

agricultural policies.”³⁶ Members included Bud Mekelburg, NACD Vice-President, and two Past Presidents, John Wilder and George Bagley. Norman Berg represented SCS, while staffer Dale Stansbury represented the Senate Agriculture Committee and Rep. James Jeffords (VT) and George Dunsmore, Staff Assistant, came from the House Agriculture Committee.

In his charge to the Task Force, Bauer noted that in the early 1970s, USDA had a slogan encouraging “Production with Protection.” “The ‘Production’ was encouraged by high prices and strong policy statements,” he reminded the group. “The ‘Protection’ was given lip service, accompanied by reduced program budgets. It is little wonder that the increased production was accompanied by increased soil erosion.”

By 1980, concern over soil erosion and support for an active federal conservation program in partnership with private landowners had reached the general public. A Louis Harris poll found strong support for policies that: save resources for future generations (60 percent strong support–24 percent weak), conserve the natural productivity of the soil (44–38 percent), and meet energy needs through conservation rather than production (58–26).³⁷

The evidence was pretty clear, Bauer told the 1980 NACD Convention in Houston, Texas. “The budget balancers in Washington asked the [Resources Conservation Act] study to look for reasons why conservation programs weren’t working well enough,” he said. “They may be surprised with the answer. The problem is them, and their strangling budgets.”³⁸

The Resources Conservation Act (RCA)

Congress was aware of the growing interest in soil and water conservation, and one result was passage of the 1977 Resources Conservation Act, known as RCA.³⁹

The RCA had a strong pro-conservation statement of national policy, and called for a periodic appraisal of the land, water and related resources of the nation, to be followed by a program for furthering the conservation, protection and enhancement of those resources. It was envisioned as a means by which the national soil and water conservation program could break the budget barriers and become based on identified facts and needs.

Passed by Congress in the fall of 1976, the original bill was vetoed by President Gerald Ford under pressure from the Office of Management and Budget. NACD’s officers, who had been instrumental in the drafting and passage of the bill, were appalled. “Objections cited by the President misinterpreted the intent of the bill and ignored its legislative history,” President George Bagley wrote in the *Tuesday Letter*.⁴⁰

But Congress was not to be denied. On the first day of the 95th Congress, Kika de la Garza (TX) introduced H.R. 75—the Land and Water Resources

Conservation Act of 1977, and a companion Senate Bill soon emerged as well. Passage was reasonably swift (for modern Congresses), and the bill was signed by President Jimmy Carter on November 17, 1977.

USDA began an immediate effort to implement the RCA, based largely on the 1977 National Resource Inventories (NRI) and a strong effort to gain public input from conservation districts and other interested parties. The Act stated that the RCA appraisal and programs “shall be made in cooperation with conservation districts and state soil and water conservation agencies.”⁴¹

In 1978, SCS was given leadership in USDA for the RCA process and published instructions on how the appraisal and program process would be carried out. Their intent was clear: “Development of the National RCA program must begin at the local level where the resources are located and managed.”⁴² To pursue this objective, the agency established a grant program designed to assist states in the development of a state soil and water conservation program that could guide future efforts. In addition, SCS launched a public information program coordinated through SCS state offices in cooperation with state soil conservation agencies and conservation districts. A 1979 review of these efforts counted more than 9,000 meetings, reaching almost 165,000 people. There were also thousands of newspaper and newsletter stories, radio spots, letters, posters, and so on.⁴³ The feedback from these efforts included a strong sense that soil erosion was still a primary concern, and its reduction should be a high priority for the national conservation program.

But going from public opinion feedback to a formal program proposal proved more difficult and controversial than the SCS had imagined, and the Congressional deadlines for submission of the program passed without a new program proposal. The initial strategy in USDA was to rely on the public input and the data developed by the 1977 NRI, but critics in the Administration insisted that there was no real analytic evidence that a soil and water conservation problem existed. The need, OMB insisted, was to develop estimates of the costs that soil erosion was imposing on national productivity and economic health. Those questions, never asked as part of the NRI nor adequately quantified by public input, tied the process in knots and stretched out deadlines. The RCA process was described by one participant as “an enormous undertaking, fraught with conflicting goals, interagency jealousies, inadequate data, and uncertainty about how to marshal the data to reach decisions regarding features of the program to recommend to Congress.”⁴⁴

In 1979, to assist in the state planning efforts, NACD prepared a sample outline for a statewide soil and water conservation program and distributed it to all state soil conservation agencies. In transmitting the sample document, President Lyle Bauer said “NACD believes that long-range state soil and water conservation programs may become key documents for future direction, and perhaps

even funding, of soil and water conservation activities.⁴⁵ By June of 1980, it appeared that some 45 states would have completed their statewide programs by the end of 1981. The SCS grants program had done its work.⁴⁶

Although the 1977 NRI did not address all the questions about soil erosion, it certainly established one fact: The most erodible five percent of the land base accounted for 52 percent of the total sheet and rill erosion in the U.S., and most of the land with the most severe erosion had little or no conservation treatment. Norm Berg and Bob Gray of American Farmland Trust plainly stated the argument for better targeting of conservation programs: "As of 1977, conservation measures of all types tended to be concentrated on land with fairly modest soil erosion hazards, while the most erosive land remained largely untreated."⁴⁷

In early 1980 NACD adopted a position paper urging that several key principles be considered in developing the new national program proposal. They included:

- USDA should restore confidence in the long-term future of agriculture through national policies that encourage farm stability and economic profitability, and encourage proper land use and conservation treatment.
- USDA programs should address national problems, but the solutions must be based on locally identified priorities, with locally developed approaches at the conservation district level.
- USDA should provide a coordinated program of long-term conservation and production goals. Past USDA programs for production control and soil conservation have seldom had common objectives. Changing annual targets of commodity programs, contrasted with the long-term objectives of conservation plans, confuse and distort land management decisions.
- USDA must place a higher priority on information and education efforts as part of the total conservation effort.

A working agreement between SCS, NACD and the state soil conservation agencies, supported by a grant from SCS, allowed NACD to carry out a national information program to help state agencies and districts understand the RCA process and develop statewide plans. A series of "RCA Notes" was launched in February 1980 to distribute information and collect feedback about the RCA process. Coordinated by Eugene Lamb from the NACD Washington Office, the project would run through 1991 and publish a total of 74 of the notes.

In addition, NACD began proposing new approaches to strengthen conservation incentives. One of the challenges involved the conflict between commodity programs and conservation programs in USDA. While the former encouraged farmers to set aside surplus croplands, often without any conservation considerations, it also provided incentives for intensifying production on the remaining acres. People who installed conservation measures were often penalized, rather than rewarded, by the way the commodity programs worked. It was, one

observer noted, as if the USDA programs were “stepping on the gas and stepping on the brake simultaneously.”⁴⁸

One solution emerged out of NACD’s District Outlook Committee: a Conservation Incentives Program. Under the program, farmers and ranchers who took conservation measures could claim incentive benefits from other USDA programs after certification by the local conservation district.⁴⁹ This so-called “Green Ticket” approach held much appeal to conservation district and farm officials because it would encourage those that were not practicing conservation to do so, while not penalizing those that were already so engaged.

But it was not the only idea on how to deal with conservation problems. OMB and others proposed a reverse idea, called by many the “Red Ticket” approach. This would require all landowners to carry out conservation programs or lose access to the USDA programs. In USDA, this became known as “cross-compliance” and was included as one of the proposed options for reform that became part of the RCA public review document released in January of 1980.

The RCA draft proposals attracted some 68,000 responses, many of them opposed to the cross-compliance option. The political backlash against cross-compliance grew so heated that Congressional leaders warned USDA against adopting any form of “mandatory” conservation programs.

In June of 1980, it had become clear to NACD that program decisions on the RCA were not going to be made by the RCA study teams or “for that matter, may not be made in USDA at all,” as President Lyle Bauer wrote in *Tuesday Letter*.

Bauer continued:

We have seen enough of the data, and heard enough public opinion, to know that the RCA study is proving the nation has a serious erosion problem that needs immediate attention,” Bauer wrote. “The federal soil and water conservation effort is grossly under-funded. The existing programs need more money, along with some updating to make them more effective. In addition, new approaches are needed to encourage state and local government to participate more fully in the conservation effort.

All this will take money, and federal budgets are being cut, and cut hard, in Washington these days. The Office of Management and Budget may simply not allow USDA to openly state the facts of the matter: the nation’s agricultural productivity may be in jeopardy, and federal support of conservation programs must be increased. In this election year, the political factors may outweigh the overwhelming evidence that the RCA has accumulated.⁵⁰

By November of 1980, the RCA process was ready to release a proposed program, but the election of Ronald Reagan to the U.S. Presidency brought the process to a halt. A conservative wave (“the federal government is the problem,

not the solution”) was sweeping the country. New leadership in USDA needed to sort out the issues and consider them in light of the new political realities. As noted in *For Love of the Land*, “After three years of study and frustration, the realization had firmly taken hold: the RCA process was a *political* process, not an *analytic* one.”⁵¹

It was a full year after Reagan’s election before USDA was ready to release its proposed conservation program under the RCA. In the November 1981 release, Secretary of Agriculture John Block told the Senate Agriculture Committee that the proposal represented “a realistic program ... responsive to the needs, yet responsible in view of the economic situation.” NACD immediately gave the proposal wide national visibility, publishing an eight-page special edition of *Tuesday Letter* that laid out the proposal and its “preferred program” options. Within a few weeks, the reaction began to coalesce, and Lyle Bauer explained the situation to his readers, saying “People from all over the country tell me that they are being put in a serious bind in trying to respond to the proposed RCA program. They want to be constructive, but feel they must strongly oppose many portions of the proposal.” One of the cited problems was the wording of the USDA questionnaire sent out to solicit public response. Bauer cited one question, asking for an opinion on “providing federal matching block grants to states by reducing federal conservation program funds.” Many people supported the concept of grants, but not at the expense of ongoing programs, and didn’t know whether to answer “yes” or “no” to express their response to the statement. Bauer urged them to mark up the questionnaire or write a separate letter outlining their views.⁵²

NACD, in its response, ignored the USDA forms and sent a letter strongly opposing several of the Administration’s proposals, including the proposals for “targeting” programs by shifting assistance from areas where soil erosion was under better control to areas where it was still excessive. To NACD, this looked too much like abandoning good programs and penalizing good landowners in order to focus on bad situations. It was inconsistent with the “constant-care maintenance” vision of soil conservation that the organization and its leaders had long expressed.⁵³ Of the proposal to fund grants to state and local conservation efforts by taking the funds from other conservation programs, Representative Tom Harkin (IA) was quoted as saying “We’re robbing Peter to pay Paul.”⁵⁴

By the time USDA was ready to release the final program in mid-1982, the primary policy focus was clearly based on holding down federal spending. In addition to urging state and local governments to take a more active role in funding conservation programs, USDA would target conservation funds and programs to areas where “the need for conservation is critical in national terms,” and redouble efforts to promote conservation tillage.⁵⁵ The implication in the statement was clear: conservation priorities would be established in Washington, DC, rather than in local conservation districts or state soil conservation plans.

It was clear that the whole approach was constrained by the political need to appear to do more conservation with less money. Noting the bind USDA Secretary John Block found himself in, commentator and freelance writer Ken Cook observed that “It remains to be seen whether the program that emerges from OMB will enhance John Block’s political standing or diminish it. But there is no lack of cynicism within USDA about the way the RCA analysis has been bent, spindled and mutilated to fit the budget mill.”⁵⁶

Neil Sampson, then NACD’s Executive Vice President, called it an attempt to solve the conservation problem using “blue smoke and mirrors.”⁵⁷ NACD President Lyle Bauer called it “fiction, pure and simple.”⁵⁸ The contrast between the RCA Appraisal’s findings and the Administration’s budget-driven response was clearly exposed, leaving conservationists to struggle throughout the decade to find the political support to remedy the situation.

While the RCA program’s inability to guide the federal budget process was a disappointment, its influence in affecting public understanding of the conservation problem was not. In looking back at the impact of the bill in 1984, by-then former SCS Chief Norm Berg would write: “Unquestionably, the most important contribution made by the law was the appraisal process it mandated: the collection and analysis of a vast amount of data on resource conservation conditions and trends. This information represents nothing less than a revolution in people’s understanding of the erosion problem.”⁵⁹

The 1981 Farm Bill

The public debates spurred by the RCA were not lost on Congress, and as work commenced on the 1981 Farm Bill, there were many proposals that mirrored what had been discussed by NACD and others. Congressmen Ed Jones (TN) and James Jeffords (VT) introduced the Soil Conservation Act of 1981, which would become the first-ever Conservation Title in a Farm Bill. It contained provisions for a Special Areas Conservation Program, matching grants for state and local conservation programs, conservation loans, an Agricultural Land Resources Policy, an organic act for the Resource Conservation and Development Program, and other details, many of which mirrored the RCA alternatives that had been intensively studied by USDA and supported by NACD.

In the Senate, the first Republican majority since 1954 began to work on its version of the Farm Bill under the chairmanship of Jesse Helms (NC). Due to the Republicans’ long stint as a minority party, the new leaders had few staff resources and faced the complicated legislation without a great deal of prior leadership experience. Senator John Melcher (MT) introduced the first version of a conservation title that would provide a new conservation loan program, reauthorize the Resource Conservation and Development Program, and establish

a new Special Areas Conservation Program.⁶⁰ The bill was consistent with the House approach, although with fewer proposals. It was soon joined by a similar proposal sponsored by Roger Jepsen (IA), who was chairman of the Soil Conservation Subcommittee. These bills opened the way for the Senate Committee to begin thinking about new conservation program proposals.

The resulting legislation opened up several significant avenues in federal policy. Included was a farmland protection section (the follow-up to the work that Rep. James Jeffords (VT) had done in response to the National Agricultural Lands Study), authorizing USDA to implement part of its programs through grants to states and conservation districts, and a host of other sections that expanded USDA's conservation program authorities.

By the time the Farm Bill was ready for final consideration the Reagan Administration had assessed the RCA proposals and knew pretty firmly what it didn't want. They could not support options that would require additional federal dollars or programs, regardless of what public opinion or USDA analysis said. But Congress moved ahead with the Farm Bill over USDA's objections, and in the final analysis gave the Department new conservation tools it had not asked for, did not want, and would not, in general, use. NACD's leadership in developing national policy had succeeded, but to what end?

Lasting Effects

Some of the effects of the battles over the RCA process and the 1981 Farm Bill have proven to be long-lasting, while many of the details have been forgotten. In the contest of ideas over the "Green Ticket" versus the "Red Ticket," as we shall see, it was the latter that won the early rounds with the inclusion of a cross-compliance provision in the 1985 Farm Bill. But the former resurfaced again in the 2002 Farm Bill.

There was a great deal of effort to institute the targeting concept, and in response to OMB pressure, SCS identified the areas with the highest rates of erosion as shown in the 1977 NRI and decided that the targeting efforts would be phased in over five years, with five percent of technical assistance money diverted to the target effort each year, until by the fifth year, 25 percent of all technical assistance funds would be involved.⁶¹

This effort affected conservation district programs for many years, as districts with heavily urban constituencies and programs lost technical assistance and program support, as did those that were heavily dominated by forest and rangelands, and those that had lower erosion rates due to climate and topography. Decision making went more toward Washington and away from the local conservation districts. This raised an interesting contradiction that was discussed in one USDA program appraisal: The USDA conservation program

called for more input from state and local government, while at the same time it shifted from concern with local issues to more concern with national issues.⁶² NACD continued to speak out about these trends, worried that the thin veneer of institutional capability built up over the years would be diminished or lost in many areas.

In 1983, NACD passed a resolution saying that while it supported the targeting concept, it was concerned about the implementation. The Association pointed out that, because SCS had selected target areas on the basis of the 1977 NRI, and relied on the concept that five tons of soil loss per acre per year was an acceptable erosion rate everywhere, regions with thin, fragile soils were being damaged at erosion rates lower than five tons, but those same areas were suffering program reductions. "We are further concerned," the resolution continued, "that because targeting funds are being taken from an already-thin base of program dollars and technicians, the current targeting methods seriously reduce the conservation program in many states."⁶³

In 1985, after four years of experience with targeting, USDA Assistant Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, Peter Myers, argued that the program was getting "more conservation on the ground in critical areas with fewer dollars and more efficiency."⁶⁴ That view was supported by USDA estimates of progress, where measures such as "acres adequately protected" had risen 19 percent in the period 1981–1983 compared to the years 1977–1980. For those districts whose programs were diminished by the loss of resources to the targeted areas, however, such arguments meant little. Opposition to the targeting concept remained widespread.

The idea of federal grants to states and districts to support local conservation programs pretty much died without a fight, only to resurface later. The authority was there in the early 1980s; the money wasn't. Opposition to taking the money from existing programs was strong, and there was to be no new money from Washington. As federal programs for technical assistance continued to shrink, states and localities were challenged to reinforce federal capabilities, but at their own expense, and often in an uneven manner.

Some insight into the pressure being felt inside NACD comes from Neil Sampson's message to the staff and officers in a January 1984 issue of *Friday Briefs*: "I view the 1985 budget as the last 'hurrah' for the 1981 Farm Bill Programs. The ones without funds in '85 are dead ducks, and that includes grants. In the attempt to build political support to get grants funded, we created a climate of expectations among district people. They are now disappointed, and some blame us, for no results. My feeling is that we have been facing insurmountable obstacles, but some would view that as simply an excuse. Where now? I can't tell if the Administration budget will ask for funding for grants. If it does, we have a chance to get them, and a strong political effort might pay off. If it

doesn't, we don't stand a prayer, in my opinion, and a strong effort will lead to a much more obvious and costly defeat. If that is the case, the best course would be to defuse some of the more strident expectations in the countryside and move to a longer-term strategy that might pay off when the political climate (and economic situation) changes." As can be assumed from the descriptions of the budget wars that follow, no funding was forthcoming, and the grants portion of the 1981 Farm Bill was forgotten for many years.

One of the major factors to emerge from the RCA was the accelerated growth within SCS of a strong inventory and assessment program, the NRI. The SCS had been conducting surveys of soil and water conditions since the 1930s, and had conducted studies episodically through the early 1970s.⁶⁵ The inability of the 1977 NRI to answer the critical questions raised in the RCA study, however, led to a remodeling and improvement of the NRI program for 1982. The number of data elements was doubled, and the number of sample points increased from 70,000 to more than 365,000.⁶⁶ But the increased workload of gathering field data on each sample point threatened to overwhelm SCS's field capability, and new data demanded for the 1985 RCA appraisal and the 1985 Farm Bill increased the pressure. By the time the 1982 NRI was released, SCS had identified several problems that needed attention, led primarily by the need to improve technology so that the survey could be done with less time and money for both data collection and analysis.

In 1987, much of the work of the NRI was done with remote sensing data, and all data entry was done at the state office level. That speeded things up, and allowed SCS to go back and fix errors found in the 1982 data. One result was that, for the first time in its long history, SCS could begin to do accurate change assessment, as it compared 1987 conditions with 1982 conditions on the same sample plots. This continued through the 1992 and 1997 NRI cycles, and today those four datasets provide significant insights into the changes on the nation's nonfederal lands.

The gains were not achieved without a price, however. The field assessment of the data points prior to 1987 did much to improve the scope and consistency of the technical resources at the county level. By going out and assessing places (such as forests) where they had not previously worked, local soil conservationists gained new skills and understanding of resource conditions. And the reliance on remote sensing data lost some local accuracy, and county-level statistical reliability was lost as a result.