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Partnering for Environmental Policy in the 21st Century

Gary Mast
Deputy Under Secretary
Natural Resources and Environment
United States Department of Agriculture

A Tradition of Partnerships

It is an honor to talk about the importance of partnerships that truly support the goal of enhancing and sustaining our natural resources. My life in conservation has given me an opportunity to view our mission from several angles. I will be speaking from the multiple perspectives of producer, national conservation association leader, and Federal employee with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The early leaders of the soil and water conservation movement in America perceived that some Federal involvement was needed to accelerate progress. They also recognized that it should not solely be a Federal activity. The act of April 27, 1935, created the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) in the U. S. Department of Agriculture, the predecessor to the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and gave the Secretary the authority “to cooperate or enter into agreements with, or to furnish financial or other aid to, any agency, government or otherwise, or any person, subject to such conditions as he

may deem necessary, for the purposes of this Act....” Notice the breadth of the authority.

For many years, USDA’s primary conservation partners were the conservation districts, which are subunits of state government. State laws that authorized creation of districts were based on the USDA-drafted "Standard State Soil Conservation District Law." The conservation district, as outlined in the standard law, was a new device in American federalism that involved local citizens and landowners. Some of the conservation district authorities paralleled those of the Soil Conservation Service such as:

- Conduct surveys and research,
- Disseminate information,
- Conduct demonstrations, and
- Carry out prevention and control measures.

Time will not permit a discussion of all of the ways in which the conservation districts have furthered conservation, but I would like to give you one example. One of the great success stories of the last three decades has been the development and adoption of conservation tillage systems. My home soil and water conservation district in Ohio received a \$10,000 grant from the Environmental Protection Agency to undertake conservation in a watershed with impaired water quality. Ninety percent of the farmers in the watershed were Amish, and did not use tractors. This is a barrier to adopting no-till because hydraulic power is needed to raise and lower the no-till implement. We solved this problem by mounting small gasoline engines and hydraulic pumps to operate the hydraulic system of the no-till planter or drill. Some of these very first no-till

“systems” were made in my farm shop. But the point I want to make is that from this \$10,000 grant and the over arching partnership with the Amish community, the conservation district, NRCS, Cooperative Extension, and modern farmers like myself, conservation tillage was launched among the Amish. The Amish Advisory Committee grew out of this effort and continues to be an advocate for conservation in the world’s largest Amish Community.

Nationwide, many soil and water conservation districts purchased planters and drills that were rented to farmers so that they could try conservation tillage systems on a few acres. In this manner, a partnership of districts, NRCS, and producers, contributed to the success of conservation tillage adoption.

This long tradition in USDA and NRCS of building partnerships to help people help the land continues in thousands of examples across the country. To encourage even greater use of partnerships, President Bush signed the Cooperative Conservation executive order in August of 2004 which led to the highly successful Cooperative Conservation Conference in August of 2005. The purpose of the executive order and Conference was to ensure that the Departments of the Interior, Agriculture, Commerce, and Defense and the Environmental Protection Agency implement laws relating to the environment and natural resources in a manner that promotes cooperative conservation, with an emphasis on appropriate inclusion of local participation in Federal decision making. The term "cooperative conservation" means actions that relate to use, enhancement, and enjoyment of natural resources, protection of the environment, or both, and that involve

collaborative activity among Federal, State, local, and tribal governments, private for-profit and nonprofit institutions, other nongovernmental entities and individuals.

These partnerships are, I believe, the heart of the conservation movement in America. Based on National Resources Inventory data, these partnerships have helped farmers and ranchers reduce the erosion rate on agricultural land from about 1.7 billion tons per year in 1982 to about 1.0 billion tons per year in 2003. Each year our partnerships with farmers and ranchers are keeping in place 700 million tons of soil which, in turn, enhances future productivity and protects our rivers, streams, lakes, and estuaries. That amounts to nearly 38 million standard 10-wheeler dump truck loads of soil, each year.

It is in this spirit that I would like to share with you a just a few of the thousands of examples of how partnerships can further the cause of conservation. These examples range from grass-roots partnerships to interagency partnerships, but the common thread is that these partnerships were essential to helping craft technically sound and economically viable solutions to conservation problems.

Partnering with other Federal Agencies -- Oregon Pilot Project

A good example of Federal cooperation on grazing lands is a grazing land assessment project in Oregon. This is an effort directed toward improving the assessment of rangelands. Range scientists in the various Federal agencies had developed methods of rangeland assessment as a baseline for developing conservation plans for improvement of rangeland. The desirability of speaking with one voice had brought the range scientists together to develop a national system. One step in the process has been the

development of the ecological site description system. NRCS, the Forest Service, and Bureau of Land Management are cooperating in the Multi-Agency Oregon Pilot Project in 13 central Oregon counties to develop a unified method of assessing rangelands. The ultimate objective is a National Assessment of Rangelands. Toward this end the Sustainable Rangelands Roundtable, comprised of over 50 organizations including government agencies, universities, non-profit organizations, and private landowners, was formed with the objective of seeing that the two major rangeland inventorying programs—the Forest Inventory and Analysis program in the Forest Service and the National Resources Inventory program in the Natural Resources Conservation Service—utilize the same grazing land assessment standards.

Partnering with Municipalities

As background for my next example, you should know that USDA and NRCS have a long history of partnering to help farmers and ranchers take action to mitigate what we call off-site effects by improving land management. Shortly after it was created, SCS made sedimentation studies of water supply reservoirs to learn about the connection between erosion from fields and the loss of water supply capacity in the reservoirs. Our natural resource issues are far more complex than they were 70 years ago. Today farmers and ranchers are addressing natural resource issues related to air quality, nutrient management, irrigation water management, wildlife habitat, wetland protection, soil quality, among others. Because natural resource issues are broader and much more complex, farmers and ranchers need an expanded partnership to help them implement conservation plans that are not only effective, but also socially acceptable and economically viable.

Wichita, Kansas draws 70 percent of its water from the Cheney Reservoir on the North Fork of the Ninnescah River. In 1992, an algae bloom erupted in Cheney Lake, which resulted in complaints about the poor taste and odor of the water. Excess phosphorus and sediment from agricultural land was identified as a major source of the reservoir's problems.

NRCS and the Reno and Sedgwick County conservation districts teamed with the City of Wichita to address the water quality problem in Cheney Reservoir. This led to the formation of the non-profit organization, CLW Inc., which provides water quality education and facilitates funding for clean water projects. With the help of CLW, producers plan and implement conservation practices to protect water quality. From January 2003 to August 2005, more than \$200,000 in state and Federal cost share assistance and more than \$100,000 in city funds were invested in 2,000 conservation projects that are helping to protect the water quality of Cheney Reservoir.

Partnering to Improve Water Quality in the Upper Mississippi

Cropland drainage is very extensive in the Midwestern United States, and drainage flows can carry excessive amounts of plant nutrients and other chemicals, especially nitrate-nitrogen. Recent science has shown that managing drainage flow can significantly improve water quality by reducing nutrient and pesticide losses and at the same time boosting crop production by conserving water in the soil during dry periods. Modifications to existing drainage systems, and better designs for new or replacement systems, allow better control over drainage water releases and reduce nutrient losses.

The Agricultural Drainage Management Systems Task Force and the Agricultural Drainage Management Coalition were formed to promote drainage management as a viable option for reducing nutrient losses from cropland and conserving soil moisture. This coalition of Federal agencies, Land Grant Universities, and State Agricultural Experiment Stations has funded research, started demonstration projects for farmers, and has raised awareness about the benefits of drainage water management on water quality and wildlife habitat in the Mississippi River Basin.

Partnering to Restore Habitat for the Bobwhite Quail

Bobwhite quail populations have dropped from an estimated 59 million birds in 1980 to 20 million birds in 1999, primarily due to loss of habitat as abandoned farmlands grew into forests or were developed. Other upland birds with similar habitat requirements, including many songbird species, have also suffered significant declines. Unless action is taken to restore habitat for these species, wildlife scientists expect this downward trend to continue.

The populations of some birds, for example, wild turkeys, have been successfully restored through large-scale conservation initiatives. These successes gave wildlife conservationists reason to be optimistic that, with an effective, collaborative approach, they may be able to reverse the bobwhite quail decline as well.

In August 2004, President Bush announced the Quail Initiative, committing an estimated \$125 million to the project. The initiative is expected to create more than a quarter million acres of habitat for the northern bobwhite quail and other upland bird species, primarily through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Quail populations are expected to increase by 750,000 birds annually across the 35-state region. The primary partners in this Bobwhite Quail project were the USDA Farm Service Agency, Southeast Quail Study Group of the Southeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, Mississippi State University Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Quail Unlimited, State Fish and Wildlife agencies in 35 states, International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, Partners In Flight, local farm producers, and others.

Partnering to Streamline Endangered Species Act Implementation

The Columbia River Basin is the Nation's fourth largest river basin. Originating in Canada and stretching throughout the Pacific Northwest, it covers nearly a quarter of a million square miles of mountains, forests, farms, and other lands. The river system supports five species of salmon and other important species, including the steelhead, shad, smelt, and bald eagle, some threatened or endangered. Numerous Federal and state agencies and non-profit organizations have joined in a partnership with farmers and ranchers to encourage landowners to adopt conservation practices. In areas covered by the Endangered Species Act, Federal agencies are required to employ a lengthy, formal consultation process on landowner conservation plans if the plan might affect endangered or threatened species. These consultations can take months, even years, to

complete. Often, the landowner becomes discouraged by the long regulatory process and declines to participate in conservation programs.

After a four-year consultation among NRCS, National Marine Fisheries Service, and the Fish and Wildlife Service led by the soil and water conservation districts in Wasco, Gilliam and Sherman Counties, the agencies developed a biological assessment and biological opinion for conservation practices in the three counties. Private landowners with an NRCS-approved conservation plan could, as a result of the partnering, receive an incidental take permit for their operation. This allows private landowners to improve livestock management, plant trees, protect soil, and improve water quality in a timely manner with minimal red tape. This process provides regulatory certainty for agricultural producers under the Endangered Species Act. It is a win-win for endangered species, farmers, ranchers and Federal agencies.

Rancher Led Partnerships on Grazingland

The Malpai Group, a non-profit organization, was organized and led by area ranchers who saw that the land—and their way of life—were threatened by deteriorating rangelands and by the spread of subdivisions from nearby towns. In addition, the lack of natural wildfires to rejuvenate the landscape and the slow nature of recovery in a dry climate contributed to the land's deteriorating condition. The group has undertaken actions to protect and restore the ecological diversity and productivity of the land. Practices include rangeland restoration, reintroduction of fire, wildlife conservation, and endangered species recovery.

The landowners, NRCS, Federal land management agencies, state agencies and universities and the Nature Conservancy have partnered to:

- Protect 77,000 acres of private land from development through conservation easements.
- Create the GrassBank, which allows ranchers to rest their grasslands while sustaining their livestock production. Grass on one ranch is made available to another rancher's cattle in return for conveying land-use easements prohibiting subdivision. The Malpai Borderlands Group holds the easements.
- Reintroduce fire to more than 75,000 acres.
- Host educational workshops every year, sharing new scientific and land management information with neighbors and cooperators.

Partnering in Rule Making: The CAFO Rule

Structural changes in the U.S. livestock sector over the past 20 years have increased both the size and the concentration of animal feeding operations. Consequently, the mandates in the Clean Water Act amendments concerning regulation of point-source discharges, including Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFO) became applicable to more livestock operations. As concerns among producers grew, lawsuits were filed and the Environmental Protection Agency issued a draft rule in 2000 to revise the regulations. The draft rule, prepared without significant advice from USDA, outlined a regulatory process that was perceived to be overly burdensome and a process that did not fit American agriculture.

USDA and EPA formed a partnership to address issues associated with animal feeding operations. First, much needed to be learned about the concentration and environmental effects of the operations.

USDA formed its Animal Waste Management Team, which discovered that large animal feeding operations have the potential to contribute the bulk of excess phosphorus and nitrogen nutrients, to nearby waters. While EPA had initially proposed subjecting all medium-sized operations to the strictest management regulations, the final rules limited coverage to farms with the greatest risk. The team's findings illustrated that the previously proposed expansion in regulatory coverage would have significantly raised the costs of compliance and enforcement while generating only a marginal reduction in risk to water quality.

The USDA Animal Waste Management Team, working with EPA, refined the new regulations, which are the most significant agriculture-related change to implementation of the Clean Water Act since 1987.

In addition to directly affecting the Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation rule making, the USDA – EPA partnership indirectly led to other partnership activities including a Memorandum of Understanding for a water quality credit trading pilot program in the Chesapeake Bay, bi-monthly meetings between USDA and EPA leaders and staff, and the establishment of an agriculture advisory group within EPA.

Partnering to Assess Conservation Benefits

The early soil conservationists like Hugh Hammond Bennett promoted stewardship. They believed that conservation was the right thing to do and that one should leave the land a better place. The tradition and passion for conservation should continue, but we still need to do a better job of understanding and demonstrating the environmental benefits of conservation practices. In addition, the 2002 farm bill greatly expanded the financial assistance to landowners to help offset the costs of adopting conservation practices. The public needs to be assured that the funds are spent wisely. The Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) is an effort led by USDA to quantify environmental effects of conservation practices. The success of CEAP is predicated on the large partnership with a wide range of USDA and other Federal and local agencies. The CEAP Partnership includes:

- USDA agencies including NRCS, Farm Service Agency, Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service, National Agricultural Statistics Service, and National Agricultural Library
- Other Federal Agencies including U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- Local groups and individuals including conservation districts, local governments, drinking water suppliers, agricultural and environmental organizations, universities, State agencies, and producers.

Conclusion

These are just a few of the thousands of examples of how partnerships will continue to shape environmental policy as well as conservation program implementation in the 21st century.

Seventy percent of land in the United States is privately owned and the owners of this land are USDA's primary customers. Those of us that have been part of the conservation movement understand that cooperative conservation, across watersheds and landscapes, is the only way it makes sense for us to do business with private landowners in the 21st century. Experience has taught us that four principles should guide our conservation programs in partnering with landowners. Conservation delivery should be:

- Locally-led
- Incentive driven
- Voluntary
- Science-based

Finally, I would like to leave you with a challenge. We need to find ways, through partnerships, to make conservation programs easier to administer and deliver.

Through partnerships we can develop and deliver conservation solutions that work! And together, the committed members of our conservation partnership can help landowners get conservation on the ground. That, after all, is the true measure of our success.