

The RCA Process Revisited

An interview with Norman A. Berg

Congress in 1977 directed the secretary of agriculture to undertake a continuing appraisal of the status and condition of the nation's soil, water, and related natural resources. The effort thus far, under the leadership of USDA's Soil Conservation Service, has produced three major documents, Parts I and II of the RCA Appraisal 1980 and a Program Report and Environmental Impact Statement. With the period for public comment on these documents now past, the JSWC invited Norman A. Berg, SCS chief, to respond to a series of questions on the evolution of RCA to date. Mr. Berg kindly consented.



JSWC: *What brought about the RCA process and what does it demand of the U.S. Department of Agriculture?*

Mr. Berg: RCA is our acronym for the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act of 1977. Congress recognized that some federal conservation legislation was passed 45 years ago. There are now 34 soil and water conservation programs within USDA authorized by Congress. It is time for a comprehensive look at present and future demands on our resources and for an exploration of possible fresh approaches to conservation. The law (P.L. 95-192) calls for USDA to prepare an appraisal of the current status and trends regarding soil and water resources on nonfederal lands and to develop a soil and water conservation program for the future to be delivered to Congress, along with a statement of presidential policy, in 1980 and 1985.

JSWC: *How did USDA organize internally to respond to the RCA?*

Berg: Following passage of the act in

late 1977, responsibility for the RCA appraisal and program development was assigned to the Soil Conservation Service and efforts were focused on SCS programs. In October 1978 Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland decided that RCA implementation should include all USDA programs related to soil and water conservation. He retained SCS leadership for the study and established a coordinating committee composed of nine department agencies. The president's Office of Management and Budget and Council on Environmental Quality were invited to participate on the committee. This multiagency committee has directed the RCA process since that time.

JSWC: *Was setting up still another committee really the best way to find a new approach to soil and water conservation?*

Berg: Someone skeptical of decision-making by committees has said that if you want a track team to win the high jump, you find one person who can jump seven

feet, not seven people who can jump one foot. If you want to win a relay race, however, you find four people who can run one lap, not one person who can run four laps. This outcome is based on a team effort. In RCA that's what we are after. The 34 different conservation programs are administered by six different agencies. The coordination of these programs is essential to accomplish common objectives. The committee approach has helped to achieve an interagency approach to this task. It has aided in broadening communications between USDA and its partners in soil and water conservation, namely, the conservation districts, ASCS county committees, and state conservation agencies.

JSWC: *Do you think the RCA documents made clear the urgency of dealing with such problems as soil erosion and retention of our best farmland?*

Berg: We hope so. The RCA documents, of course, are meant to be objective appraisals and analyses, not "sales brochures" for a particular point of view. But we do think the documents lay out the significant facts about future pressures on our resources and the dimensions of the challenge ahead.

JSWC: *You reportedly received over 60,000 comments on the RCA documents by the March 28 deadline. What will you do with all this feedback?*

Berg: Each comment is being read carefully to capture the concern of each respondent. All comments are being coded in terms of geographic origin, occupation of respondent, affiliation (if any), etc. When the processing of the comments is com-

plete, a report will be prepared for use by the RCA coordinating committee in developing the recommended soil and water conservation program

JSWC: *Will the public get another chance to respond when you come up with a recommended program?*

Berg: Yes. We plan to publish a recommended program and make it available for public review late this summer

JSWC: *Can you give a general idea of the tone of the responses so far?*

Berg: Until the recording and analysis of all public comments have been completed, it would be premature to characterize the responses.

JSWC: *Some people thought the comment period should have been extended for more than 60 days, didn't they?*

Berg: That's true, and we considered their views carefully. We decided to abide by the original schedule primarily because we will be providing the public with another opportunity for review and comment on a specific recommended program. The 60,000 comments received to date will be most useful in developing specific alternative programs—each combining objectives, activities, and delivery strategies—and selecting a recommended alternative for public review late this summer

JSWC: *Are you paying more attention to comments from farmers and ranchers than to those of nonfarm people?*

Berg: We are paying close attention to the comments of all the people. Soil and water conservation is a matter of widespread public concern. Obviously the views of farmers and ranchers are very important because farmers and ranchers own and manage the land of principal concern to the RCA process. No soil and water con-

servation program will be practical and effective if it is not supported by those engaged in agriculture as well as the general public

JSWC: *Do you expect the RCA draft documents to be changed considerably in the final version?*

Berg: Some improvements will be made in the technical data included in the *Appraisal*, although this document will probably change very little. Most changes will be made in the program document and environmental impact statement. Here is where specific soil and water conservation program alternatives will be discussed, taking into account the public comments and further analysis of program impacts. The final recommended program will appear here.

JSWC: *Some people complain that the RCA draft documents are overly long, hard to read, and hard to understand. Do you agree?*

Berg: Yes. The time available and the complexity of the issues involved contributed to this problem. We must remember that this is the first comprehensive effort of its kind

JSWC: *Was the expertise of all the agencies represented on the RCA coordinating committee considered and used? How can agency expertise be used better in the future?*

Berg: The agencies participated actively on the coordinating committee. We met frequently in the process of preparing the draft documents. In addition, many agency personnel contributed extensively as members of an interagency work group that met continuously throughout the effort and as participants on numerous teams with special assignments. Future work can build upon this experience

JSWC: *How good are the data used in the RCA appraisal?*

Berg: They're the best available, but our information is far from complete. SCS inventories of gully, streambank, and roadside erosion and sedimentation were not available for the first documents, but they are forthcoming. Some questions have been raised about use of the universal soil loss equation in assessing erosion problems in the West. We are doing everything possible to correct these shortcomings in the 1985 process. Meanwhile, we think a reasonably clear and accurate picture of our resource conditions and problems emerged in the 1980 *Appraisal*

JSWC: *Critics have raised questions about the usefulness of the erosion yield simulator, a computer model that draws on information in published soil surveys. How can the model be changed to arrive at more realistic values?*

Berg: We plan to check the findings of the simulator against research station data to help validate the model. Without question, the simulator can be improved by adding and refining variables. We know that we need better data on the impact of conservation practices on erosion and crop yields.

JSWC: *The National Agricultural Lands Study being conducted under the leadership of USDA and CEQ has come up with new statistics that paint a much gloomier picture of the future availability of farmland than does the RCA report. Will these new findings affect the final version of the RCA documents?*

Berg: Preliminary results from NALS predict that there will not be as much productive land available in future years as indicated in the RCA appraisal. We expect to include the preliminary information in the final RCA documents to illustrate the

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range of estimates of land conversion and availability

JSWC: *Results of the recent Lou Harris survey commissioned by USDA indicated widespread public support for soil conservation. What will be done with the survey results as far as RCA is concerned?*

Berg: The results will serve as an additional source of information to be considered in the design of a recommended soil and water conservation program. Survey results will be compared with other public responses, and any significant differences will be studied carefully.

JSWC: *What are some of the more important research needs identified by the RCA process?*

Berg: As suggested earlier, we need to know more about what happens to a soil's productivity when erosion takes place. And while we know that conservation practices help keep sediment out of water, we don't know enough about the specific relationships between conservation practices and water quality, including delivery of sediment, pesticides, and fertilizer nutrients to water courses. We'd also like to know the impact of energy production from biomass on soil erosion and soil fertility. One important question has to do with how much organic matter can be removed from the land for the production of energy without damaging the soil resource base.

JSWC: *From stories in the press, there apparently is a lot of misunderstanding about the nature of the seven alternative strategies presented in the draft program. Weren't these strategies offered for discussion purposes only—to get public reaction?*

Berg: Yes, and most people understood that. We wanted to lay on the table the full range of options that have been seriously

discussed. We expected the public to tell us what they like and dislike. They have

JSWC: *The idea of cross compliance seemingly has angered many farmers and ranchers. Was it necessary to include such controversial alternatives in the RCA documents?*

Berg: The RCA coordinating committee felt it necessary to include a wide range of alternative strategies for public discussion. We didn't want to hand the public a stacked deck. A full range of strategies, of course, would range from no federal assistance to complete federal regulation. The alternative strategies we presented are more realistic. Some have been discussed for many years.

JSWC: *But is cross compliance feasible from an administrative standpoint? From a political standpoint?*

Berg: All the impacts of a cross-compliance strategy have not yet been assessed. Administrative feasibility would depend on the specific nature of a given approach. The public comments we have received should give us some idea of the political viability of the concept in general.

JSWC: *In your appraisal you identified many different resource problems. Which are the most critical?*

Berg: Problems differ from one part of the country to another. In many parts of the Corn Belt, the South, Appalachia, and the Palouse, sheet and rill erosion are critical. The poor condition of much of our rangeland is a problem in the West, and the loss of prime farmland is viewed as critical in many different parts of the country. Impaired water quality, flooding, and the loss of wetlands and fish and wildlife habitat are also major concerns.

JSWC: *But which resource problem do*

you think is of most concern?

Berg: Maintaining the quantity and quality of our soil for the continuing production of food and fiber, I feel, is the most important single issue. This country—and much of the world—depends upon our productive capacity now and in the future.

JSWC: *Can you imagine a workable soil and water conservation program that doesn't provide some kind of incentive or financial help to land users to encourage them to apply needed conservation measures?*

Berg: No, but we must view incentives broadly. They include technical assistance as well as cost-sharing and loans. They could include tax incentives or performance payments or bonuses. Our challenge is to design a program that motivates action to conserve our resources in the most efficient and cost-effective manner.

JSWC: *Won't an adequate soil and water conservation program cost more money? In a time of tight budgets, where will the money come from?*

Berg: One major determinant of program costs is the objectives that we set. The total cost—public and private—of meeting the objectives proposed in the RCA documents is at least double that of the present conservation effort. The nation as a whole needs to decide what level of conservation achievement is essential and what trade-offs with other public necessities can be made. RCA provides a vehicle for this to happen through the recommendation of a program by the president and a decision by the Congress.

JSWC: *Is there any reason to expect a greater commitment to conservation from Congress as a result of RCA?*

Berg: The idea behind RCA is for the Executive Branch to determine in an objec-

tive manner the nation's needs for soil and water conservation and to present these findings to Congress. The facts generated by this process provide a better basis for funding decisions by the Congress than we have had in the past

JSWC: *Is there any basis for deciding how much of the soil conservation bill should be paid for by the individual landowner and how much by the public, or taxpayer?*

Berg: This is an important question, but it cannot be totally answered in 1980. We will explore it in more detail in the 1985 RCA process. It may be that the landowner should be expected to invest in soil conservation only to the extent that the conservation practices raise his or her crop yields or income over the short run. Perhaps the total cost of conservation that will benefit future generations—but provides little return to the landowner—should be paid by the taxpayer. The question will have to be studied with care, keeping in mind that it is a political question as well as an economic one

JSWC: *The idea of a Conservation Incentives Program, which combines a little carrot with a little stick, has been discussed in the JSWC in the past. Did the RCA coordinating committee consider the CIP*

concept in developing its list of alternative strategies?

Berg: Yes, it did. The conservation performance bonus strategy, under which an individual would be given lower interest rates or higher commodity payments for carrying out a conservation program on his or her land, is based on the CIP idea

JSWC: *Do you honestly think that the United States can achieve its soil conservation goals without stiffer regulations?*

Berg: First, we have to establish more specific goals. That is the purpose of the RCA objectives. Next, we have to examine each objective and determine the best way of achieving it. Many of our present programs have demonstrated that voluntary action can be obtained with appropriate incentives. In a few states, regulatory soil conservation programs have been established by local and state governments, but most of these programs deal with nonagricultural lands. In my view, we need to use all possible voluntary approaches before considering regulation of any kind.

JSWC: *How much regulation are people willing to accept?*

Berg: If you start telling individual farmers and ranchers what to do with their land, and how and when to do it, you will run into heavy resistance. In my opinion,

present USDA soil conservation programs have been successful because they are voluntary and are carried out with a great deal of participation and guidance.

JSWC: *Should the role of the states in soil conservation be greater—and the role of the federal government less?*

Berg: That is one of the alternatives being examined. In talking with farmers and others, there is no general agreement on the question.

JSWC: *Will state governments and state agencies have a bigger role in future RCA deliberations?*

Berg: Definitely. And local units of government also. We involved state and local conservation agencies as effectively as we could in the 1980 RCA process. We based our selection of potential problem areas on input from the local level. We provided funds for the development of state soil and water conservation programs. But more is needed, and in the 1985 RCA work we will explore ways to help all states develop plans and use these plans as building blocks in constructing a national conservation program.

JSWC: *But many states already are putting more resources into soil and water conservation programs. How does this square with traditional conservation programs administered by USDA? Are there any conflicts?*

Berg: State and local assistance to conservation is on the increase. Where states are putting additional funds into cost-sharing, there is coordination with USDA programs so that they complement each other. Where states provide funds to accelerate soil surveys, state employees generally work side-by-side with USDA employees. With this excellent record of cooperation in mind, we will be looking at other opportunities for joint action to achieve conservation objectives.

JSWC: *What role do you foresee for conservation districts in the years ahead?*

Berg: I see a greater role for conservation districts. Districts have established an enviable record in the field of conservation. State legislatures are assigning additional responsibilities to districts. The number of district employees is growing year after year, and district officials are becoming involved in a range of activities and concerns that would have seemed impossible 15 years ago. The future of soil and water programs in the United States and conservation districts is inseparable, as recognized in the RCA legislation. □

COMMITTEE LEADERS DENOUNCE REGULATORY MEASURES

The chairman and vice-chairman of the House Agriculture Committee have told U.S. Department of Agriculture officials that they will not support coercive conservation policies.

Representatives Thomas Foley (D-Wash.), the committee's chairman, and Kika de la Garza (D-Tex.), the vice-chairman, met with USDA officials in early April to discuss public comments received from farmers in reaction to the alternative conservation policies proposed in the RCA process.

Foley and de la Garza told USDA officials, "We have been deeply disturbed because it appears that as a result of widespread misunderstanding of the purpose of the review, some farmers have been given the impression that USDA will seriously consider asking Congress to adopt coercive policies—programs under which farmers might be threatened with loss of federal price supports or other farm program benefits if they failed to comply with conservation rules.

"We made it clear that we do not think USDA should propose such policies and we are convinced Congress would not adopt them. Certainly we

need strong conservation programs to preserve our nation's productive soil but they should be based on cooperating with and assisting landowners in their own voluntary efforts—not on trying to blackmail people into compliance."

The two congressmen, noting that RCA was to provide a wide-ranging review of soil conservation problems and needs for consideration by Congress, commented, "This review could be a useful process. A careful study of how best to make sure that our soil is kept in shape to feed future generations, conducted with wide participation by the people who own and manage the land, could be helpful. But we are distressed because of indications that a serious misunderstanding of the process in some areas may have grown out of internal conflicts in USDA."

Foley and de la Garza added, "We are confident that the recommendations and views submitted to USDA by thousands of interested and concerned people will be heard, and USDA has assured us this will lead to practical proposals for future conservation policies. We are confident these policies will not include coercion."

Conflict between rural residential development and agricultural activities is the focus of the planning effort in Big Horn County, Wyoming.



Lovell Chronicle photo

Planning with rural values

By Lee Nellis

This case study of planning in Big Horn County, Wyoming, points out some basic principles to follow in overcoming resistance to planning in rural areas

LOCAL land use planning in rural America is a rocky experience that seldom is successful in terms of plan implementation. Yet the ultimate success of local planning is necessary to a nation that wishes to preserve alternative places and values for living and to assure itself of adequate water, food, and recreational resources.

A case study in Big Horn County, Wyoming, illustrates one such rural planning effort where initial local resistance to planning gave way to support, resulting in successful implementation of a plan. The case study points out reasons for resistance to planning in rural areas and how planning can be designed not to overcome these reasons but to legitimize them.

The Big Horn County setting

Early in 1974 the Wyoming Conservation and Land Use Study Commission ran-

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domly sampled state residents about their attitudes on land use planning (17). Respondents in Big Horn County ranked first (of 23 counties) in labeling planning as unnecessary. These same Big Horn County respondents fell among the top three counties in favoring economic goals over environmental goals and in resisting protective measures for unique natural areas.

Big Horn County covers 3,177 square miles in northwestern Wyoming's Big Horn Basin (5). The current population is 12,000. An annual growth rate of about two percent has prevailed since the early 1970s.

The county's economy is based on agriculture and minerals. The agricultural industry consists of cattle, sheep, and irrigated sugar beets, barley, beans, and hay. The minerals' segment of the local economy includes oil and gas production, bentonite mining and processing, and gypsum mining and wallboard manufacturing.

Lovell (population 2,600), Greybull (2,300), and Basin (1,200) are the principal

towns in the county. Growth in recent years has been in nearby rural areas rather than in the towns. Recreational demands of workers and their families from the rapidly growing coal and uranium mining communities in the Powder River Basin, east of the Big Horn Mountains, have created substantial impacts on mountain and foothill areas of the county.

The county's Board of Commissioners first appointed a county planning commission in the spring of 1973. That commission hired a professional planner in July 1974, chiefly because of the "threat" of federal land use legislation, the availability of federal planning grants, and the county's renewed growth. Two new subdivisions had just been platted in the Shell Valley, east of Greybull.

Wyoming's legislature finished the task of committing Big Horn County to some kind of planning process when it acted to require counties to adopt subdivision regulations by September 1975 and to develop land use plans by January 1978 (18, 19). In July 1975 Big Horn County pooled its resources with Washakie and Hot Springs Counties to fund the necessary professional planning effort. By October 1976 the county implemented the first element of its comprehensive plan.

How did a rural, conservative county proceed with planning that far, that fast, especially in light of the resistance to planning reflected in the 1974 Land Use Study Commission survey of Wyoming residents?

Reasons for resistance

Two warnings must precede consideration of resistance to planning. First, rural resistance to planning cannot be laid out in a neat, analytic list. It is usually expressed as a general frustration, with slogans borrowed from newscasters, conservative interest groups, or other sources. The resistance also may be tangled and confused with other issues. The list offered here is for use by professionals trying to reach beyond slogans and general frustration to manageable elements of the problem.

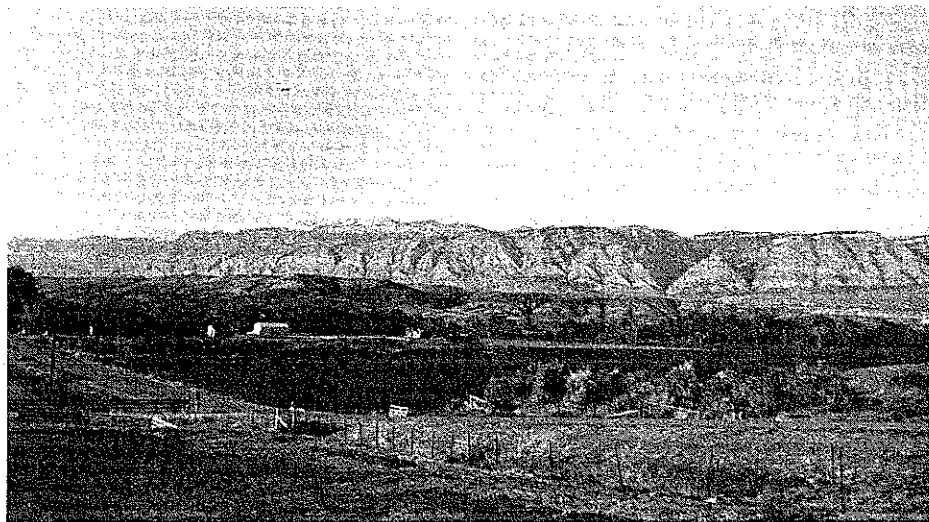
Second, Big Horn County's rural communities are relatively cohesive and stable. They have been subjected to little change compared with rural communities subjected to the impacts of energy development or migration from nearby metropolitan areas. The least cohesive communities within the county were the most difficult to organize for planning action. This may hold true in other locales as well.

Now for the list of reasons for rural resistance to planning. There are four: (a) a strong emphasis on private property rights, coupled with (b) distrust of outside priori-

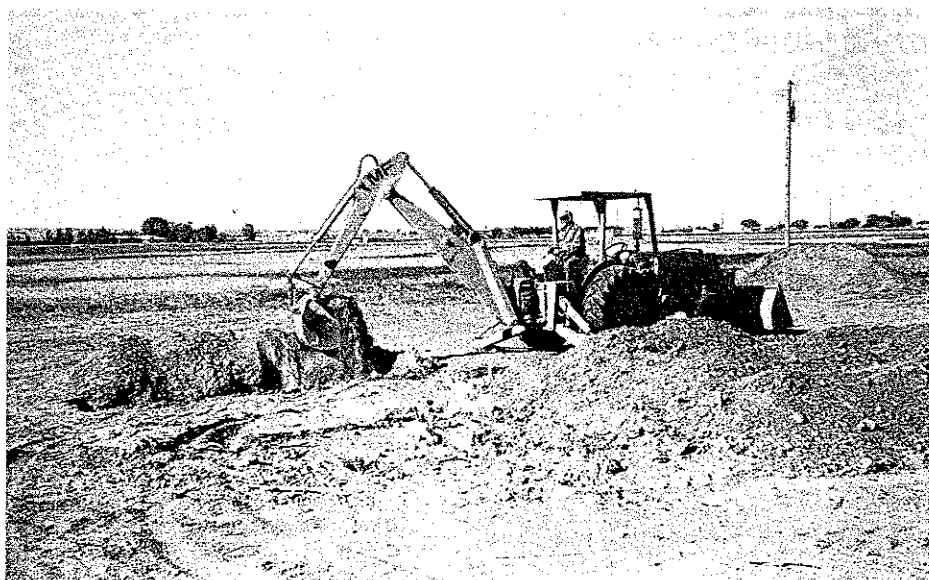
ties for land use, aggravated by (c) the inappropriateness of traditional urban planning tools and attitudes, all resulting in (d) a feeling that planners have little empathy with rural values and needs.

Property rights We are all heirs to Thomas Jefferson's sentiment that "it is not too soon to provide by every possible means that as few as possible shall be without a little portion of land. The small landholders are the most precious part of a state" (8). Any community that implements a land use plan must walk a thin line between the strong American attachment to the rights of property ownership and the community's collective concerns.

Rural landowners in Big Horn County and elsewhere have long recognized some mutual necessities where individual property rights must be subordinated to the community's overall right to sustain itself and all its members. Examples include rotation systems to make the most of limited irrigation water or the control of noxious weeds. But the recognition of limited public concerns about land use is balanced by land's private values. Land is a source of income. Land is a savings account, a hedge against inflation or hard times. Land is a part of family history and pride as well as part of the shared American heritage. Finally, land is living space, a value of tremendous importance to rural Western-



Residential growth in the pastoral Shell Valley triggered the initial decision to undertake planning in Big Horn County.



Contamination of wells in rural areas south of Lovell was an impetus to planning. One outcome of this planning has been the installation of sewage disposal beds.