

# Over 75 Years, Conservation Programs Provide 'Bang For The Buck'

Conversation With Current And Former Chiefs Reveals Challenges Ahead



SARA WYANT

WASHINGTON, D.C.

It's been renamed, reorganized, criticized and epitomized, but for 75 years, the USDA's Soil Conservation Service, now known as the Natural Resources Conservation Service, has been blazing a trail toward protecting soils, air, water, and wildlife in cooperation with the private landowners who control 70 percent of the U.S. land base.

Much of the progress has been the result of a dedicated workforce spread out across the U.S. and its territories, ranging from Maine to Guam. However, the 13 men who have led the agency, have each put their own indelible stamp on how those employees and volunteers were deployed, how resource problems were tackled and how programs have been delivered.

Six of the former leaders, along with the current Chief Dave White, participated in a panel discussion in USDA's Jefferson auditorium last week, and I was honored to serve as moderator for this historic event.

It was part of a daylong celebration marking the 75th anniversary of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the beginning of the federal commitment to conserving natural resources on private lands.

On the same day, the agency released results from the Natural Resource Inventory (NRI), which documented the terrific strides made in controlling soil erosion. Total cropland erosion (sheet, rill and wind) declined by about 43 percent from more than 3.06 billion tons per year in 1982 to about 1.72 billion tons per year in 2007. The reduction reflects NRCS's emphasis on working with producers and landowners to reduce erosion. Most of the soil erosion reductions occurred between 1987 and 1997.

## Big shoes to fill

I wondered how each of these men dealt with such a huge responsibility and the legacy of sitting in an office once occupied by conservation giant Hugh Hammond Bennett, who helped pass the soil conservation act of April 27, 1935 and led the agency until 1951. Not surprisingly, each of them credited their career staff with helping "train" them for the rigors of the job.

"Every employee that I met from day one said my job is to help you be successful and to help you do great things for the agency," recalled Arlen Lancaster, who served as Chief from 2006-2009.

But for an agency that was originally focused on soil erosion, the challenges of trying to address more and more resource concerns with fewer and fewer people to provide hands-on technical assistance has sometimes taken its toll. When Mel Davis was in charge from 1975-1979, the agency had almost 15,000 employees and now there are 11,823.

When Paul Johnson took over as chief in 1994, Congress was focused on balancing the budget. His first task was to reduce personnel by 10 percent. At the same time, he was trying to make sure that landowners were practicing conservation compliance.

"I told them I thought we needed twice as many people. It was really difficult. I fought with the administration and lost," recalls Johnson. He conducted a series of listening sessions and received input from around the country about conservation priorities. With the help of Pearlle Reed, who followed Johnson as chief, they were able to make the required cuts.

Current Chief Dave White sees technology playing a key role in addressing future workforce challenges.

"In 3-5 years, we hope to eliminate up to 80 percent of the clerical tasks that our field people have to do. We would like to see our field people, who are at the sharp end of the sword, spend up to 75 percent of their time in the field. If we could just do that, it would have the impact of adding 1,500 to 2,000 people without one dime of extra money. Would like to see more people,

but technology points the way for us to work smarter and capitalize on the IT investments we have made over the years."

New technologies can be incredibly helpful in getting conservation on the land, agrees Bruce Knight, who served as chief from 2002 to 2006. But he says there is still a long way to go in finding common technical definitions between agencies.

"The point I see the greatest need on, if the trading of ecosystem services is in our future, is to finally address the lingering differences in definitions between agencies. If you are going to trade carbon sequestration on rangeland soils, we can no longer afford a different definition of rangeland between NRCS, the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. If we are going to trade carbon credits based off of car-



AgriPulse Editor Sara Wyant served as moderator for a panel discussion with six former and the current Chief of NRCS as part of the agency's 75th anniversary celebration. From left to right: Wyant, current Chief Dave White, Former Administrator Mel Davis, Chief Bill Richards, Chief Paul Johnson, Chief Pearlle Reed, Chief Bruce Knight and Chief Arlen Lancaster. Photo: Alice Welch, USDA.

bon sequestration in soils in the U.S and we trade globally, we can't afford to have part of the world use a U.S. system and part of the world uses a Russian system. We have to find resolution to those issues to unleash the next level of technology," Knight explained.

Looking ahead to the next 25 years, what do these conservation leaders see in their crystal balls?

Bill Richards, who served as chief from 1990-1993 and is widely credited with educating farmers about the importance of residue management, predicts that "the demands on our resources will be greater than we can ever imagine." But he views science and technology, along with a growing awareness by the general population about the important role that natural resources and especially the soil brings as reasons to be bullish on the future.

"I think we will be more than sustainable. I think we will be improving around the world," Richards added.

Pearlie Reed, who served as chief from 1998 to 2002, shares the optimism, but believes that "the changes in demographics in the U.S. will have a major impact on how public policy is shaped as it relates to conservation.

Lancaster also agreed that the challenges ahead will be steep, especially as we look at tremendous increases in population and the demands on resources like water.

"The big challenge is how we will grow all of the commodities we need for feed and fuel with the water available," he explains.

Bruce Knight would like to see the model of science-based, knowledge-based, voluntary conservation be a model that is replicated around the globe.

"There is going to be an opportunity to take all of the technologies we have for soil science and unleash productive capabilities around the globe," he emphasized.

Paul Johnson sees the agency coming back full circle to some of its roots.

"We almost have two conservation services, one focused on protecting and enhancing the productivity of agriculture lands. The other is to recognize the multi-functions of private lands, whether it is to produce food or fiber or fuel or aesthetic beauty or wildlife or recreation.

"If you go back to Coon Valley, WI., the agency's first project, we had all of those things there and this same concept of multi-functional agriculture is something that's in our future."

Chief Dave White says that conservation issues will undoubtedly change over the next 25 years, but he hopes that the organization will continue to advance the cause of voluntary, incentive-based working lands conservation.

"We were created in the New Deal, but we'll be around because we are the real deal." Δ

SARA WYANT: Publisher weekly e-newsletter, AgriPulse.



Link Directly To: VERMEER