

Critical Conservation Choices: A Bicentennial Look



Proceedings of the
31st annual meeting,
Soil Conservation
Society of America,
August 1-4, 1976,
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Soil Conservation Society of America
Ankeny, Iowa

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OPENING SESSION

Keynote Address: Critical conservation choices: A bicentennial look

HUBERT H. HUMPHREY

A few short years ago, this convention would probably have been examining the importance of conserving our soil and natural resources. Today in this Bicentennial year, conservation has come to mean much more. We must, as your theme suggests, consider carefully a wide variety of conservation choices.

While our views on the subject have changed greatly throughout history, it was an important issue even in the early days.

George Washington said, "Our lands were originally very good; but use and abuse have made them quite otherwise."

Ben Franklin wrote with great concern that Philadelphians had to travel over 100 miles for firewood. He invented his famous stove to make the wood go farther, but no one thought to manage the forests until 100 years ago when the

American Forestry Association was founded.

That great conservationist Gifford Pinchot said, "The noblest task that confronts us all today is to leave this country unspotted in honor and unexhausted in resources...I conceive this task to partake of the highest spirit of patriotism."

That is a noble objective, but one not easily achieved. Conservation today involves hard choices which cost money. But we could hardly expect the founding fathers to have the concern we have today over conserving soil, water, air, trees and even our human resources. The main concern of our settlers was to open up the land--even if it meant burning off the forests.

It took the dust bowl of the 1930s--blowing the topsoil of the Great Plains into the the windows of Washington--to lead to the establishment of the Soil Conservation Service under the outstanding leadership of Hugh Bennett. Bennett had a simple conservation philosophy: Anchor the soil with plants and keep the water on the land.

More than 200 million trees were planted on the Great Plains to keep the soil and water on the land. Under the direction of SCS and the Extension Service, farmers were taught contour plowing. Wire fences were replaced with hedges that provided good wildlife cover and served as windbreaks. In addition, thousands of farm ponds were created, usually on the most badly eroded land.

*Hubert H. Humphrey, Washington, D. C. 20510,
is a U.S. Senator from Minnesota.*

Under the influence of Bennett, the American farmscape regained a beauty it had not had since before the Civil War. When World War II came along, the world needed all the food which our rejuvenated soil could produce. I recall that at that time the soil conservation workers carried portable rostrums with them from which they spoke to farm groups. These rostrums had a sign on the front that said, "Conservation Pays."

Our farmers found out that this was true. They became our nation's best conservationists out of enlightened self-interest.

After the war, the European nations began to rebuild, establishing strong protectionist agricultural policies. This was happening at the same time our farmers were setting unheard-of production records.

By the mid-fifties, we were building up huge surpluses. Our farmers had produced this wonderful feast--a great banquet--and nobody came.

The signs which said "Conservation Pays" came down. Farmers began to wonder if perhaps conservation wasn't an enemy. Big crops meant less profit. Our conservation workers were thrown into an identity crisis. More and more, the farmer was left to his own devices--concentrating on rural development and similar programs.

The soil surveys were used more by real estate developers than by farmers. We should have been on the alert to what was happening as our population grew and much of our best land went into development.

Our nation was beginning the world's greatest mass migration as 30 million people fled to cities that were ill-equipped to deal with them other than through urban sprawl or the ghetto. We were on the way to becoming a Balkanized nation with the vast majority of our people living near the sea coasts and the Great Lakes. Housing and development demands were rapacious on our flood plains and in already water-short areas. There weren't enough schools. Our zoning was inadequate, as were the water and sewer systems.

During the 1930s the experts had told us that our population would top off at 150 million. But by 1960 the population was approaching 180 million, and today we have around 215 million people. At the global level, we reached 4 billion people this year. And it is expected that the total will approach 7 billion people by the end of this century.

As a result, many countries today are experiencing economic and social crises. People everywhere want a better life. This means an increased pressure on the supply of food and natural resources. Consequently, many nations have ignored sound conservation practices and neglected their soil and water resources. Countries of South Asia, for example, are paying a price for over-cutting timber and over-grazing grasslands. These practices are costing India 30,000 acres of lost fertile land each year.

Today there are virtually no restrictions

on planting, and our surpluses are gone. Food scarcity and volatile prices have now become the accepted rule. And because of increased demand, farmers are getting better prices for their commodities and expanding their acreage, planting acres that they never would have bothered with in the past.

However, the drought also is back, and the dust is blowing once again, my friends.

A lot of our topsoil is gone too--gone with the wind--only to land 200 miles out in the Atlantic.

At the same time, we are cutting down our shelterbelts to plant more crops. This year 15 million acres were damaged by wind erosion.

Certainly, we must do all we can to help the developing nations to protect their soil and water base. And we must help them to increase their own food production. But hundreds of millions of citizens of this old earth are going to be relying on the American farmer for a long time to come. Because the United States is the world's main food surplus nation, what we do can help start wars or stop them.

The Club of Rome and a number of other prognosticators have come up with some pretty dismal alternative futures for the world. It is clear that there will be a continued heavy strain on the world's resources as it struggles to satisfy the demand for food and other scarce commodities.

I certainly am not a prophet of gloom and doom. But many Americans will likely face the need to change their lifestyle as many non-renewable commodities become prohibitively expensive or not available to all. This is not to say that we will go back to living in tents or driving stagecoaches. But a lack of certain resources is going to force us to change our ways. We will have to adapt just as Dr. Franklin did by inventing his stove.

We also can get more mileage out of existing resources. For years we have ignored wind power and solar energy. But now we are starting to invest research dollars in developing these energy sources.

We also have discovered additional acres of land for cultivation--111 million acres was the SCS estimate--to help meet the world's needs for food and fiber. And there are lands available in other nations which--at a price--can be opened up for production. In Africa, for example, controlling the tsetse fly would open up thousands of acres for production.

We are losing about 5 million prime acres a year in this country to urbanization and development. Therefore, we are going to have to manage our lands as serious conservationists.

I was very pleased to see the recent Department of Agriculture policy statement to the effect that everything possible should be done to protect our best agricultural land. The only trouble is that the policy has no application to agencies outside of USDA--such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development--which need to get the message.

Another critical conservation concern--related to our land and forestry practices--is the management of water supplies. This area directly affects soil erosion and agricultural productivity. This issue has become more serious as we have expanded our irrigated farming. In some Nevada counties the water table has gone down over 1,200 feet.

The general Accounting Office, in a report to Congress, states that half of the water provided for irrigation by the Bureau of Reclamation is wasted. Unfortunately, this story is repeated throughout the developing world, where water for irrigation is often not used efficiently.

The conclusion which is unavoidable is that many people have forgotten the basic importance of resource conservation. And the need is more critical than ever before.

I am concerned that our farmers--beguiled by the full production rhetoric and facing high production costs--are forgetting some of Hugh Bennett's lessons.

The SCS people should consider putting a new sign on those portable rostrums--not "Conservation Pay," but "Failure to Conserve Costs Everyone."

While we have had serious drought in Minnesota and other parts of the world this year, it appears that we will have good crops, with record yields in some areas. But we must not let this harvest lull us to sleep. The ticking population timebomb is real. One bad crop year would at a minimum disrupt the world markets. But two such harvests would lead to starvation for millions.

The weather is capricious and undependable. Climatologists believe that the world's weather patterns are undergoing long range changes that will mean greater instability. In their view the world climate during the last 50 years has been mild and reasonably stable. They expect that the climate in the future will return to more "normal" volatile patterns. And in many respects our ability to feed the world's population will depend on this one factor.

To do the job, we need to give priority attention to conservation. We must plan ahead. And we must be willing to invest some money.

In 1974 Congress took an important step in passing the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act, a device which we expect to use to set policy and spending priorities for the U.S. Forest Service.

We also have spent a great deal of time this year in developing new forestry management legislation to guide the Forest Service operations and involve the public in the process. We want to work with the Forest Service in a cooperative fashion in balancing the many competing demands placed on our national forests.

The Senate this year passed a bill, based on the Resources Planning Act, to bring some cohesion to our long-range planning in our soil and water conservation programs. This bill could be the beginning of a sensible conservation program. It requires SCS to do periodic land inventory and monitoring so that federal resources can be

focused on the areas of greatest need.

But whether the bill moves ahead quickly or not, the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry also has begun an evaluation of all soil and water conservation programs within the Department of Agriculture. Unfortunately, because Congress repeatedly must concern itself with protecting these programs from Administration budget cutters, there never seems to be time to take a hard look at priorities and programs.

Despite the hundreds of millions of dollars that we have spent every year, there still is too much silt running in our creeks and rivers. Farmers are waking up to find that their own chemicals have polluted their ground water supplies.

What I am saying again is that the conservation issues are increasingly complex and interrelated.

Unfortunately, the Soil Conservation Service in recent years has had an image problem. Some people have even felt that the agency's job is over. In my view we need a renewed dedication to conservation. And we need to have SCS playing a strong lead role.

I recently introduced legislation to begin the process of developing a national food policy--directed toward balancing the needs of consumers and producers and at the same time helping to feed a hungry world. Such a policy, it seems to me, also should include a major conservation component to help our farmers produce the abundant supplies of food and fiber we need.

The message before us is clear. The urgency is overwhelming. And the difficulty is awesome. But let us get on with the task. I pledge my help, and I ask for yours.

REMARKS OF SENATOR HUBERT H. HUMPHREY

SOIL CONSERVATION SOCIETY OF AMERICA

Minneapolis, Minnesota

August 2, 1976

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