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# Cooperative Conservation: Partnership in Perspective

R. Neil Sampson  
USDA Outlook Conference  
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# The Outline

- Introduction – Telling the Story over Time
- The Beginning
- Protecting Programs
- Fighting for Resources
- Responsibilities Grow and Change
  - Quasi-Regulatory Roles emerge
  - Audiences Expand Dramatically
  - NRCS Shifts to Program Administration
- The Future – Where to, and How?



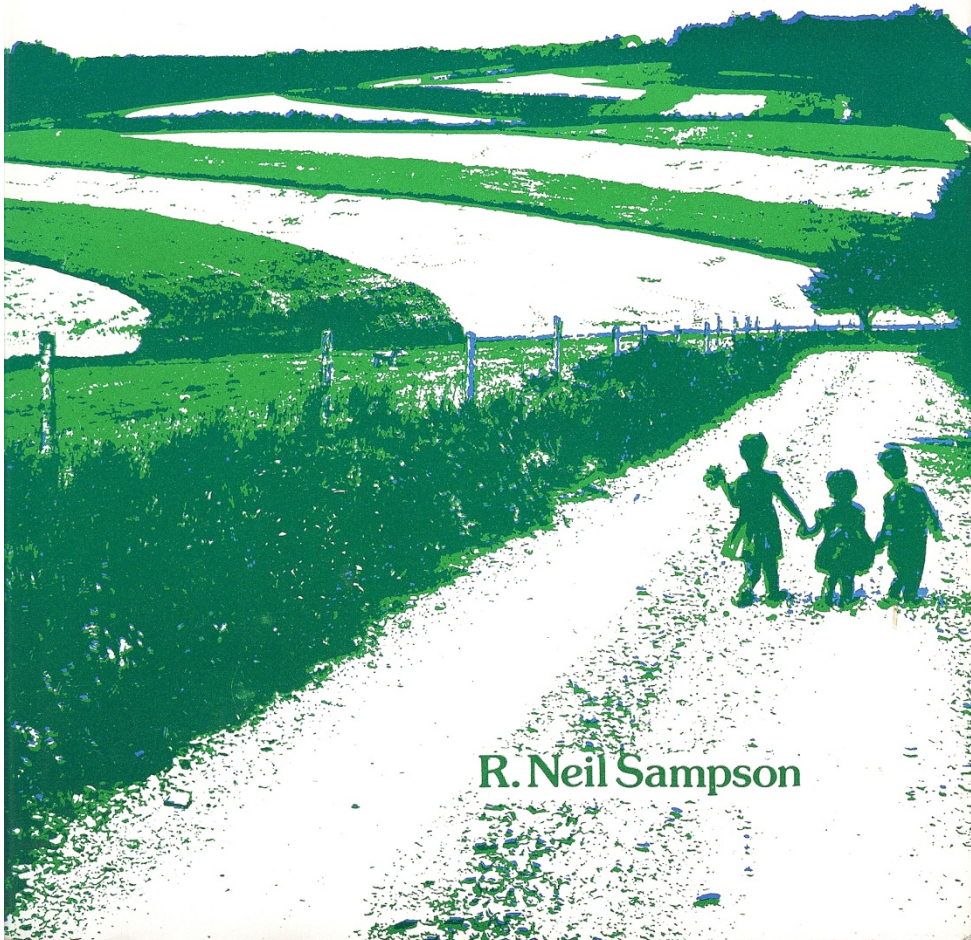
# Introduction

- The story (as I will tell it) is contained in two books:
  - For Love of the Land – 1984
    - From 1935 to 1980
  - With One Voice – 2009
    - From 1980 to 2005
  - Told through the history and activities of the National Association of Conservation Districts.
- This misses a lot of history – 75 years is a long time – Got to just hit a few points.



# FOR LOVE OF THE LAND

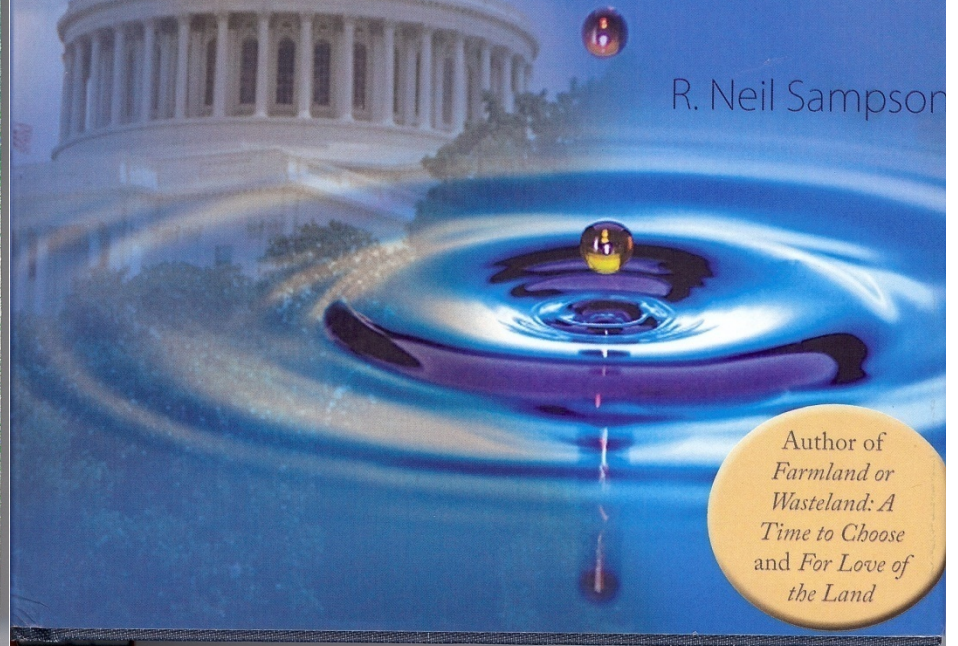
A History of the National Association  
of Conservation Districts



R. Neil Sampson

# with The National Association one of Conservation Districts voice

R. Neil Sampson



Author of  
*Farmland or  
Wasteland: A  
Time to Choose*  
and *For Love of  
the Land*





# The Beginning

- Public Law 75-46 – The Soil Conservation Act of 1935
  - April 27, 1935
    - Set National policy
    - Established the Soil Conservation Service
- Rapid Launch in the first year
  - 147 demonstration projects
  - 48 conservation nurseries
  - 23 research stations
  - 454 CCC camps



# Opposition Rises

- Overlapping Agency Missions
  - Extension
  - Forest Service
  - Research
- Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act of 1936
  - Agricultural Adjustment Administration
- Multiple programs, multiple missions, multiple agencies – a prescription for turmoil.





# Lessons Learned

- Demonstration projects didn't work. Farmers liked what they saw, but didn't know how to do it on their own land without technical assistance.
- A new science was emerging – soil and water conservation. Soil erosion could be controlled.
- The new breed of conservation problem-solvers were gaining in skill and confidence.
- There was no one “magic” solution. Each situation needed to be treated according to its needs.





# Conservation Districts Emerge

- The idea was posed by Hugh Bennett in 1934
- M.L. Wilson, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, was influential in developing the idea.
- Philip M. Glick, USDA Lawyer, drafted a “Standard State Enabling Act”.
- In February, 1937, a newly re-elected President Franklin Delano Roosevelt sent the standard act to the Governors, urging its adoption at the state level.
- An avenue to reach private landowners with federal goals, without direct federal-private dictates.



# Rapid Adoption

- Arkansas passed the bill the following week!
- By 1938, 27 states had passed a bill, and ten more passed it in 1939.
- By 1945, all 48 states had a soil conservation district law.
- Not all followed the Standard Act completely; many differences emerged.
- The main omission was that, in many states, districts were not given the power to enact and enforce land use regulations.





# Associations Form

- Arkansas was the first state association, formed to help district officials learn from each other.
- Other states followed rapidly, both to strengthen district operations and to work on state legislative issues of concern.
- Regional meetings and associations soon followed.
- In 1946, the National Association was formed to provide districts a way to band together and work on national conservation policies.



# Protecting Programs

- 1947 – Cooley Bill would eliminate SCS and transfer programs to Extension.
- 1953 – USDA Sec'y E.T. Benson proposes re-organization. After heavy lobbying from NASCD, SCS technical program is retained.
- 1957-58 – The F.A.R.M. fight in South Dakota.
- The National Limestone Institute kept the SCS-ASCS controversy going into the 1980's.





# Fighting for Resources

- The 1970's – “Decade of the Environment” – saw conventional conservation programs suffering.
  - Other agendas – pollution control, protectionism
- By 1980, in 1970 dollars, the program losses were:
  - Technical assistance to land users – down 2 percent
  - Watershed construction – down 10 percent
  - Great Plains Conservation Program – down 14 percent
  - Agricultural Conservation Program – down 51 percent
  - Soil and water conservation research – down 60 percent



# Programs Threatened

- 1971 – Channelization attacked as environmentally unwise – issue: who would hold veto power over local watershed project plans?
- 1972 – Nixon proposes elimination of ACP
- 1975 – National Land Use Legislation
  - Federal program managed by Interior; private lands?
- 1977 – Clean Water Act
  - Rural Clean Water Program – EPA and SCS leadership
  - Experimental RCWP – ASCS to run; Whitten budget
- 1978 – Phase out RC&D program

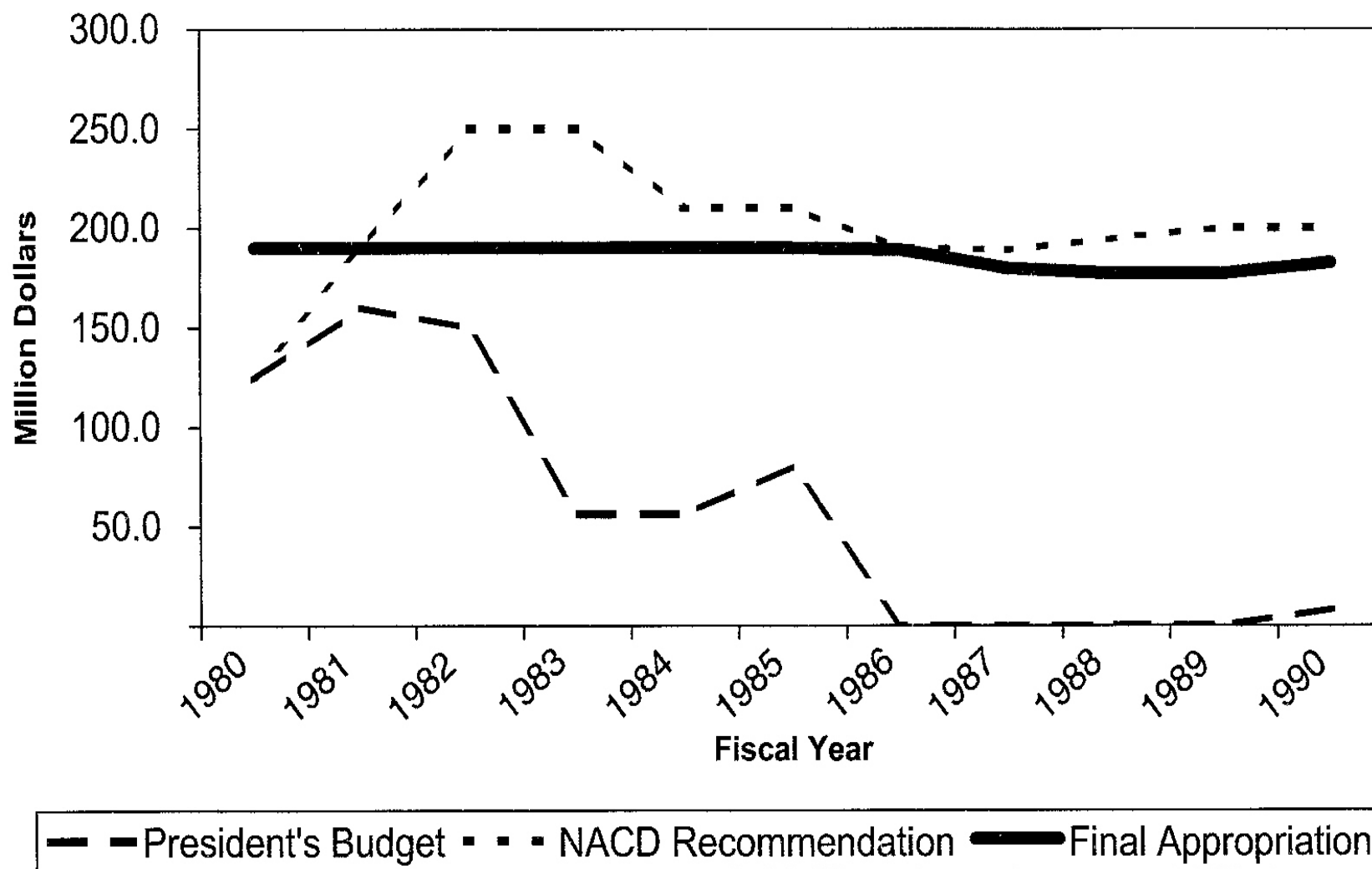




# Budget Battles

- 1981 – Reagan proposes 12% reduction in agency budgets
- 1984 – Administration proposes 21% cut in SCS and 63% cut in ASCS cost-share programs.
- 1986 – Administration proposes phase out of all conservation programs.
- 1987 – Administration proposes 50% cut in SCS programs and termination of ASCS cost-share programs.
- Through the decade, Congress maintained program funding due, in part, from pressure from district officials.

## Budgets for the Agricultural Conservation Program in the 1980's





# The 1985 Farm Bill

- New Approach – Conservation Compliance
- New Programs
  - Sodbuster, Swampbuster
  - Conservation Reserve
- Expanded Workload
  - All highly erodible croplands need conservation plan by January 1, 1990.
  - All plans to be implemented by January 1, 1995
- Overwhelmed, SCS and Districts were criticized for lack of progress and USDA was faulted for lack of enforcement.



# The 1996 Farm Bill

- New Programs
  - EQIP – Environmental Quality Incentives Program
  - WHIP – Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program
  - Grazing Lands Conservation Program
- Modified or Re-authorized
  - Swampbuster
  - Conservation Compliance
  - Forestry Incentives Program
  - Resource Conservation & Development Program





# 2002 Farm Bill

- Conservation Security Program
  - A form of the “Green Ticket” idea, 20 years later.
  - A first effort in the conservation program to encourage people to go beyond basic levels of “conservation for protection’s sake.”
  - It strikes at the question: “Can the U.S. meet the needs of a growing population if all it does is prevent damage, or must we seek a higher standard?”
- EQIP – major growth
  - Conservation Innovation Grants



# Major Changes in 25 Years

- NRCS – much more involved in program administration
  - Larger programs, broader program goals
  - Staff and budget constraints continue
- Conservation districts
  - No longer able to rely on NRCS to provide technical assistance to landowners.
  - More state, local and privately funded staff at district level.



# The Challenge

- NRCS must demonstrate that the conservation program meets national goals and needs
- Districts must demonstrate that the conservation program is relevant to local needs.
- These are seldom the same.
- Local demands, if loud enough, may mean more Congressional earmarks to meet specific demands.
- A continuing budget target, and potential future fatality, is the NRCS' technical assistance program, which meets district needs but gets easily diverted to national targets.



# The Future

- An innovative conservation program, mixing federal, state, and local interests to reach private landowners, must continue to change as it has changed for 75 years.
- We can expect the pace of technological, economic, and social change to continue, if not increase, in the future.
- There is no “solution,” only a continued search for the best approaches to promoting social goals in a democratic society.