

Conservation Districts: Getting to the Roots

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The theme of this conference, "People Protecting Their Land," addresses the crucial link in any soil conservation program, the landholder. Governments may try various means to promote soil conservation such as research, financial and technical assistance to landholders, education, moral appeals, and regulation. But if governments are to succeed, they must take into account the attitudes and motivations of the landholders and ultimately enlist their cooperation. Implicit, if not always elucidated, in calls for conservation is belief that conservation has values for society as a whole and that we must conserve resources for future generations. Often these values fit nicely with the everyday objectives of the landholder, but not always. The question then becomes how to satisfy these various objectives equitably.

The soil conservation movement in the United States established a government agency, the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), numbering about 13,000 employees spread throughout the country. SCS works in cooperation with nearly 3,000 conservation districts to assist landholders in the districts.

The districts, which are often coterminous with counties, are organized under state law and are directed by locally elected directors or supervisors. This partnership sustained the conservation movement in the United States. This paper will focus on the historical experiences of working with local groups, specifically conservation districts, in achieving conservation. The purpose is not to promote districts as an ideal instrument worldwide, but to increase awareness of this system so that others may further

examine its elements if the district concept seems promising.

Hugh Hammond Bennett, more than any other person, influenced the development of the soil conservation movement in the United States. Study and observation during his career as a soil scientist in the U. S. Department of Agriculture convinced him that soil erosion was a menace to long-term productivity of the land. The Great Depression provided Bennett with an opportunity when public works programs were created to put people to work. Beginning in 1933, as head of the Soil Erosion Service, he received some of the emergency employment money to demonstrate soil and water conservation methods in selected watersheds. The work proved popular and the Congress then created the Soil Conservation Service with the Soil Conservation Act of 1935. For the most part the early agency continued to promote soil conservation through the demonstration projects as trained soil conservationists worked directly with farmers. The availability of labor and equipment greatly facilitated the adoption of these measures (Helms, 1985).

Meanwhile, M. L. (Milburn Lincoln) Wilson, assistant secretary of the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and one of America's most innovative agricultural policy-makers, had been thinking about ways to spread soil conservation beyond the scattered demonstration projects, and to make it a force for agricultural reform. Several principles guided his thinking. Farmers had to feel that they had an active role in promoting soil conservation if they were to accept it as a goal and ultimately a regular part of their farming operations.

Also, Wilson recognized that the acceptance of conservation in the demonstration projects rested partly on the fact that equipment, labor, and the assistance of trained soil conservationists were available to farmers. This kind of assistance was not available outside the demonstration projects. Belief in soil conservation was insufficient to spread adoption of conservation measures outside the projects. Wilson's dilemma was how to make farmers feel more involved and in control, and how to provide the assistance, not just on demonstration projects, but nationwide to bring soil conservation to all the Nation's farmlands (Glick, 1990).

With the assistance of Philip M. Glick, a lawyer in the U. S. Department of Agriculture, Wilson's ideas were embodied in the "Standard State Soil Conservation District Law." The conservation district, as outlined in the standard law, was a new device in American federalism. It was classified as a "special district" because it had limited purposes and was not a local unit of general government as is the county or city. Just to list a few of the powers of the district, it could conduct surveys and research, disseminate information, conduct demonstrations, carry out prevention and control measures, acquire land and property, sue and be sued, and promulgate land-use regulations. In some instances these authorities paralleled the authorities of the Soil Conservation Service, thus accommodating cooperative ventures. In other cases the districts could do things which the federal government could not do. In short, adding the districts enhanced and expanded the soil conservation movement. Philip Glick has suggested that this type of American federalism with cooperation among federal, state, and local entities resembled not so much a layered cake, but a marble cake (Glick, 1967 and 1990).

Organization of districts proceeded after state legislatures passed a law based on the "standard law." If the local people then voted for the district in a referendum, they elected directors and supervisors of the district. Then the districts signed an agreement with USDA. The working relationship

that has developed over the years is for the districts to sign agreements with individual farmers and ranchers. Then trained soil conservationists from the Soil Conservation Service field offices worked individually with them on conservation problems.

A few examples can illustrate the work of districts. For instance, they helped apply conservation to the land by making specialized equipment available. Districts often purchased specialized equipment such as grass seeders, spriggers, or tree planters and rented them to farmers. Most farmers would need such equipment only a few times. During the last couple of decades, districts have promoted various reduced tillage systems which leave crop residues on the land surface and thus reduce soil erosion. The technique required specialized equipment or modifications in conventional planting equipment in order to plant through crop residues. Advocates of conservation tillage have tried to gain converts by getting them to use the technique on a few acres. If the farmers are satisfied that it works well and profitably with their particular cropping systems, then they may well be inclined to purchase equipment. Some districts purchased equipment and rented it to farmers for field trials with the idea of promoting a revolution in tillage systems.

In addition to making equipment available, some districts provided services such as tree planting. The operations of the Southern Soil Conservation District in West Virginia in the early 1970s provided examples of what districts might do. The district's tree planting crew planted seedlings for district cooperators for a fee. The district employees helped construct watering troughs and develop springs. These activities promoted grassland farming over tilled crops on the steeper land. District crews also helped in reclamation of gullied areas. Districts acquired plants which provided habitat for wildlife from the state Department of Natural Resources and supplied them to the farmers at a fee. For farmers who wanted to develop stock watering facilities from springs, the districts lent equipment as well as selling supplies which were not available on the local market

(Southern Soil Conservation District, 1972). After World War II districts received surplus military equipment, which was also adaptable for building terraces and installing other conservation practices. Now most of these mechanical practices are installed by contractors while the Soil Conservation Service provides the guidelines and specifications. But districts have been invaluable in providing conservation services and materials which were not yet commercially viable.

In a way the system of district and state cooperation with the federal government could produce a service that was greater than the sum of its parts. For instance, the Soil Conservation Service had the staff to develop standards for various conservation practices and modify them to fit the local area. But the state, county or districts could accelerate conservation by helping to pay for installing conservation practices or by hiring additional technical staff. In those states which chose to hire additional staff, one might walk into a field and find people paid by the federal government, the state, or the district. Yet all would be doing similar work, using similar methods.

The districts focused first on promoting soil conservation. But additional federal and state legislation continually altered and expanded their role. New federal legislation for flood control in the small upstream watersheds passed in 1954 brought involvement in watershed projects for flood control, drainage, recreation, municipal and industrial water supply, and other purposes. Districts had to adjust to be an effective force in a changed economy in the United States. While many districts remained predominantly rural, others saw small towns grow and suburbia spread onto farmlands with the accompanying problems of increased human activity and resource pressures. The information available from the Soil Conservation Service through districts, such as soils information, knowledge of flooding hazards, erosion control techniques, and a host of other information, could be valuable in helping guide residential and business development wisely. Counties might choose to require that

development plans be reviewed by the districts for approval. Districts became leaders in the passage and enforcement of erosion and sediment control laws designed to reduce sedimentation from construction sites.

The districts' national organization, the National Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (later the National Association of Conservation Districts), suggested changes districts might make to be more effective in the changed world (National Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, 1966). The report of NACD's District Outlook Committee urged districts to be inclusive and to be the natural resources representative not only of agriculture but also of business, industry, recreation, and community interests. State leaders sought changes in the state conservation district law to accommodate this broadened role. Between 1966 and 1969, some 82 changes were made in state conservation district laws (Sampson, 1985). Districts became a voice in erosion and sediment control laws designed to reduce sedimentation from construction sites.

Through the years the financial contributions of state and county governments grew. From 1973 to 1983, state appropriations for conservation districts programs doubled from \$42 million to \$96 million. By 1992, the appropriations from state and local sources amounted to about \$493,000,000. Sources other than federal funds provide for 7,000 employees, about the same number as the SCS people in field offices. About one-half of the district employees are secretarial; thus SCS is providing a larger portion of the technical staff. In a few states, staff funded from state and local sources outnumbered the Soil Conservation Service personnel, but these states were the exception rather than the norm (NACD, 1991).

Developments during the last two decades in Nebraska represent another step in the maturation of the conservation district ideal. Nebraska currently has 23 natural resources districts with a broad-based natural resources agenda. Since the late 19th

century special districts in Nebraska proliferated as they were created for irrigation, drainage, soil conservation, watersheds, rural water development, reclamation, sanitation, mosquito control, and other purposes. By the late 1960s there were some 500 special purpose districts created to deal with resource conditions. Officials in Nebraska, especially Warren Fairchild, Executive Secretary of the Nebraska Soil and Water Conservation Commission, recognized that there were too many districts with fragmented authorities and too little funding to be effective. They were influenced by the analysis of districts made by the District Outlook Committee of the National Association of Conservation Districts. Without providing specific guidance the committee did recognize the problem of the proliferation of special districts and the need for soil conservation districts to assume greater responsibility in the changed rural world. Nebraska legislation passed in 1969 called for natural resources districts to commence operations in 1972. Nebraska consolidated 154 special purpose resource districts into 24 natural resource districts in 1972 (Jenkins, 1975).

After 20 years some of the advantages of the Nebraska plan are obvious. One is the financial base. The legislation provided that districts be funded from the property tax. Statewide, districts received about one percent of the property taxes paid in the state. This contrasts with the "standard law" which did not recommend that districts be funded from property tax. M. L. Wilson believed such a provision would be the death knell of district law in state legislatures during the midst of the Depression (Glick, 1990). The assured funding makes it possible to hire a professional staff, which in turn makes the districts more effective. Since the districts are much larger than the typical soil and water conservation districts, there are some economies of scale involved and less money is spent for overhead expenses. The staff makes it possible for districts to be involved in a variety of activities and cooperative agreements with various state and local agencies, not just the Soil Conservation Service. The districts are large enough to have a voice in state

government and to promote their interests. Districts which include both rural and urban areas can effectively deal with issues that connect the two such as water quality, flooding, and other issues. Since district directors are elected, there may be some fear that urban residents would dominate. But according to Steven G. Oltmans, general manager of the Papio-Missouri Natural Resources District, which includes Omaha, the urban contingent has been generous in spending the district's funds in the countryside for traditional soil and water conservation measures (Oltmans, 1992).

The natural resource districts do not see themselves as replacing the services provided by the Soil Conservation Service and duplicating the expertise SCS brings to conservation problems. Each district cannot reasonably do all the research needed and the development of methods and standards. But they can help accelerate the application of conservation practices in the countryside. The districts also worked on conservation problems outside the purview of SCS. The lack of administrative funds made the conservation district too dependent upon the Soil Conservation Service and perhaps too restricted in its natural resources agenda (Glick, 1990). The source of funding brings Nebraska natural resources districts closer to the original ideal of a district as a comprehensive resource agency for the local area. With the shrinkage in the number of farm operators and the need for districts to have a firm financial base, the consolidated districts with broadened authorities merit consideration.

Natural resource districts as they exist in Nebraska are the exception rather than the rule. The assured funding increased the influence of the local entity. For too long in their history many of the districts were allied exclusively with SCS or had little staff and funds to launch their own initiatives. The Nebraska model may not be the ideal for all of the United States, let alone the world. But it exhibits the potential of the district concept.

Summary

What might one say about the importance of districts in advancing soil and water conservation farming in the United States? What are the possibilities for using the concept elsewhere? First of all, the districts accelerated acceptance of soil conservation in the United States by making landholders feel a part of the movement. The movement was not led solely by government agencies, but also by landholders who converted friends and neighbors to the values of conservation farming. On the other side, this neighborly aspect has sometimes been a source of criticism about districts. It was difficult to make the hard choices where regulatory authorities were needed. This last issue has a paradoxical aspect. Recent federal farm legislation in the United States contains conservation requirements for farmers who receive crop support payments and other assistance from the U. S. government. But these regulatory activities should be seen as an addition to the conservation movement, not a replacement. All resource problems will not be solved through this instrument, and the need for local involvement will remain.

Within the American system of government the districts, through their national association, have influenced Congress to provide for soil and water conservation. They have been a major force in securing funds for the Soil Conservation Service. In the early history of the movement, there were a couple of times when the Soil Conservation Service might not have survived as an agency without the support of the districts. This is not to say there would have been no governmental support of soil and water conservation. But there might well not have been an agency charged to work primarily on soil and water conservation programs. Legislatively, the districts individually and through their association influenced other environmental legislation, and along with SCS they are seen as the primary delivery system to transfer legislative intent from Congress into action in the countryside. On the local level, the districts, especially in the case of Nebraska, offer a way to deal with a multitude of private and govern-

mental agencies on a wide range of resource issues.

Any conservation advocate outside the United States should keep a few things in mind when evaluating the districts. The standard law was written with the American system of federalism in mind. Any attempt to import the system should carefully consider the cultural and governmental system of the country. Also, it should be remembered that part of the effectiveness was that in the partnership the SCS employees and the farmers were for the most part from similar backgrounds with similar values. This was a decided advantage in persuading farmers to use conservation farming techniques. Most SCS employees came from farm families and had earned college degrees in agriculture, or a related field, at the state university.

In other countries the representatives of government and local groups may not necessarily be of the same class or ethnic group. Conservation did not escape from the heritage of colonialism with a particularly appealing reputation among indigenous peoples. In some cases their recollection of "conservation" involved thoughts of the expropriation of the most valuable lands for white farmers and then the imposition of onerous rule for natives farming the poorer, steeper, more erodible lands (Stocking, 1985).

But the district concept can be an asset by involving minorities who have not been fully represented in the conservation movement. For example, attempts to work with native Americans have been fraught with cultural misunderstanding (Kelly, 1985). During the last decade several native American tribes have formed conservation districts and are again cooperating with SCS. The fact that the district is operated by local people empowers them. Since they can assert themselves as decision-makers in the relationship, the potential exists to accomplish more than in a paternalistic relationship.

Finally, valuable as the district concept is, look at it if you will as one piece of the

possible answer to conservation problems, not a panacea. The landscape of conservation is littered with too many simple answers to complicated problems.

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