

HISTORY, ORGANIZAION, POLICIES, FUNCTIONS AND ADMINISTRATION OF THE SOIL CONSERVATION SERVICE

Delivered by Hugh J. Dowdle, Assistant State Conservationist, at Columbia, SC, August 1, 1951, to new employees of the Soil Conservation Service as part of orientation training course.

INTRODUCTION:

To me, this is a big subject for such a little person. It was first assigned to Dr. Buie, later to Mr. Sargent and then to me. I could not pass it on down. Some preacher said, “Not many souls are saved after the first twenty minutes.” The program calls for one hour – that leaves forty minutes of “non-soul saving” time or free wheeling.

You have just heard our able regional training officer outline in a very complete and instructive manner the organization of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. As was illustrated, the Soil Conservation Service is a bureau within the USDA. Therefore, our organization, the one you and I represent, is commonly referred to as the U.S. Soil Conservation Service.

History

Some of you think of history as dragging out of the closet a dust-covered, time-scarred, crumbling skeleton. This is not rue of the SCS. We are a young vigorous working organization. In discussing the history of this organization, I would like to take you back to April 15, 1881, seventy years ago this past spring. On that date, the “daddy” of modern soil conservation was born – Hugh Hammond Bennett – on a farm in Anson County, North Carolina. He entered the University of North Carolina in 1897, dropped out two years to earn expenses, and graduated in 1903.

Period of Discovery 1903-1918

The period 1903-1918 has been referred to as the “period of discovery”. Dr. Bennett started mapping soils at 7:30 am July 1, 1903, in Davidson County, Tennessee. His salary at that time was the fabulous sum of \$83.33 per month. In 1905, Bennett and W.E. McLendon of Bishopville, South Carolina, discovered the profound process of sheet erosion. Next, Dr. Bennett in 1911 made a survey of Fairfield County, South Carolina, and discovered that 90,000 acres of once good cropland was mapped as “rough gullied land.” 46,000 additional acres were indicated as “meadow” – wet and subject to frequent overflow. At one time these 46,000 acres, too, were regarded as the best land in the state. A total of 136,000 acres in one county destroyed for cultivation.

1918-1933 – Education and Research Period

During this period, this man Bennett became outspoken and prolific in writing and talking about soil erosion. He presented papers and wrote some books focusing attention on this problem of erosion.

On December 18, 1928, Congress appropriated \$160,000 for starting a national program of research in soil erosion and means for control and prevention.

In December 1929, ten erosion experiment stations were set up. The first of the ten was located at Guthrie, Oklahoma. The others were at Temple and Tyler, Texas; Hays, Kansas; La Crosse, Wisconsin; Pullman, Washington; Clarinda, Iowa; Bethany, Missouri; Zanesville, Ohio; and Statesville, North Carolina. These stations were located by broad problem areas. They were set up to study, among other things, soil and water loss in relationship to slope and ground cover. Even though these stations were slow in giving their findings, they have supplied the scientific basis for modern land treatment.

Action of the Land 1933 to

On the 19th of September 1933, Dr. H.H. Bennett became the director of the first erosion control agency ever set up by an important nation in all history. On that day, he was the only employee on the staff. The agency which he headed was known as the Soil Erosion Service. It was set up in the Department of Interior and was established as a relief agency. Soon after this time, Dr. T. S. Buie was selected as director of the Southeastern states with headquarters in Spartanburg. It was the thought of many that since this Soil Erosion Service was a relief agency that they should spend all the money they could get their hands on. Dr. Buie did not feel this was about it. It was both Bennett's and Buie's idea to have something to show for the money spent. This emergency work got under way on a demonstrational project basis. The size of these projects varied from 20,000-30,000 to 100,000 acres. Many of these demonstrational projects were located on a watershed basis. As we now see the picture, these demonstration areas were merely field laboratories for training men and trying out methods of erosion control. The first project in South Carolina was the South Tyger River project located in Spartanburg and Greenville Counties. Following this, the Fishing Creek project at Rock Hill was started. In 1935, the Anderson, Newberry, and Lancaster projects were set up. The last project to be set up in South Carolina was at St. Matthews in the upper coastal plain.

There were 15 CCC camps scattered over the Piedmont area. A large portion of this labor was used on project areas. In the spring of 1935, the Service hired a number of college men as trainees. These were known locally as "the gully crew." They were paid 40¢ per hour and went to school two or three nights per week on their own. From this group came many of our present technicians.

The projects and camps were well staffed even though many of the staff members were undergoing training. Much of the work done was a trial and error basis. Some of it, however, was based on data obtained from our erosion experiment stations. Personnel of the Soil Erosion Service from the chief on down profited by mistakes. In those days, the farmer was given seed, fertilizer, planting materials and labor. The farm plans or agreements in the early days were between the farmer and the United States government.

The 74th Congress passed Public Law 46 on April 27, 1935. This law set up the Soil Conservation Service as a permanent bureau in the Department of Agriculture. Since 1935, Congress has supplemented the soil conservation act with other laws.

On February 27, 1937, President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote to each governor in the 48 states suggesting that they enact legislation making possible the creation of farmer-controlled soil conservation districts. To the president's letter were attached copies of a Standard State Soil Conservation Districts Law with a memorandum summarizing its basic provisions. South Carolina got busy and on April 15, 1937 the General Assembly enacted Law 182 known as the South Carolina Soil Conservation Districts Law. Since that time, this law has been amended twice. The first amendment made possible subdividing multiple-county districts. The second amendment, passed this year, made possible the setting up of a Soil Conservation Committee composed of five farmer-District Supervisors and abolished the old committee which was composed of the heads of three agency representatives, namely; the Director of Extension, the Director of the Experiment Station, and the State Conservationist of the Soil Conservation Service.

So far as history is concerned, it might be of interest to know that Mr. J. B. Douthit of Pendleton, South Carolina, is the oldest Soil Conservation District Supervisor in point of service in the United States. He has served continuously since August 16, 1937. Smilie Johnson of Rome, Georgia, is the next oldest, serving since September 17, 1937.

The Chief of the Soil Conservation Service recently referred to the soil conservation district movement as being "The greatest land movement in the history of this country."

Organization of the Soil Conservation Service

The Soil Conservation Service is organized especially to give the most help possible to soil conservation districts. (Use chart to show organization from the top down). The national office is in Washington D.C. The United States is divided into seven regional offices. The state conservationist administers SCS activities in each of the 48 states. He has two or more assistants and a small business staff to handle clerical and administrative details for the field headquarters in his state. He does not have a technical staff. Technical help is obtained from the regional office through regional division chiefs, zone conservationists, and technical specialists. SCS spends more than 92% of its money on direct assistance to farmers and less than 8% on overhead necessary to enable the field men to do their jobs.

Policies, Functions, and Administration of the Soil Conservation Service Policies and functions:

In August 1945, the basic policies and functions of the SCS were set forth:

"It is the policy of the Service to:

1. Maintain a coordinated technical approach to problems of soil and water conservation and land use.

This policy is based upon the belief that:

- a. Problems of soil and water conservation and land use can be solved by applying all appropriate branches of agricultural knowledge, employed not singly but collectively, according to the needs and capabilities of the land, in a combination of integrated control measures.
- b. Each acre of each farm, ranch or other unit of land should be treated in accordance with its needs and capabilities.
- c. Technical assistance should be provided on the land itself by conservation technicians who constantly keep in mind the whole farm and its economy.

The policy of SCS today is to work through soil conservation districts. We now have 36 in South Carolina and over 2,300 in the United States.

Some things that should be done to carry out the above broad policy:

1. Get farmers and others to understand and appreciate the soil conservation district approach to solving soil and water conservation problems.
2. Help Supervisors prepare and keep current their Programs and Work Plans.
3. Motivate and develop Soil Conservation District Supervisors.
4. Make land capability surveys on as many acres as possible.
5. Get farmers and others to understand the Department's Basic Objective which is "The use of each acre of agricultural land within its capabilities and the treatment of each acre of agricultural land in accordance with its needs for protection and improvement."
6. Keep in mind our goal is to get each and every acre of land used within its capabilities and treated according to needs – attaining the Basic Objective.
7. Develop new methods and techniques and improve on present methods and techniques of planning, applying and maintaining practices. Examples: new type farm plans – Advance and Initial; also Plan of Operations and other phases of the Work Improvement System.
8. Find neighborhood groups and work with them through their accepted leaders.
9. Assemble and disseminate useful information. Some examples of this might be total conservation needs based on problem areas, trends in land use and progress made on job.

10. Assist Supervisors in routing District – owned equipment.
11. Write, and get published, timely news items.
12. Maintain working relations with:
 - a. Other agricultural agencies
 - b. Business and civic groups
 - c. Schools, editors of local papers, ministerial groups, etc.
13. Promote conservation education:
 - a. Appear on program of civic clubs – radio, schools, take groups on see-and-learn field trips. Study on-the-ground complete soil and water conservation program.
14. Help individual farmers plan, apply and maintain soil and water conservation practices.
15. Keep accurate records and make reports that reflect accomplishments.

The Soil Conservation Service expects all employees to:

1. Follow established time-tested methods.
2. Do things promptly and willingly.
3. Be sincere and devoted to duty.
4. Be thorough.
5. Write official letters or take other official action through channels. This is a good way to stay out of trouble.
6. Be a part of the community where you work and become a reputable citizen. Remember, to your neighbors, you are the SCS.
7. Go to your immediate supervisor with your grievances and troubles.
8. Work safely and keep healthy. A sick or inured employee can't get the job done.

In closing, I would like to impress on each and every one that in the SCS, the administrative officers and your immediate supervisor have at heart your interest and well being. Remember, our employees are not regimented. Feel free at all times to express your ideas. All of the worthwhile things accomplished by our organization in the short time it has been in existence represent group or collective thinking. It is human nature for each of us to think our job is the hardest. I would like to leave two quotes with you (1) "It is truly said – the knowledge of burdens

that others carry gives us courage to bear our own.” and (2) “Let us be kind one to another for we are all fighting a hard battle.”