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Mr. Green
Mr. Weaver
From Mr. G.
& Mr. Meadows

The SCS Role With Planning Districts

Millions of Americans are at odds with their environment today. They breathe polluted air, drive congested roads to a crowded beach, turn rivers into sewers, pay ever-rising taxes to make their water drinkable. Too often, they live with scarred landscapes in new suburbs. Too often, their streams are flooded, their lakes filled with sediment, their surroundings depressing or unhealthy. In big or little ways, their lives are affected by environmental misuse. If, as we tell ourselves, man is a thinking animal, then where do our reasoning powers go when we abuse the environment?

Material for Norman Berg in talk to Virginia SWCD members, April 29, 1971

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This, of course, is only half the picture, although the more publicized half. Many parts of Virginia, and elsewhere, are beautiful examples of good land and water use. Some areas are in much better shape than they were a generation ago, although their use today is often more intensive.

Still, there is enough wrong with our collective use of the environment that millions of people are concerned.

What marks the essential difference between ~~Slurbtown~~, Ghettotyke ~~USA~~ ~~USA~~, and ~~rural and urban America~~ Countryside USA the Beautiful?

It is "planning."

-- Intelligent "planning by and for people, based on matching human needs to the suitability and capacity of our resource base.

-- Planning that recognizes, and plans for, all of our many needs, including the need to recycle the so-called waste products we generate.

Having said this about planning, let me quickly add that SCS is not never was a planning agency. We collect and interpret data, suggest alternative uses or treatments for different areas of land and water and assist in the implementation of treatment. The real planners are the farmers, ranchers, land developers, and local and regional officials who make the decisions on land use.

The small watershed program--under public law 566--expanded the kinds of assistance provided by SCS and soil and water conservation districts. However, the Service role was still collection and interpretation of information about soil, water, and related resources for the use of planners. The local planners, in this case, were small watershed sponsors. Today Virginia has 33 small watershed projects completed, under operation or approved for planning.

About ten years ago, Virginia districts and the SCS broadened their program to include more conservation work in urbanizing areas. A pilot program in the No. Va. Soil & Water Cons. Dist. Fairfax County concentrated almost solely on new suburbs, and surrounding rural lands affected by the massive changes.

Recently, the Northern Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District was divided into three districts, one for each county--Fairfax, Loudoun and Prince William. This change will permit each county to concentrate on its own major conservation and land-use problems.

In the mid-1960's, the National Association of Conservation Districts set up a special district outlook committee. The purpose, as then NACD President Marion Monk, Jr. put it, was to "look beyond the events and programs now current to the probable needs and developments of the years ahead, not only in terms of resources involved, but in terms of districts as serviceable units of government. We must anticipate future needs, identify potential problems...and chart a course to bring about the desired results."

Proud of my role as SCS refer.

The committee report urged that districts pay special heed to four requirements for future work. They should, said the report-- see booklet

-- Represent all the people and all community interests in responding to conservation needs.

-- Develop resource programs for all of the people.

-- Involve all people in the decision-making process, and

-- Accept and carry out responsibility in connection with these resource conservation programs and projects.

One response to these broadening goals was an acceleration of district data-collecting and inventory work. In the 1960's, for example, local districts and SCS technicians began collecting information on existing and potential public and private recreation possibilities in each county. The information has been furnished to the Virginia Commission on Outdoor Recreation as well as other agencies.

Today, in 1971, districts in Virginia, as elsewhere, have still other ways to help move needed resource information into the hands of decision-makers. I refer to the multi-county planning districts.

Virginia law requires these new districts to develop comprehensive plans for their area of responsibility. This includes plans for the use and treatment of soil, water, and related resources--and that is right in your ballpark.

In addition to the new multi-county planning districts, there is now a Virginia Outdoor Recreation Commission and your state has also passed a law requiring stabilization of land areas undergoing mining. It's obvious how your knowledge and resource data can be helpful in these important areas of land and water use.

To help meet the challenges, SCS increased its resource inventories and evaluations. At the request of county governing bodies, and through local SWCD's, we are now making various water studies in Virginia. These include studies on geology, ground water, soils, existing and potential water resource areas, and water management problems.

With other groups, we are also working on tidal riverbank erosion problems, and on better animal waste disposal systems.

We are interpreting soil maps for more uses--for agriculture, forestry, the placement of septic tank drainage fields, locating and developing recreation areas, and help in site selection for homes, roads, airports, sanitary landfill areas, and so on. These surveys are cooperative, and V.P.I. is heavily involved.

Roadside Erosion Soil mulches

Other side of the Pasture Fair

Water problems are of special importance in Virginia. Your state has abundant water supplies, but not always at locations where you need them. Water storage for municipal and industrial use is a major need. No community can grow or develop beyond its available water supply. Without exception, all Virginia communities that have stored municipal and industrial water in a small watershed project have increased their industrial employment.

Another important planning need is to select and set aside water impoundment sites for later use. This provides assurance that good impoundment sites will not be preempted by buildings or other development. Here, again, conservation districts can help by making planning offices aware of these desirable areas early in the planning process.

I repeat that the Soil Conservation Service is not a planning agency. We will strengthen our ability to gather data, and suggest alternative possibilities to planners or decision makers. We will help interpret, analyze and evaluate data, and give on-site assistance to the user or planner. Soil and water conditions themselves may well dictate aspects of area planning, but the decision-maker must make the choice. Our job is to point out the facts and to help officials utilize the good aspects and minimize the less desirable aspects of the land, water, and related resources they work with.

The Pohick Creek small watershed project in northern Virginia is an example of how districts, the SCS, and local officials can work together on resource problems.

The Pohick covers about 32 square miles in an area going from rural to almost total urban use. The major aim of the watershed project is to solve water runoff, erosion, and sediment problems resulting from this massive urbanization.

When planning began in 1963, the area had about 5,000 people. By the year 2000 an estimated 161,000 people will live there.

One result of the watershed project should be that sediment delivery into Pohick Creek and the Potomac River will be reduced by more than 7 million tons over the 100 year life of the project. This will be a 75 percent reduction of sediment volume, and a significant savings in public funds that would otherwise go into dredging the river and removing sediment.

I have been talking about ways in which SCS and conservation districts have broadened their help and assistance to planners in the past. Earlier this year, a highly successful two-day conference was held in Charlottesville between the Virginia Chapter of the American Institute of Planners and state and local representatives of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Each group explored the means for more fully assisting the other. H. Lane James, president of the Virginia SWCD's, Vice-President R. E. Wilkenson and Mason Carbaugh were among those attending.

During these meetings, SCS people explained available technical assistance and pointed out to planners how this help was channeled through local conservation districts. As one result, the planners have requested land-use planning workshops at the multi-county planning district level. Some of you are already involved in these workshops and others will be in the coming year. The workshops will be a valuable way to increase understanding and use of good land and water information by professional planners.

Information on soil, water, and related resources is basic to any program for development of a farm, village, subdivision or county or state. Decision makers must have solid facts on which to base sound decisions. SCS and soil and water conservation districts can provide and interpret much of the needed data. Together we can help in significant ways to improve our communities.

The basic role of the Soil Conservation Service has not changed; but it has expanded to meet new challenges and demands from a society conscious of its need for better resource use. The district's role has also expanded, past farm boundaries to local communities, to multi-county planning districts and beyond.

Whenever I talk to planning groups, I urge them to remember the importance of identifying and retaining good farmland early in the planning work. I point out that we have enough land for all needs if it's wisely used. In the absence of controls, however, too many communities follow the path of least resistance. New homes go up on the most fertile agricultural land even though land less fertile, but as good or better for homes, may be available nearby.

I point out that planners and officials must do the kind of "thinking ahead" that reserves prime cropland--that this is a basic long-term planning function. I know many planners will look to conservation district officials to provide the needed information on good agricultural land in their area. This is another contribution districts can make.

I'd like to close with a few general comments. In our work, I hope we all look forward to a better use of land and water, rather than backward to a time when, presumably, seldom was heard a discouraging word and the skies were not cloudy all day.

We must start where we are--which is 1971--and work with the situation today. Many older cities and urban areas in the nation have land and water problems that are so numerous and severe they are almost impossible or too costly to correct.

We cannot blame our predecessors for all of these mistakes. The science of resource planning--of almost any planning--was not well developed a century ago.

But this is not true today, when planners have extensive physical, social, and economic information available. Our generation collectively can be blamed if we fail in our treatment of the environment. We do not have the excuse of ignorance. One writer has called man the ruler of earth who never learned the rules. That isn't quite true; many people today know the rules--the real job is to make them more widely understood and applied.

As conservationists--people who know the rules of good resource use--you have an obligation to help. Not by colorful confrontations of good versus bad guys, but in quiet meetings, or by other methods where planners and decision-makers can be given the help and facts they need.

The role of soil and water conservation districts has never been more important. If you care about conservation--thrive on challenges--look toward the future--then the 70's are your time. The Soil Conservation Service looks forward with you to the decade ahead.

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