

2.0 Why Public Involvement

(People want to have a say in their government. Importance and function of public involvement in SCS-related activities.)

You and I and thousands like us helped develop a remarkably broad, flexible and workable system of ideas for land and water management. We must now focus on getting those ideas applied on the land everywhere.

We have helped build a strong agriculture that contributes its share to national and world markets. One-fourth of the world's population each day eats something grown in the United States--and the dollars gained from those exports keep our overall balance of payments on the right side of the ledger as well as helping pay for the worldwide products that Americans want and need. We must now focus on helping landowners strengthen their food and fiber output without weakening their land and ruining the environment.

Material used by Norman A. Berg, Associate Administrator, for Keynote Address at Lincoln, Nebraska, session on Public Involvement in the Planning Process, October 4, 1976.

WHY PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT ?

On September 24, 1976, an article in the Philadelphia Inquirer said,

Federal bureaucracy is so big, so lethargic, so inefficient because of the thicket of overlapping programs it simply can't do its job.

... The Federal Government has proved itself good at collecting money and bad at dispensing public services.

In 1976, the National Journal said,

Robert M. Teeter, of Market Opinion Research Corp. in Detroit, who conducts political surveys for Ford, said he believes the wave of popular resentment is directed more at the federal government and its institutions rather than at the Washington community.

There are clearly anti-Washington elements to it, Teeter conceded. But I don't know whether people think of it as much in anti-Washington terms as anti-government terms. People are anti almost every big institution--business, labor unions, the press, school systems, churches. But I think it is more acute when directed at the federal government.

There is a general feeling among people that the government has simply run wild and gone out of control. Part of that feeling stems from a growing sense that a lot of decisions have been taken out of the process in which they had an influence.

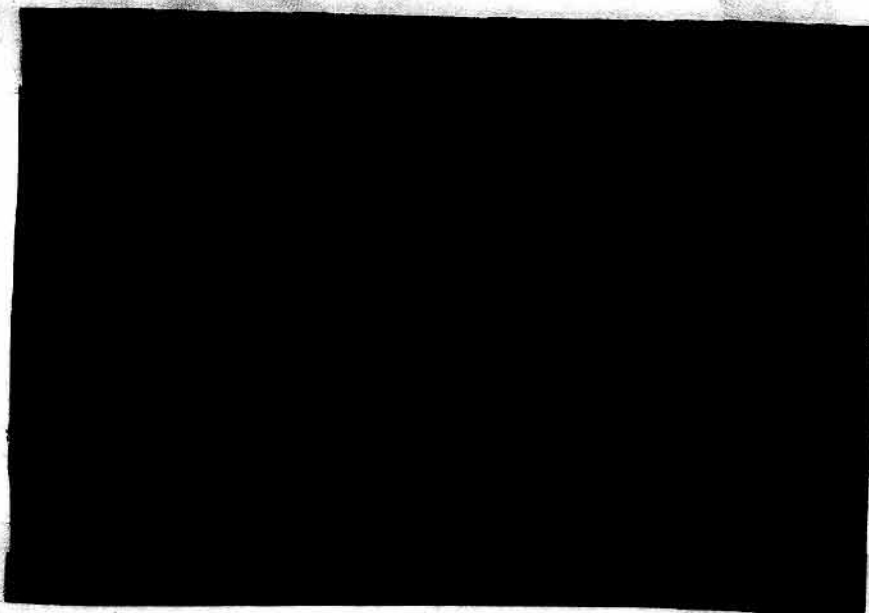
Is the federal bureaucracy as "bloated" as the anti-Washington campaign indicates? Some figures: From 1950 to 1975 local-state employees increased 193 percent. In the same period the number of federal civilian workers increased 43 percent, about the same as the gain in all U. S. employment. In 1815, federal employees numbered 4,302, with 11.1 percent working in Washington. Today, with nearly three million employees, exactly 11.1 percent still work in Washington. And the ratio of federal employees to the total population is slightly lower than it was 29 years ago (13.3 per 1,000 people against 14.4 in 1947). Also, since 1950 local and state property taxes have gone up 550 percent, sales and gross receipts taxes 794 percent and personal income taxes by 2,373 percent. In contrast, federal spending (in constant dollars) for goods and services between 1969 and 1974 declined 22 percent.

A hopeful view, meanwhile, was proposed by James L. Sundquist, a senior fellow of the Brookings Institution. "If the government starts working again and people start doing things right," he said, "faith in government will be restored."

Sundquist argues that charges of big government are ill-founded. He said, "There is no objective reason for saying that our government is too big or that it is growing out of control. The tax load in proportion to the population is less than it has been and the federal budget has been approximately stable in relation to the gross national product."

And one final note: One of the ironies of the anti-Washington issue is that it was given impetus in the early 1960s by anti-war demonstrators and other protestors against the governmental system and has now been taken up by political candidates, many of whom are regarded as conservatives.

The Washington Post, September 28, 1976, showed:



SO WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE TO INCREASING THE BUDGET?

Only to make the dollars that are available work harder and more effectively.

It can be done, and you can help to do it. How?

The Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry is now conducting an oversight of soil and water conservation.

CAST Report No. 60 (9/9/76) said,

In recent years--mostly in the last decade--popular awareness of "the environment" has reached new levels. Millions of people who are now concerned over one aspect or another of environmental degradation or protection were quite unaware of environmental matters only a few years ago. Typically, these relatively recent converts have been impatient: a problem exists, why not solve it at once? Persons involved in soil and water conservation over much longer periods may protest in vain that problems are not as simple and solutions not as quick and easy as the popular supporters think they are. Whereas in earlier decades the public relations problem of the soil conservation community was to arouse public interest, now the problem of relationship with the larger public is how to meet the demands of that public and how to channel its energies into consistent and practical ends.

The Water Quality Act of 1965 and its several amendments, the Air Pollution legislation beginning in 1955 and continuing through a long series of amendments, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, January 1, 1970, the Freedom of Information Act of November 21, 1974, Executive Orders and Secretary's Memos, the Coastal Zone Management legislation, energy supply legislation, and many other public laws and actions are some of the outcomes of the increased public interest in environment.

We do not attempt a complete review of their history or of their provisions.

The primary focus of these Acts is not agriculture, but they have considerable effect upon agriculture and have the potential for much greater effects. If such laws should be administered to outlaw or significantly reduce all "nonpoint" sources of water pollution, for instance, including soil particles resulting from soil erosion, their impact upon agriculture

could be very great. Notably, a national land-use planning law has not yet been passed, but the legal authorities in other legislation give federal agencies significant legal power to affect, if not control, land use on farms. Legal power is not always equivalent to political power; the legal power may exist which an agency thinks it would be wise to avoid using to the full; and sometimes the political power exists to do something for which the legal foundation is shaky. In the uncertain and somewhat fluid state of federal environmental protection efforts today, the full thrust of presently existing law has not yet been felt by agriculture.

These newer federal environmental Acts have utilized technical assistance, exhortation, and subsidy to some extent, but they have generally added the significant new dimension of compulsion. Industries, water users, land users, and others are required by law to meet certain standards, and penalties for noncompliance are provided for and can be imposed. In this respect, the new (last decade) environmental legislation is sharply at variance with the older soil and water conservation legislation.

Sometimes just the prospect of regulation can head off a potential conflict. Iowans discovered that fact after the "District Conservancy Law" was enacted.

Between January 1, 1974, and January 1, 1976, 80 letters complaining of sediment damage were received. More than 50 of these complaints have been settled to the satisfaction of both parties, with the use of cost-sharing funds. As of the first of this year, no cases had gone to court.

This was the intent of the law--to encourage people to undertake conservation measures, rather than to punish them for not doing so. It's a good example of how a different approach can succeed, and there's a lesson in it for all of us.

We have noted that the more recent environmental protection programs have included a large measure of compulsion; the laws or the regulations set standards, and those who violate them are vulnerable to fines or even jail sentences. The compulsory route seems to offer a greater degree of

individual compliance to the social will, but this may be more apparent than real. No one today, we think, argues that all the environmental protection laws and regulations are completely enforced; on the contrary, nonenforcement is a problem, the seriousness of which may be a matter of argument or dispute. Compulsory measures in any field tend to mobilize at least some private initiative to find ways to evade them, whereas voluntary measures, at least at their best, tend to mobilize private initiative and effort to attain common ends.

Increasingly, in recent years, questions have been raised about making soil and water conservation, or at least some aspects of it, compulsory. There are private gains from soil and water conservation--benefits accruing on the land of the owner; and for these, voluntary programs may be fully adequate. But there are also social concerns with soil and water conservation, most notably in the effect of farm practices upon the quality of the water downstream, which may affect large numbers of people, and in air quality as affected by dust and chemicals originating from farmland. It is here, if at all, that compulsory controls find their greatest rationale. One major issue here is: will compulsory controls actually produce more soil and water conservation than will voluntary programs? Will noncompliance reach such proportions that the programs are less effective than the admittedly only partially effective voluntary ones will be?

As Dr. Jan van Schilfgaard of ARS said at the recent Soil Conservation Society of America Convention, "We have learned to increase our agricultural production and to reduce the labor requirements. We have also learned how to better conserve our soil and water. Considering the progress we have made, we should be able to face the future with optimistic confidence. Yet there are some serious problems that require our urgent attention.

Although we have developed and applied tremendous new technology... although research units, action agencies, private organizations and individual landowners have made extensive efforts...we continue to waste water, to lose soil, and to squander energy. We wrote our laws to encourage economic growth and we were successful. But now it is late in 1976!

Despite our best efforts over four decades, drouth and dust storms are not extinct. Iowa reported its worst soil erosion in 25 years. In Lansing, Michigan, on May 5, highway travelers had to use their headlights at 2 o'clock in the afternoon--and a fatal auto accident was directly attributed to lack of visibility due to the dust-laden air. In several states, crop-harvest predictions are iffy although few seem worried about the national totals.

Despite our best efforts over four decades, some people have never heard or don't yet believe the value of a conservation plan fully applied. Some acres are plowed up for row crops that belong in range or another use. Some acres are plowed under for homes or highways that belong in agriculture because they are the best land for farming--the prime and unique acres. Some range or pastureland is allowed to deteriorate so badly the stocking rate should be square miles per animal unit.

I don't mean to imply that Soil Conservation Service employees and districts haven't done a good job. You've done a great job in aiding landowners and government units. The pressure is on for all of us to do our assignments better than ever before. The pressure is on for us to be advocates--especially for the retention of prime and unique farmlands and for pollution control through conservation land treatment. The pressure is on for us to take the bushel basket off our light. The pressure is on

for us to re-emphasize quality in every activity. If we are to motivate landowners to spend their money on soil and water conservation...if we are to justify the expenditure of public funds on soil and water conservation... then we must demonstrate forcefully that the data we present are accurate, and that the conservation systems we recommend are workable.

A national concern with the environment is basic to our whole society and to our future as a species on earth. Consequently, agriculture must be prepared to play its reasonable role in any programs that may be undertaken. But at the same time the food and other outputs of agriculture are basic to life itself. Hence, the socially most efficient ways to environmental protection must be sought with all the skill and knowledge at our command, and needless costs and restrictions are to be avoided. Difficult practical questions will always arise on which informed and dedicated people will differ, but these should not obscure agreement on overall goals and objectives.