

USDA AGENCY OPPORTUNITIES IN LAND USE

Land use is one of the prime subjects for discussion, argument and proposals, and for legislation in every state.

In all parts of the United States, conflicting demands for limited land resources are placing severe strains upon economic, social and political institutions; on the political process; and on the natural environment. Farmer groups oppose real-estate developers; homeowners collide with highway planners; water based recreation interest groups are pitted against oil companies; environmentalists fight the power, mining, and timber interests and sometimes the agricultural interests; cities and counties question state actions and fear Federal actions; and the suburb is at odds with the inner city.

The Department of Agriculture is no stranger to land use problems, conflicts, and decisions.

Address by Norman A. Berg, Associate Administrator, Soil Conservation Service, at the USDA Midwestern Regional Workshop on Land Use, Indianapolis, Indiana, June 25, 1974.

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Agencies of the Department have been influencing decisions about the use of land for many, many years.

We have protected and managed the national forests and grasslands.

Through various production programs, we have influenced the crops planted and the number of acres farmed.

Through education, persuasion, and incentives, we have encouraged landowners to protect and conserve soil and water and to improve farm and ranch management.

We have helped provide credit to farmers to finance, enlarge, and improve their operations.

We have helped control floods in rural areas.

And so on, and on. It would not be stretching things very far to describe the Department of Agriculture as America's original land use agency as well as the People's Department.

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But while our impact on decisions about the use of land go back many years, it is only recently that we have made conscious attempts to sort out all the Department's responsibilities under the relatively new concept of "land use" particularly as it relates to environmental quality.

This new dimension to the idea of land use appeared in the 1972 Report of the Citizen's Advisory Committee on Environmental Quality, and I quote:

"Of all the factors that determine the quality of our environment, the most fundamental is the use we make of our land."

Action by the Congress in passing a Coastal Zone Management Program and debating National Land Use Policy indicates that this is a subject of current and substantial importance to the people of the country.

An important key to the protection and enhancement of our environment in future years will increasingly be more effective land use planning and control.

The Department of Agriculture began to focus on this concept on March 26, 1973, when Secretary's Memorandum 1807 established a USDA Committee on Planning and Policy for Land Use and Land Conservation. The mission of that committee is to coordinate the Department's interests and responsibilities in the Nation's effort to assure that land is used for the greatest long-term benefit of all people.

Memorandum 1807 pointed out that Departmental agencies influence land use decisions on more acreage each year than those of any other government entity. We are directly involved with land and its use on three-fourths of the land in the Nation. This includes the 187 million acres of public lands in our national forests and grasslands, many non-Federal public lands, and the 1.3 billion acres of privately owned agricultural land in the United States.

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Membership on the USDA land use committee includes representatives from the eight USDA agencies most involved with land use. We have done our best to coordinate interagency thinking on land use; we have watched land-use legislation; we planned this workshop.

It soon became obvious that the Department needed a clear and concise policy statement on land use, a field characterized by more than its share of hazy, imprecise thinking and a notable lack of definitions on which any two people could agree.

It was an important step forward, therefore, when on October 26, 1973, the Secretary issued his Memorandum No. 1827, a "Statement on Land-Use Policy."

A definition of land use policy included in that memorandum states in part:

"Land use policy is the expression of society's determination of how its resources, land, is used. Land-use policy refers to 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, legislative fiat."

That is a clear definition, and it is a guiding document worth rereading and considering from time to time as your involvement in land use affairs deepens. We need to remember that land use policy is not the product of a single body of custom or law, or a single system of ownership, or one particular agency or group of people. It is an expression of society's will -- often difficult to determine and subject to change as frequently as circumstances change. Now, what are the specific responsibilities of Department agencies-- the agencies you people represent -- in land use?

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First, the Department is a source of resource facts second to none in the land use field. We have a responsibility for making sure our data is complete and accurate; then for interpreting the data correctly, and finally for helping land use planners to evaluate alternative land use plans by making our interpretations readily available and easily understood.

I will mention just a few of our current data resources--

- . Soil surveys
- . River basin studies
- . Watershed surveys and investigations
- . Forest and range surveys
- . Snow surveys and water supply forecasts
- . Every conceivable sort of agricultural statistic
- . Conservation Needs Inventory
- . Aerial photographs, and many, many more.

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We are able to interpret this data because USDA employees have experience with increasing crop production, improving farm, ranch, and forest management, controlling soil erosion, conserving water, managing the vast National Forest system and state forests. Our interpretations are based solidly on research and field experience, with farmers, ranchers, and other rural land planners and users.

In the Rural Development Act of 1972, the Department received an additional mandate from Congress to intensify its fact-gathering in land inventorying and monitoring. USDA was asked to report every five years on the state of the nation's resources and to survey and monitor soil and water resources, prime agricultural lands, and flood plains, among other things.

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The Secretary delegated responsibility for this task to the Soil Conservation Service, which has formed a Land Inventory and Monitoring Division. This new division has been cooperating with sister agencies in USDA in developing a list of priority data items for inventorying and monitoring. Task forces already are at work on definitions of prime agricultural land, prime grazing land, and prime forest land. They are also developing monitoring procedures on erosion and sedimentation.

It is the responsibility of each USDA employee involved in land use work to keep himself fully informed of the information resources of all our agencies -- not just the one that employs him -- and to know where to find resource facts when they are needed.

It was in part to acquaint you with our internal resources that the Department published last February its booklet, "Land Use Planning Assistance Available Through the U.S. Department of Agriculture." You might keep that book handy.

Another thing we can do is seek ways to improve our delivery system. It is a good system. Some of our agencies have offices in just about every county in the nation. Others are decentralized, both in terms of location and management. These certainly are assets in terms of moving information to people in the field.

But that doesn't mean that our system can't be improved. As the Secretary pointed out, we are very effective in reaching farmers and ranchers but planners and others in units of government sometimes complain that they are not getting the facts they need quickly enough. You have only to attend a county zoning hearing or listen to a debate over the location of a new highway to understand what they mean. In my own agency, there have been too many occasions when local planners could have used soil survey interpretations to advantage--but were unaware of the existence of the published soil survey. We can't call it an effective delivery system until it delivers the information to those who need it in a form that meets their needs. We need to translate our technical jargon into understandable language for key decision makers.

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We are also expected to coordinate the work of the Department's agencies at the state level to make our land use efforts relevant and harmonious. This is easier said than done, but it will only be accomplished through much closer inter-agency communication than we have realized to date. If farmers, who have known us for years, occasionally get confused by the multiplicity of USDA programs and positions, you can imagine the reaction of a county, state, or regional planner having his first experience with our particular brand of alphabet soup.

That is why the Secretary would like to see a single, unified USDA entity at the state level to make our assistance available. Personally, I would like for us to project a unified image to those involved with land use decisions--the image of a Department that is well-informed, calm, cool, and confident. Because you will find that the image of many planners and officials today is confused and frustrated.

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We have good reason to inject a note of calm-and-cool into land use deliberations. We know better than any other group or agency that the United States still has the land resources that it needs to meet the demand for food and fiber, for roads and recreation, and for urban services. We are aware of difficult problems, but we also feel that satisfactory solutions are still attainable.

As we continue to develop more harmonious relations, each of us might begin by going home from this meeting and telling our closest friends at the state and local level what we are doing about land use. I am referring to such groups as organizations of farmers and ranchers, to supervisors of soil conservation districts and state conservation commissions, and to members of state forestry commissions. Many representatives of these groups have strong feelings about the role they want to play in making land use decisions, and we should make sure that we understand one another.

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We should also make deliberate efforts to extend the range of our contacts, making certain that as many people as possible know of the land use assistance available from Department agencies. These people include state, regional county, and city planners. They include officials of health and sanitation departments, highway commissions, park departments, zoning boards, and airport commissions. They include private landowners and users, -- not only farmers and ranchers, but those in agricultural industry, banks and insurance companies, architects, developers and contractors, land appraisers and school administrators. They include organizations of concerned citizens like the League of Women Voters. They are making land use a national project this year. They also include groups with an environmental concern, like the Sierra Club.

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In all our contacts, let's make it clear that we understand that it is local people, acting through their units of government, who must finally set their own land use objectives and make land use decisions. Let's begin by helping local people to understand that land use policy is not something abstract and mysterious, but that it is something which touches the lives of all of us. Let's show them why land use policy is basic to sound planning and development and help them to arrive at decisions that are based on accurate, up-to-date information.

Some Department employees are asking: "Do we limit our involvement in land use planning to an examination of alternatives or do we occasionally take sides and urge a particular point of view?"

There are some answers to that question in Secretary's Memorandum 1827, which states, among other things, that the Department will:

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. Adapt present pertinent programs to help enhance and preserve prime agricultural, range, and forest lands for those uses;

. Promote and help influence the management of rural lands to assure adequate sources of high quality water;

. Help protect rare and endangered plant and animal species and their ecological systems, as well as historic, cultural, scientific, and natural systems; and

. Help conserve and develop significant waterfowl habitat lands.

I do not see how we can do very much in any of these areas unless we assume the position of advocates. And when you 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 consistent with those practices, and in keeping with the national interest, I think we would fail in our duty if we did not speak out.

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On the other hand, USDA agencies 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.

But we can 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.

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I'm sure that you now see clearly why we are holding these regional meetings for USDA employees concerned with land use. We want to be sure that we all understand our common mission and role in relation to land use. We want to do a better job of making our programs and help available to others with land use responsibilities. And, frankly, we want to improve the USDA image in relation to land use, and one way to do that is for USDA agencies to work together, and to coordinate more fully their land use activities.

Meanwhile, I encourage each of you to familiarize yourself with the language of land use planning and policy during the next few weeks and months, because it will continue to loom in importance in American political thought. Nearly two centuries ago, Thomas Jefferson said: "The face and character of our country are determine by what we do with America and its resources." Like so many of Jefferson's statements, that one seems to grow more meaningful and pertinent with the passing years, and I hope you carry that message back home with you and keep reminding your fellow Americans of its essential truth.

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The farmers and ranchers that you work with continue to be the chief stewards of America's land and water resources, with responsibilities to all Americans, rural and urban, in the present and future. They will continue to be among the major architects of land use policy.

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