
- In 1976-77, GAO found less than half of ACP funds were used for soil-conservation oriented practices. Production-oriented practices had priority. This was further confirmed by ASCS. ACP funded work, approved by SCS, was not effectively reaching lands where sheet and rill erosion were most severe. The SCS, with their BPCP, and technical responsibility for ACP, was criticised in comparable audits for outdated plans and weak follow-up with the landusers. The 1977 National Resources Inventory (NRI) revealed for the first time, the serious soil loss problems that, because of a unique set of complex reasons, were not being solved by "traditional" programs. Also, it was a time of shrinking federal resources that were unduly stressed by tight budgets and double-digit inflation.

#### In the 1980's:

There was general agreement early in this decade that current agricultural policies no longer reflected the realities of today's agriculture. More effective and equitable programs and policies would need to be designed to stabilize farm income and to ensure the long-term productivity of American agriculture. Agriculture had changed and these changes, over fifty years, prompted a great deal of debate about the appropriate role of the U.S. Government in Agriculture. Alternatives to present policies were the focus of more seminars and studies for an 1985 Farm Bill than any time in the past. The U.S. Congress is, through long history, a body that requires time and energy to enact new policies. The path is long, and good legislation results when enough time is spent to fully address the many roadblocks. I recall among the novel policy proposals to Congress by Secretary of Agriculture Charles F. Brannan in 1949 was the idea of requiring approved conservation practices as a condition for farmer eligibility in Federal commodity programs. This was the first time "cross-compliance" surfaced, but the idea, rejected in 1949 (along with most of the "Brannan Plan") lay dormant until in the 1980 Resources Conservation Act review draft, USDA discussed "cross-compliance" as one future alternative strategy. The rationale of requiring farmers who desire the society's protective economic commodity and credit programs, might in return be expected to protect the socially valued

resource-soil-had some public support. A 1979 Harris public opinion poll, part of the RCA process, indicated that 41 percent of the adult U.S. population believed this to be fair to both farmers and taxpayers. In the spring of 1980 however, USDA received nearly 110,000 comments on the RCA draft's discussion of "cross-compliance", later known as "conservation compliance". Overall, 49 percent supported the strategy and 51 percent were opposed. Environmental groups, along with farm organizations in the Northeast and the Midwest, were for it. Members of farm organizations in the South and West were opposed, along with some ASCS and Conservation District representatives. They were joined by key members of Congress who had heard from their constituents. We were cautioned on possible repeal of RCA. We didn't want that and, except for encouraging FmHA loans to have a conservation plan, the "red ticket-green ticket" concept had a very low USDA priority.

RCA signaled the pending political change for conservation.

The Soil & Water Resources Conservation Act (P.L. 95-192, '77) also established a process for natural resource appraisal and planning. A purpose was to provide a mechanism for informed, long-range policy decisions regarding the conservation and improvement of the Nation's soil, water, and related resources. 34 USDA soil and water conservation programs were to be evaluated. A National Conservation Program was to be developed and sent to Congress, along with Appraisal results.

RCA was intended to serve not only the Federal Government, but also State and local governments, and private landowners and land users. A comprehensive national policy, including priorities and continual evaluations, was mandated. The framework for the changing politics of conservation emerged. The 1980's appeared to be a necessary time for integrating USDA agricultural programs. Soil and water conservation became an issue that led to significant nonfederal actions. Several new players became part of a viable coalition for conservation.

There were timely actions that laid a foundation for change: First, the RCA process, although frustrating in several ways, helped develop an awareness throughout the Nation that soil erosion and related resource problems had not been solved. Second, the NRI's (1977 and 1982) and the RCA Appraisal, assessed for the first time in history, a credible identification of the nature, extent, and scope of the soil erosion problem. Loss of soil above "T" on one-third of the cropland was a concern. Third, the ability of farmers to produce more commodities than domestic and export markets could clear, led to determinations that U.S. farm policy should not subsidize using soils for cropland that were highly erodible or valuable as wetlands. Fourth, a large number of non-profit organizations agreed to work together to develop draft legislation and other needs. Fifth, the Administration (outside of USDA) although late in the process, endorsed need for new tools in the conservation kit. Earlier, budget proposals were aimed at eliminating programs.

Why did the politics of conservation change? Water quality, wildlife habitat, soil loss, future of wetlands, and sodbusting brought in many new players and their views. I'll offer mine:  
 -The Journal of Soil and Water Conservation led the media as articles were generated by writers not previously thought of as members of the conservation choir. Two special issues: Conservation Tillage (May-June 1983) and Non-Point Water Pollution (January-February 1985) were most timely for use in Congressional hearings, and broader understanding of current problems and possible answers. Reporters for the Des Moines Register, the Washington Post, and other papers and magazines throughout the Nation became more aware of pending issues.

-The American Farmland Trust (chartered in 1980 to inherit the National Agricultural Lands study of the 1970's) broadened their goals to include soil conservation, under President, Douglas P. Wheeler, Director of Policy Development, Robert J. Gray, and myself as their Senior Advisor, following my retirement in April, 1982. I'd had forty years as a USDA-SCS career conservationist. By January, 1983 I was also SWCS's D.C. "Rep".

Succeeding me, as Chief of SCS, later as Assistant Secretary, now USDA Deputy Secretary, Peter C. Myers had direct access to the Secretary. Pete represented the Administration in the many Congressional hearings that were held in 1983, '84, and '85 leading to enactment of the Conservation Title of the Food Security Act of 1985. His "open door" attitude provided Conservation Coalition members an opportunity to talk about ideas that were not compatible prior to preparing testimony for the several hearings being held by the U.S. Congress.

-The AFT study, *Soil Conservation in America-What Do We Have to Lose?*, after intensive field interviews with landusers, technical papers by experts, review of USDA-NRI data, and the RCA Appraisal and National Conservation Program influenced the outcome. Ken Cook was analyst and editor of the report. Their study documented and reported the following:

"If there is a soil erosion crisis, then, it is in the policy realm. Conservation has remained on the margins of America's agricultural policies. Decisions about farm price and income supports, loans, crop insurance, agricultural research and many other governmental activities, continue to be made with little consideration being given to their effects on land and water resources--and very often the effects are adverse. Traditional, voluntary programs have thus far solved only a small part of the problem. Yet the existence of these programs have provided farm policy makers, and to an extent, the farm community, with an excuse for not facing difficult ethical, social, and political problems related to land use and government programs. In fact, conservationists and their organizations have themselves avoided some of the more controversial policy issues, including questions about:

-the relevance and effectiveness of the traditional government conservation programs.

AFT recognized that the U.S. faced many serious agricultural resource problems. Somewhere in this large landscape, someone documents conversion of important farmland as a problem. Non-point sources, including urban development, require attention. Soil erosion impacts rangelands and forested areas. However, by focusing on cropland erosion, AFT did not mean to slight these and other resource issues. Rather, the study focused on proper use of cropland. Almost half of total annual soil loss came from this type of land use. These lands were also the central thrust of the major Federal Farm Programs".

The study had 23 recommendations, including need for a 10 year Conservation Reserve Program for "highly erodible cropland". The RCA process had identified the value of using soil loss tolerance ("T") as a measure of acceptable, long-term erosion. This, coupled with the Land Capability definitions used in the sodbuster proposals, and the RKLS product of the Universal Soil Loss Equation could be translated into acres impacted.

The data, the analysis, a changing farm economy, unease with farm policy in general, and concerns from a broad array of organizations with interests in wildlife habitat, forestry, water quality, sodbusting and swampbusting, proved timely.

The House Agriculture Committee, under Mr. Jones' leadership had passed a conservation bill early in the 98th Congress. Senate action on Senator Armstrong's pioneer sodbuster bill created need for a conference that ended up deadlocked. The Senate and the Administration preferred action in the 99th Congress. The result was that no conservation legislation was enacted. There were some who said that conservation was an issue whose time had come--and gone. There are three parties that weigh in on whether legislation is passed or not. These are the Congress, the Administration, and the public. If two of the three are in favor, legislative proposals usually end up being supported. In 1984 the conservation community was at work with all three. Farm bills cover many issues. Conservation was a key concern.

Action in 1985:

The 1985 Administration proposal, a market-oriented concept, was entitled "Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1985". The proposal had only a very weak sodbuster provision. The House Bill of the prior year did include a strong Sodbuster provision and a modest Conservation Reserve Program. It did not have Swampbuster or Conservation Compliance provisions.

The Conservation Coalition, with endorsement from the Natural Resources Council of America (a national organization of over 60 organizations), had over two dozen very capable key people ready, willing, and able to meet, plan strategy, attend hearings, assist in drafting legislation, and testimony. A broad array of interest groups were involved. These included our Society, the Nat'l. Ass'n. of Conservation Districts, the American Forestry Ass'n., the Nat'l Ass'n. of State Foresters, the Sierra Club, the Wildlife Institute, the National Wildlife Federation, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Izaak Walton League of

America, the Internat'l. Ass'n. of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, the Society for Range Management, the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, the Conservation Foundation, Amer. Farmland Trust, & others. Also, staff people from Congress, USDA, USDI, whose work related to soil, water, forest and wildlife conservation, were part of the network. Grass-roots action, when needed, was outstanding. These diverse interests had considerable clout. These organizations are skilled in lobbying, public relations, and legal aspects of policy-making, writing legislation, regulatory implementation, and, if need be, litigation. These very competent men and women will be around the political scene well into the next decade, and century. They represent many, many voters.

In April, 1985 the Senate Committee for Agriculture had a key hearing, with Senators Lugar and Melcher. Twenty organizations testified in support of a strong conservation title in the upcoming farm bill. The bipartisan action taken from that time on was supportive of all the provisions that became law. On July 9, the House Committee for Agriculture voted to support a bill that had a 25 million acre Conservation Reserve. On July 11, the Senate Committee for Agriculture voted for a 30 million acre Conservation Reserve. Both bills had the Sodbuster and Swampbuster provisions. The Senate Committee had the first Conservation Compliance feature, to begin in 1988. The House action set 1990 to begin and 1995 to finish applying a conservation plan. Senators Dole and Nunn raised the CRP goal by 1990 to 45 million acres. USDA, in June, had approved a 20 million acre, \$ 11 billion, ten year CRP. By mid-December, 1985-Title XII - emerged as the most innovative policy statement in the 1985 Farm Bill. Everyone from President Reagan on down praised it as path-breaking, and that it is. At the field level the combination of carrots and sticks contained in the law places enormous leverage-and responsibility-in the hands of local soil conservationists.

### The future:

Forecasting, even based on a thorough knowledge of history, is a highly imperfect business. John Galbraith said, "There are two classes of people who tell you what is going to happen in the future: Those who don't know, and those who don't know they don't know".

However, significance of the conservation title goes beyond the actual policy changes it contains now and for the future. Perhaps that principle of using leverage of ongoing programs of the federal government to achieve conservation may well be extended in other ways. Change in conservation politics has disturbed some. We are not at all certain that the commodity organizations, agri-business, and some farm groups will fully support the change or endorse any expansion. However, in my opinion, your world and mine, of agricultural resource conservation will never be the same. We can expect both praise and criticism for aiding the changing politics of conservation. The transition to a new Administration and Congress is near.

At least two new themes have emerged. One is integration of commodity, credit and insurance programs and policies, with the soil and water conservation programs and policies, of USDA. The control of agricultural production can reduce soil loss from croplands, improve upland wildlife habitat, enhance water quality, and perhaps reduce long-term federal program costs.

Second, is the growing acceptance that actions by agriculture to produce food and fiber can have adverse environmental impacts off-site. Prior to this decade those organizations concerned about "environmental" issues played only a token role in national farm policy and soil conservation debates. Now they know well the "T" value of soil, the erodibility index, the hydric soils, the plants that grow on wetlands. The requirements of reducing soil erosion to non-degradation status is now being widely discussed. The technical guides at USDA field offices are being scrutinized by others, who prior to conservation compliance, did not know they even existed.

The 1985 Conservation Title is viewed by the new players as important, but a modest step. This is in contrast to the farm community where many may view these recent actions as bold. Now, the next change in the politics of conservation will be by those impacted by agriculture. They will evaluate, monitor the agencies assigned implementation for results off-site. They will be making observations about the participation of the agricultural producers and their record of compliance. To date most are pleased with the excellent CRP progress.

Those concerned about water quality, about wildlife habitat, about a wide range of issues beyond production of food and fiber, will increasingly want to be in the loop of action. This includes legislation, rule-making, funding, and follow-up.

The combination of their organization's mission, key people in Congress, the Administration, and the media, represent an ability to monitor events and cause change to occur. It is a formidable combination. They will be reasonable, but demanding. The traditional soil and water conservation programs will function at about their present level of performance. Efforts to redirect are limited. Therefore, the new, the different, even better ways will probably be advocated by the new players. In return they will expect results. The future spending of public funds will be more reluctantly given than at any time in the past. The rural non-farm, urban, and environmental influence has arrived. They represent a large, politically astute, electorate.

Conservation will increasingly be a strong partnership task. State and local initiatives are increasing. As former Assistant Secretary Don Paarlberg told us in the 1970's, "Agriculture no longer controls the agenda for agricultural issues". In the 1980's traditional conservationists no longer control the soil and water conservation agenda. It will be an exciting and challenging future. It can be most constructive and enjoyable. The conservation ethic, in production agriculture, can survive.