

Preface

Since the early stirrings of public concern over the waste and destruction of America's bountiful natural resources in the early 1900s, thousands of people and hundreds of organizations have worked to shape and mold the complex soil and water conservation programs of today. Telling their story in any kind of comprehensive way would be the work of many, many books.

This book takes one thread of that story and follows it for the last quarter century. The nearly 3,000 conservation districts that operate at the local level, managed by volunteer conservation leaders and staffed by a diverse group of local, state, and federal employees, have been at the operating end of the national soil and water conservation effort since the 1940s. In addition to working with landowners to encourage conservation management, they have formed state, regional and national associations to provide the voice needed to express their concerns and needs to public policymakers.

The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) has been representing the interests of conservation districts for more than 60 years. NACD has had a national office in Washington, DC, for the past half century, and their top executives (of which there have now been five) have been deeply involved in the legislative and agency actions affecting the federal soil and water conservation programs. The chronicle of the NACD's first quarter century was contained in an earlier book—*For Love of the Land*—and this book looks at the recent quarter century. Together, the two embrace all but the most recent developments.

During that time, many federal laws have been enacted, regulations developed, funds appropriated, and programs administered, altered, and abandoned. But the task is never completed. Public opinions and priorities change, advancing science and technology open new opportunities, or create new challenges, and the global flows of economic activity and trade affect every public and private land manager's decisions on an almost-daily basis. New challenges constantly demand new responses.

The soil and water conservation program has developed as a complex, multilayered interaction between federal, state and local government. The Department of Agriculture, through its agencies, manages most of the federal programs designed to encourage private landowners to provide conservation treatment to their soil, water and related resources. In so doing, they work in partnership with other federal agencies and programs, state agencies and the local conservation districts. It is at the local offices (usually serving an area about the size of a county) where landowners actually encounter federal conservation programs—signing up for participation, seeking technical assistance and trying to adapt the program's requirements to the actual problems they face on their land.

Often, unfortunately, the federal "solutions" aren't always the solution they promise to be. Congress passes legislation with laudable goals and high promise, only to starve it to death with budgets that fail to cover even minimal needs. Expectations created in the political process are squelched, and conservationists around the country are angered by the failure. That anger is heard in Washington, where leaders too often spend their energy trying to assign blame to others. It's either one political party blaming the other, Congress blaming the Administration (or vice-versa) or interest groups blaming each other. Meanwhile, conservation programs and agencies remain budget-starved, and the struggle to meet conservation needs in the countryside continues to challenge the people and organizations on the front lines.

A national advocacy organization like NACD occupies a precarious middle ground in these continuing political challenges and debates. Great effort goes into getting a new, improved or enlarged conservation program into legislation such as the Farm Bill. Volunteers are energized, promises made and expectations are raised.

But the fight is far from over, and the continual battle for program funding may go on for years. If that ongoing battle isn't successful, or if the national program and its priorities fail to match what is needed in a particular location, those promises made in the enactment phase ring hollow to many of the people involved in the daily effort.

It is in these multi-year budget and appropriations campaigns that NACD has proven itself invaluable to the conservation districts. Since 1980, there have been several attempts to completely dismantle the national soil and water conservation program. Presidents and their budget advisors have tried to eliminate programs or agencies through zero budgets; Congress has tried to reorganize major programs in ways that would essentially remove conservation districts from an effective role, replacing local priority-setting with federal priorities. Throughout those challenges, NACD has maintained a focus on the importance of local self-government, expressed by a major role for local officials in setting local priorities for program action.

Not surprisingly, NACD has attracted a host of admirers and supporters over the years, as well as its share of detractors and opponents. The account that follows is not an attempt to judge, or dwell on the virtues of any particular person, action or organization. We've tried to tell what happened and how it unfolded. The positive and constructive actions will prove themselves in history, as accomplishments speak for themselves. The efforts that didn't work will vanish from the scene.

This book's goal is to provide a reference for people involved in soil and water conservation today and tomorrow. What they encounter today carries its own history, and by understanding that history, they may be better able to understand and carry out their current roles. In addition, many of them will become part of future efforts to refine, improve, update, and implement the conservation programs in which they are involved. We wish them the very best, and hope that improved knowledge of this history contributes to their success.

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