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The Way It Was

A History of the Soil Conservation Service in Idaho, 1935-1985

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the Natural Resources Conservation Service/Soil Conservation Service.

Our conservation story here in Idaho began in 1938 when our first state conservationist entered on duty at Moscow. A year later the Idaho Legislature passed a law to allow creation of our state's soil conservation districts.

This history of the Soil Conservation in Idaho, first published in April 1985, features a panel of conservation pioneers who took a journey backward through the years to reflect on the early days of conservation work in our state.

We feel it appropriate to reprint this history in honor of our 60th anniversary so current employees will have the opportunity to learn and review the fascinating story of "the way it was" and how the conservation movement began and grew in our state. The challenges they faced in those early days were as great, if not greater, than those we face today.

Panel members interviewed by public affairs specialist Sharon Norris for this history included:

Norman A. Berg, Chief of the Soil Conservation Service from 1979 until his retirement in 1981. He began his SCS career in February 1943 at Downey, Idaho, as a junior soil conservationist. He enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps in September 1943. He returned to SCS in 1946 and became work unit conservationist at Pocatello. In 1950 he was named acting district conservationist for southeastern Idaho, responsible for SCS people in the Portneuf, Oneida, and Bear Lake Soil

Conservation Districts--and for organizing districts in the rest of the area. He left Idaho in 1955 to attend Harvard University and in 1956 was assigned to South Dakota. He served in several key positions in the SCS National Office from 1960 to 1979. He is a charter member of the Soil and Water Conservation Society and the Society's R.N. Irving Chapter, Idaho. He currently lives in Maryland.

Melvin R. Carlson began his career with SCS in 1944 at Worley, Idaho, as a soil conservationist. In 1946 he transferred to St. Maries where he became work unit conservationist in 1949. In 1952 he transferred to the Moscow Area Office as forester. In 1963 he became woodland conservationist in the State Office, Boise. Mel retired June 1974 and resides in Boise. He and his wife, Zilda, were Earth Team volunteers for many years, working with environmental education programs.

Forrest H. Closner started his SCS career at Weiser, Idaho, in February 1943 as a junior range conservationist. He served in the military from 1945 to 1946. In 1949, he became work unit conservationist at Weiser. In 1957 he transferred to the work unit office at Moscow. In August 1957, he was reassigned as area conservationist at Twin Falls. In 1965 he transferred to Pocatello as area conservationist. He became watershed-river basin planning staff leader in the State Office, Boise, in 1966. He retired April 1983 and resides in Boise.

R. Neil Irving graduated from the University of Idaho in 1921 and began his professional career as county agency in Coeur d'Alene in January 1922. On December 1, 1938, he entered on duty with SCS as state coordinator, headquartered as Moscow. His title later changed to state conservationist; SCS headquarters moved to Boise in July 1942.

When Irving retired on March 23, 1959, he had led the agency for over 20 years and had seen SCS grow in Idaho from 24 employees to 188--and from no soil conservation districts to 51. He worked with the Idaho Legislature in 1939 to convince them to pass the state law authorizing organization of soil conservation districts. He served as advisory member and recording secretary of the Idaho Soil Conservation Commission. He guided the formation of the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts in 1944. Under this leadership, the first auxiliary of any state association of districts was organized in November 1948 at Weiser.

Irving resides in Coeur d'Alene.

Luther Jones started work with an SCS unit out of Albuquerque, New Mexico, called the TCBIA (Technical Cooperation Bureau of Indian Affairs) in 1935 as a junior agronomist. He was assigned to the Ft. Hall Indian Reservation in August 1937. In the SCS reorganization of 1940, he was reassigned to the area office at Pocatello. In July 1940 he transferred to Montpelier as district agronomist, the first SCS technician in the Bear Lake Soil Conservation District. He helped district supervisors start their program and work plan, write farm plans, and helped with grass seedings.

In August 1942 Luke transferred to the work unit office at Twin Falls where he represented SCS on five USDA county war boards and wrote Extension plans for demonstration purposes. He became area conservationist at Twin Falls in 1953. Four years later he became state resource conservationist in the State Office, Boise. He retired May 1971; passed away August 22, 1993.

James M. Rabdau went to work at an Emergency Conservation Work Camp, under technical direction of the Soil Erosion Service, near Troy, Idaho, in the spring of 1933. In 1935, he became camp superintendent of the Civilian Conservation Corps camp at Moscow. Before going to Moscow, he was CCC camp foreman at Worley.

Jim transferred from CCC to SCS in August 1942 and became a soil conservationist at Genesee and later work unit conservationist. He moved to Moscow as work unit conservationist in 1952. In 1956 he became area conservationist at Moscow. In 1963 he transferred to Idaho

Falls as area conservationist and in 1966 moved to Boise as area conservationist. He retired in July 1970 and passed away October 11, 1993.

Question: The Idaho Legislature passed a law in March 1939 to allow creation of the state's 51 soil conservation districts. What role did SCS play in organizing these districts?

Irving:

SCS personnel were active in promoting and encouraging the organization of soil conservation districts. After district supervisors organized the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts, they did a lot of promotion to organize districts on their own.

Rabdau:

Before we discuss the role of SCS in organizing districts, we must realize that the district law had to be passed in Idaho. The reason it had to be passed was that SCS couldn't work on private land unless there was a district. While SCSers were working with farmers in the Conservation Civilian Corps (CCC) designated areas, Neil Irving was working round the clock in Boise trying to convince the Legislature to pass the State Soil Conservation District Law. It was a hard job. Many counties in the State knew nothing of SCS or that they had an erosion problem.

SCS personnel had a big role in organizing districts, the biggest actually. Extension Service was charged with getting out the information on the value of districts. As new districts were organized, SCS personnel were moved in. District supervisors and conservation farmers and ranchers did a lot to spread the good news of districts. And so, eventually, the entire State was blanketed with districts. Whoever figured out the district idea was a wise person indeed. Without the grass roots, nonpartisan basis of districts, SCS would have been gone many years ago. And because of districts, SCS will continue.

Closner:

When I transferred from Weiser to Twin Falls in 1957 as area conservationist, Neil Irving told me my first responsibility was to promote and help organize districts in that part of the State.

For the next 10 years, I spent a large share of my time doing that by organizing steering committees, meeting with groups of farmers and ranchers to discuss districts, organizing hearings, and then working with the board of supervisors and the SCS district conservationist to get the district functioning.

As SCS employees, we were mostly in the background doing the leg work. That period of my career was a round-the-clock job, as I did more work after 5 PM than I did during the day.

Jones:

SCS worked with organizing committees of local farmers to explain the district law and the procedure for organizing districts during educational meetings of local people in the proposed district. We also explained the technical help we could provide through the district and the value of conservation plans on farms and ranches. After the district was voted in, SCS people worked with the new district board of supervisors to develop a program and work plan, as required by the state law. This work required several meetings over a period of time. Other agencies were also invited to explain how they could help the district carry out a soil and water conservation program within their boundaries.

Carlson:

The role SCS played in organizing districts was one of intense education with key farmers and legislators developing an awareness of the conservation problems on crop, range, and woodlands. SCS conservationists, with little technical background but a lot of dedication to the principle of land stewardship, found and developed agricultural leaders that would support the district movement.

Question: How did farmers and ranchers react to the idea of forming districts? How about other agencies?

Irving:

A number of farmers and ranchers opposed the idea of forming districts some for political reasons, and some just to be against something.

SCS personnel were instructed to seek cooperation and help from the Extension Service, Forest Service, and other federal agencies in providing information to local areas about districts. Some agencies weren't too enthusiastic; others helped a good deal. Usually, though, we got good results.

Jones:

Generally, farmers and ranchers were favorable to districts. The earlier districts were organized in problem areas, and farmers were looking for technical help with flooding problems, laying out and constructing irrigation systems, and conserving irrigation water.

The reaction of other agencies varied from county to county. Since Extension Service wasn't a line and staff organization, county agents varied in their reaction and cooperation. Some agents saw the need for districts and helped in their organization. Others opposed districts, not too openly, because they had a responsibility according to the state law to help organize districts with meetings and educational programs. Other agencies like the Forest Service, Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, Farmers Home Administration and others were usually in favor of districts.

Closner:

Many farmers and ranchers were enthusiastic about organizing districts in their area. They helped organize educational meetings, talked it up among themselves, opened their homes for small group meetings, and often provided refreshments.

Most agencies were favorable toward district organization and often helped by answering questions in meetings and discussed districts and their function when they had the opportunity. For the most part, Extension Service and Bureau of Reclamation were openly opposed to districts. Some county agents, however, were great supporters of districts.

Rabdau:

Idaho's first district, Latah, just barely squeaked through. All precincts in Latah County had a favorable vote except the Genesee precinct. There it was voted down. The editor of the local paper and a prominent farmer stood next to the voting area and told everyone who came in to vote that they were voting on something that was unconstitutional. I didn't know of this until years later after both of these men had become my very good friends. By then, the editor gladly improved and published the conservation news items I wrote. And the farmer had a sound conservation plan on his farm and applied many practices.

Carlson:

To my way of thinking, the development of the idea of districts was rather slow. Part of it was our (SCS) fault, as we had a difficult time being both technicians and politicians.

The Extension Service was alarmed at the ability of SCSers in working with farmers. They claimed education was their business and gave some resistance in district organization by influencing farmers in their voting.

Question: Some districts didn't get organized until the 1950s and early 1960s. Why were some areas of Idaho so slow to organize?

Irving:

It is interesting to note that the last counties to organize were the sparsely settled areas and/or areas where land owners had large livestock holdings and were afraid there were some things they didn't understand that could be a detriment to them and their mode of operation.

Jones:

Areas that were late in district organization were mostly the more productive and wealthy counties. Twin Falls County, other than the Salmon Tract, and Canyon County were very prosperous areas. The farmers were more independent. They mostly opposed any government help. But as districts in adjacent counties demonstrated effective conservation practices being successfully applied, they saw the need for districts and finally began to organize. Conservation programs were also good business, because water was expensive in deep-well pump irrigated areas and saving it through conservation saved money.

Closner:

Soil conservation was relatively a new thing to most farmers and ranchers. The educational job needed was much greater than I think anyone realized. District organization wasn't an easy job. It took hours of effort to inform and educate people about the value of districts and their function. To get and keep the district movement in the proper setting, it was our policy to encourage steering committees to go slow and be sure there was good strong support before they called for a referendum. This was often a slow process.

If a large number of districts had been organized in a short time, SCS would have had an impossible situation trying to service them satisfactorily--and this was necessary for their success.

I remember when I went to Twin Falls that Neil Irving sat down with me and we developed target dates for district organization in the rest of that area. It covered a time frame of several years. Neil never seemed to be in a rush to see a district organized. His concern was that farmers and ranchers were ready for a district.

Opposition to district organization was strong in some areas. I think it took four referendums in the Balanced Rock area of Twin Falls before the vote was favorable. It wasn't until the death of the leader of the opposition that the district finally organized.

Rabdau:

There were many reasons why some areas were slow to organize districts. One reason was that farmers and ranchers didn't recognize they had a soil erosion or water loss problem. In some counties people were very conservative and very independent. They wanted to do things when they wanted to, where they wanted to, and if they wanted to--with no advice from some bureaucrat. District organization wasn't easy. Those stout hearts who got the district law passed and subsequently got the state blanketed in districts were something else. They worked hard (and liked to play hard too)!

Berg:

By the early 1950s, Idaho felt the impact of actions in some states like Missouri who fought the formation of districts. I found a mix of misinformation being circulated. The younger farmers back from World War II were open and receptive to soil conservation. Agency representatives at the local level were careful about opposing what their farmers and ranchers wanted. I was informed by a representative of Chief Bennett that my job as a district conservationist was to be certain that voters understood the value of local districts. My area in southeastern Idaho was the first in the state to have full coverage of districts. Several areas struggled into the 1960s to organize their local districts.

Question: How do the conservation problems of 40 and 50 years ago differ from today's problems?

Closner:

Really the problems are much the same. We still have erosion, needed drainage, over-grazing, etc. But we have learned a great deal about solutions to conservation problems since then.

When I first went to work in Weiser, soil erosion was the main concern during the 14 years I was there, both irrigation and drainage problems were given more consideration as major conservation problems in the area.

I remember the first land leveling job we laid out in the Weiser River SCD. The farmer worked and worked with a farm tractor and a small scraper to level five acres. He was thrilled with how easy it was to irrigate after he leveled it.

Then came sprinkler irrigation systems and the conversion of dry cropland and rangeland to irrigated land. The conservation practice of planting and irrigating potatoes on the contour in eastern Idaho is now a practice of the past.

Jones:

Conservation problems of 40 and 50 years ago and today differ only in degree. We still have about the same kinds of erosion occurring, but in less degree. Recently, SCS has seen the need to stress soil loss again as we did in earlier times. We need to continue to point out and emphasize actual soil loss and its effects on productivity and the environment.

Berg:

Fifty years ago the Nation was concerned about the Dust Bowl and gully problems. However, Idaho still has many of the same problems on dry cropland, rangeland, and irrigated land faced 40 and 50 years ago. Conservation tillage, the outgrowth of decades of emphasis on residue management and stubble mulch work, does show promise. Obviously our technology in all fields is greatly improved. Concern for water quality has much improved both on and off-farm impacts. We now have better plant materials and engineering techniques. However, the work force at the field level is down.

Rabdau:

The conservation problem is still with us. SCS has better information now, has better know-how about getting conservation on the land, and has far better equipment available to get the job done. But at the moment, farmers are faced with many problems of over production, expensive machinery, high prices for fuel and fertilizer, insecticides, and pesticides. And need for larger operating units both for production efficiency and for space to turn around their monstrous equipment.

In October 1932 I drove down to Pullman to watch a college football game. It was getting dark when we started back to Spokane, but I could read in the car all the way from the light of burning stubble on both sides of the road. It was a glorious sight. That was the common fall practice to get rid of stubble so fall plowing could be done, and at the same time, burn up weed seeds. Little did I realize that within a few years I would be talking farmers out of burning stubble and succeeding on the Idaho side of the Palouse.

Carlson:

The one big problem we had in the Palouse 50 years ago was the burning of straw. Huge smoke clouds obscured the sun and left the soil bare to winter rains. I worked through the period when conservationists were inventors and gave many ideas to farmers for handling their straw and to equipment dealers interested in developing machinery to handle it.

Question: What kinds of conservation work were going on in Idaho before the establishment of SCS and formation of districts?

Berg:

It depends upon how "conservation" is defined. Some research and Extension Service work did promote crop rotations, limited soil testing, range seeding, and primitive irrigation improvements; not much else.

Irving:

Fifty years ago many Palouse farms were riddled with gully erosion, leaving as much as six feet or more of a perpendicular wall of black loam which each rainstorm enlarged. It was successfully demonstrated these could be curbed and that farm machinery could again cross on smooth ground from one ridge to the other. Farmers were able to see the sense to such a program and requested help from SCS conservationists to plan and install protective measures. To speed up the planning and establishment of practices, it was conceived that districts should be organized with supervisors in charge to promote conservation on a systematic basis, farm by farm.

Jones:

About the only kind of conservation work going on in Idaho before districts was from the soil erosion experiment stations, CCC camps, Farmers Home Administration's water facility plans, and a few Extension Service farm plans that we developed in the early days as demonstration plans.

We discovered in the irrigated areas that farmers accepted erosion as just a part of irrigation. In fact, SCS didn't consider irrigated areas as problems, because they were flat lands. Actually irrigation erosion was more severe in terms of soil loss than on the dry cropland areas. It was also a loss of some of our more productive and expensive land.

To my knowledge, none of the burns on rangeland had been reseeded to adapted grasses and were left to erode and return to cheatgrass, a continual fire hazard in the early days.

Question: What were the most popular conservation practices of the 1940s?

Berg:

Contouring, land shaping for better irrigation, range improvement, grassed waterways, drainage, crop rotations, reservoir and canal repairs, water conservation, and fire protection. We didn't have watershed protection and flood prevention, resource conservation and

development, inventory and monitoring, non-point source pollution, or any tie to the Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP). We did have the Plant Materials Center, snow surveys, and soil surveys.

Closner:

The conservation practices of the 1940s were those for erosion control primarily: grassed waterways, contour strips, lots of windbreak plantings, irrigation ditches lined with rock masonry, concrete drop structures, and grass seeding of mostly abandoned cropland.

Carlson:

The most popular conservation practices on Palouse croplands were the use of sweet clover grass for fertilizer and the handling of heavy straw cover in tillage. Woodland farmers were interested in good harvest management and the intermediate cuttings that could be profitably cut.

Question: How did World War II and the need to produce more food affect conservation work in Idaho? Is there any particular part of the state where more problems occurred than others?

Berg:

First, World War II pulled many of the younger SCS career people (like myself) into the military, and the work slowed down. The all-out push for food and fiber did stress the resource base. We are still coping with the problems of some highly erodible land that was converted from good range and pasture land to grain production. Many of these crop acres have been subsidized by federal farm policy whenever grain is in surplus and acreage diversion programs like Payment-in-Kind (PIK) are needed. The cycles are frequent.

Irving:

World War II proved a deterrent to the conservation movement. More food was required. Fewer people and machines were available to do the job. Lack of SCS technical personnel resulted in producing less efficiently. Some double cropping occurred like injecting a spring crop in a summer fallow area in lieu of a year of rest for rejuvenating the land.

Closner:

Some grass seedings in the dry cropland area of the Weiser River SCD were plowed up to plant grain. The emphasis also resulted in shorter rotations of crops, with more grain and less soil-conserving crops. There was less farm labor and short cuts in farming that are never conducive to soil conservation.

Jones:

The need for increased production during the War caused more erosion, and many areas that had been planted to grass were plowed out again. Native grass lands in southern and eastern Idaho were also plowed out and put into grain fallow areas. Many of these areas were abandoned after four or five years, and production started to decline. Lands were left idle and continued to erode. Grain areas were planted fence-to-fence and expanded to steep lands and poor soil areas which eroded more severely. Overall, erosion was worse.

Carlson:

World War II affected timber markets, and there was a rash of overcutting. Timber became very valuable and profitable to the farmer. SCS foresters had the opportunity to sell management and stress proper timber harvest, but thinning and intermediate cuttings were very hard to sell to farmers. They could see the immediate profit from selling harvested trees and were reluctant to save smaller trees for future cuts. Overcutting was the greatest problem that SCS foresters had to deal with.

Rabdau:

On the Palouse, crop prices were real good, and farmers had lots of money. I remember a farmer who bought a half section of land and paid for it with his first pea crop. He bought the land for less than \$200 an acre.

Of course, districts were just being formed during World War II, and many districts weren't organized until after the war was over. Also, many SCSers went into the war and weren't replaced until it was over. The number one purpose was to raise food for the war effort, and prices were good too. So when there were SCS conservationists, they had to be careful not to promote a conservation practice that would reduce crop yields. Lots of stubble burning took place so it wouldn't reduce crop yields. However, in Latah County reduced stubble burning and increases in seeding legumes and grasses did occur between 1942 and 1946.

Question: SCS helped districts obtain surplus military equipment after World War II. How was it used in conservation work? Did it do a lot of good?

Irving:

We did help districts obtain the equipment and suggested operating procedures. The equipment resulted in increased activity in a number of districts. Some of the equipment wasn't of much value because of prior neglect and abuse. The policy of helping obtain such

equipment was rescinded about 1958 or 1959, about the time availability ceased to exist.

Berg:

The equipment was used for construction type work, land leveling, ditch realignments, some terracing, and pond work. Some districts sold the equipment and used the money to provide office space rent-free to SCS. Use of the equipment set some good examples until private initiative took over.

Jones:

This equipment was used effectively in land leveling, ditch work, and pond construction that required heavier equipment than the average farmer used. In the early days there weren't any contractors doing this type of work, so it provided an important step in carrying out needed conservation practices called for in the farm plan.

The equipment also provided districts with a source of funds that was badly needed, and made district supervisors feel they had a going concern. Back then districts didn't have any funds to operate. Supervisors usually had to donate money for stamps.

Closner:

At first, the equipment was only loaned to districts by SCS, and its use was restricted to conservation work. Later, the equipment was granted to districts.

Although the surplus equipment was often a problem, it did a lot of good. There weren't a lot of contractors around to do conservation work at that time. Land leveling and other dirt-moving conservation work wasn't popular or known, and the cost of applying conservation practices was a major factor. Districts could do the work a little cheaper, so dirt-moving practices were moved along at a faster rate. Their need and value were accepted by farmers sooner than they would have without it.

Rabdau:

District equipment helped in two ways. The district rented it out to farmers to do conservation work. And the money received gave the district some funds to attend meetings and conventions and promote conservation activities. Second, the land moving equipment, operated by districts, showed there was a new industry possible in the conservation contracting business such as stock pond building, land leveling, concrete ditches, pipelines, etc.

However, when districts had all that surplus equipment, especially at first, the local SCSer sure got involved with some extra work, like keeping track of the

equipment. Some fellows forgot what their jobs really were.

Question: Can you tell us about one or two events that you think significantly influenced soil and water conservation in Idaho?

Closner:

I think the most significant event was the organization of the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts. The other was the abolishment of the old SCS regional office setup and giving control to the state conservationist. Under the old regional offices, administration and decision-making were too far from the action. Conservation was picking up momentum. Changes and decisions needed to be made. The old regional offices functioned much like the state office functions now.

Rabdau:

Two events that influenced soil and water conservation in Idaho were Hugh Bennett's plea to Congress for establishment of the Soil Conservation Service (Soil Erosion Service then) and creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps and the CCC camps in Idaho.

Had Dr. Bennett not been ready at the right time--and had not the Midwest dust storm darkened the skies in Washington, D.C. while Bennett was talking--Congress may not have enacted the law creating SCS. This creation had to be a factor of conservation in Idaho.

The CCC camps in Idaho and throughout the nation made it possible to get conservation started on farmland. Because getting young men to work was an emergency, the camps were established without any delay. The first districts formed in Idaho were where CCC camps were established--Latah, Bear Lake, Portneuf, Squaw Creek, and Mayfield.

Carlson:

I believe the introduction of grasses from the soil conservation nursery at Pullman did wonders for erosion control, soil fertility, and raising grass seed as a crop. Grass was introduced into crop rotations which emphasized the organization of rotations.

Berg:

The formal linkage of SCS technical help and cost sharing through the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service's ACP in the early 1950s was a good move. Other important events were the organization of state associations of conservation districts and creation of the Soil Conservation Society of America to speak up for conservation. The Resources Conservation Act helped set priorities and developed public awareness.

Question: Tell us about the SCS organizational structure while you were working. How did it differ from today's structure?

Berg:

The major change was the wipe-out of the regional offices and the transfer of authority and staff to the SCS State offices. Today's SCS structure from above the district conservationist and area conservationist level is top heavy. That's why I tried to move five percent of the people back to the field.

Closner:

When I went to work for SCS there was an area organization called a district, with a district conservationist who was similar to the present-day area conservationist. The job was different, however, in that the district conservationist didn't have the authority the area conservationist has today. Conservation plans were more like contracts, a holdover from the CCC days. This soon changed.

Jones:

My first work in Idaho was with an SCS unit out of Albuquerque, New Mexico, called TCBI--Technical Cooperation Bureau of Indian Affairs. This was a complete technical unit composed of engineers, soil scientists, agronomists, foresters, etc., as the needs required.

Weldon "Tex" Perrin and I were assigned to the Ft. Hall Indian Reservation in August 1937. We were assigned directly to the Regional Office in Spokane. Perrin was a soil scientist and I was an agronomist. I made detailed agronomic maps of cropland by plane table and aerial contact prints, showing ownership and crop boundaries, and collected related information on irrigation, erosion, crops, and livestock. I prepared farm management plans for the cropland. All maps and plans were turned over to the superintendent of the Ft. Hall Reservation. In the SCS reorganization of 1940, the TCBI unit was phased out, and the technicians assigned to the SCS area in which they were working. Some of the SCS range conservationists were transferred to the Bureau of Land Management. I was reassigned to the eastern Idaho area office at Pocatello where I supervised agronomic work at the Downey and Preston CCC camps and the Malad Land Utilization Project.

Rabdau:

At the time we had the SCS regional offices, we had technicians from there who traveled in pairs, usually an engineer and an agronomist. We called them "zone zippers" as they had a zone in the region to cover. They

were excellent technicians, but sometimes showed up at the wrong time of the year to be helpful. It was a hell of a job for them, and they were away from home and traveling about 70 percent of the time.

In the spring of 1934, I was a foreman at the CCC camp near Troy, Idaho. One noon hour I was eating lunch on top of the lookout tower and looking west over the Palouse. While there, four or five men climbed up the tower and said hello to me and then started talking about a CCC camp being built near Moscow. Later when I saw pictures of Chief Bennett, Regional Conservator Rockie, and Assistant Chief Lowdermilk, I realized it was they who were on the tower with me that day. Two years later, I was the camp superintendent at the Moscow CCC camp. The camp was phased out in June 1942, and by that time several districts had been organized. During the summer and fall of 1942, four work unit offices were set up in Latah SCD--at Moscow, Troy, Kendrick, and Genesee. There was also a work unit conservationist for Potlatch, but he worked out of the Moscow office.

The state was divided up with districts. There was one district at Coeur d'Alene which was later moved to Lewiston. It serviced the four northern counties of the Panhandle, and the Lewiston office serviced the rest of the Panhandle as far as the southern boundary of Idaho County I think there were eight district offices in the state about 1955. The two districts in northern Idaho were combined into one, with Lewiston the headquarters, and called the area office. When I was promoted to area conservationist in 1956, instead of me moving to Lewiston, the office was moved to Moscow where it remains today.

Question: Did the Desert Land Entry Act influence our SCS workload? If so, how?

Closner:

The Veterans drawing for land in the Minidoka SCD really created problems for four or five years. I don't recall how many acres or how many farms were involved, but it included most all of the pump development above the canal north of Rupert. SCS laid out 90 percent of the irrigation systems as the land was cleared of sagebrush, leveled, and made ready for crops. Veterans came from all over the country and from all walks of life. Many had never farmed, and those who had didn't know what an irrigation shovel was. There wasn't half enough help to do the job that needed to be done. George Welch, Jack Walker, Bill Woody, and others worked long hours with little or no additional compensation--only the satisfaction of helping some desperate farmers with problems they knew little about.

If you drive through that area sometime, think that not long ago it was a vast area of sagebrush, jack rabbits, and a few trails. Few probably remember the role the Minidoka SCD and SCS had in shaping and developing those farms.

Jones:

The Desert Land Entry Act doubled or tripled the SCS workload, because it all came on at once. Everyone wanted irrigation systems planned.

We experienced this in the Minidoka SCD when war veterans drew for farms on the Minidoka Tract northwest of Rupert. The Bureau of Reclamation provided irrigation water for the area from deep well pumping. Veterans who got farms in the drawing were required to live on the land and develop it. The drawing was over a period of two or three years. Each group started to clear and reclaim their land immediately, so they all wanted help at once. Many of the veterans had never been on an irrigated farm, much less knew how to develop one.

George Welch was district conservationist and did an excellent job of organizing and carrying out a conservation program which turned out to be a cooperative one, with Extension Service and Bureau of Reclamation providing some technical help.

Jack Walker, engineer, proved to be the most valuable man on the crew in designing irrigation systems and land leveling for farm plans. He was fast and accurate.

Once the veterans started to disturb the dry desert soils, they had a severe wind erosion problem. It was dust storms all spring and summer, and mud in winter. Farmstead tree plantings were popular on many of the farms.

Question: Who were some of the people you worked with whom you recall as being very effective in carrying out their work?

Berg:

First, R. Neil Irving. He was the best supervisor and person I ever worked for and with on any problem in my career. Second, Hugh Hammond Bennett. He made SCS the respected agency it still is after 50 years. Third, fellow area conservationists Tom McGourin and Doug Hole. Fourth, R. Neil Sampson.

Irving:

Just about all the employees were very effective in carrying out their assignments. They were respected as individuals and as employees of SCS. They knew their business; therefore, they enjoyed the support and loyalty of their constituency.

Almost without exception, SCS employees were loyal to their agency and assignments. They worked long hours and put in time on weekends to help their farmer friends accomplish more and do a more efficient job of controlling erosion and other problems common to the area involved.

Carlson:

I'll list a few. Neil Irving did a very good job of handling and developing men in the SCS, as did Jim Rabdau. John Nicholas, Manning Onstott, and Larry Sorensen were soil conservationists who did more than their job required. Others include Verl Kaiser, Erosion Specialist; John Schwendiman, Plant Materials Specialist and Morley Nelson, snow survey supervisor.

To me, all people in SCS were effective. It was a special time. It took dedication, enthusiasm, technical skills, and an ability to get along with rural people. If you didn't have it or developed it, you quit or resigned.

Jones:

Most of the SCS people I worked with over the years were super and a special group. It's what made SCS a special agency to work for.

We had some of the best technical people in the business. Two of the zone zippers helpful to me were Wayne Austin, Agronomist, and Waldo Frandsen, Range Conservationist. They were tops in their fields and could talk to farmers and ranchers.

Waldo influenced the seeding of range lands and started ranchers to seeding their own lands. He had a wide experience in working with ranchers and could quote successful range work in other states and areas. One of the earlier seedings was established on the Breckenridge Ranch in the vicinity of Council.

Wayne Austin was a very effective technician in working with staff and talking with farmers. He assisted directly in developing technical guides.

Another was Dr. Hafenrichter, Regional Plant Materials Specialist. He was a national leader in plant materials and the selection of proper adapted species of grasses to fit soil use conditions.

Outstanding work unit conservationists in my area were Clarence Hedrick at Twin Falls and Harold Harris in Jerome. Hedrick had a wonderful quality of getting things done through other people.

Harold Harris was an active conservationist and carried out a top technical program. One event he was responsible for was the organization and directing of a Farm-In-a-Day demonstration in the North Side SCD.

There was a very active group of SCD supervisors in Area III, as board members and as individuals. Don Fredericksen was active in organizing the Gooding

SCD and helping in other SCDs in the area. He was Chairman of the Gooding SCD Board for several years and was President of IASCD. He was a representative to the NACD and his wife, Pearl, was the first president of the NACD Auxiliary. Don was also a state senator from Gooding County.

Walt Rumsey on the Plant Science Staff was an outstanding range conservationist. He was promoted to the State Resource Conservationist position when I retired and later was regional range specialist at Lincoln, Nebraska.

Rabdau:

I just want to mention a few of the grass roots people, the technicians: John Nicholas, Manning Onstott, George Banks, Larry Sorensen, Ray Palmer, Billy McMurtrey, Glendon Hunt, Kyle Downs, Lester Avery, Don Gusman, Case Carpenter, and George Hutchison. Dave Hickman worked as a foreman at the Moscow CCC camp and then for years and years at Palouse, Washington.

The professionals were Verl Kaiser, Hal Russell, Doug Hole, Russell Smith, Oscar Onstott, Benny Martin, Frank Dickson, John Noyes, Frank Kline, Walt Rumsey, Pete Taylor, Luke Jones, Harry Vogt, Tom Priest, Keith Blackburn, LeRoy Zollinger, and the gals Barbara Larson, Esther Patterson, and Iris Morris. There are lots more than that, like Mel Carlson, Bob Palmer, Meader Wilkins, Harold Allen, Morlan Nelson, Harold Harris, Glen Neilson, Gordon Price, and more ladies Evelyn Bailey and Sharon Norris.

Closner:

I worked with a lot of dedicated, effective, hard working people during my career.

Waldo Frandsen, a TSC Range Specialist, was one of the most effective conservationists I worked with. He taught me many conservation concepts.

Dr. Hafenrichter, Regional Plant Materials Specialist, was another great conservationist. It was he who inspired us to work so hard to accomplish all the grass seeding on the abandoned cropland in Weiser River SCD. When I left that District in 1957, more than 100,000 acres had been seeded to grass.

Harold Harris, George Welch, Jack Walker, Meader Wilkins, Jay Thaanum, Manning Onstott, Jim Rabdau, and Mr. Irving, who was like a father to young conservationists, are some of my favorite conservationists who were effective in carrying out their work. But Idaho has always had some very outstanding conservationists.

Question: Soil erosion is still a major conservation problem in Idaho. Why haven't better results been achieved in 50 years?

Berg:

Soil and water conservation is never done! The work in Idaho was held back until districts were in place. By that time many states had a lock on the money and people. Idaho is still playing catch-up.

Conditions were improving until the all out fence row-to-fence row push for production for export markets promoted in the early 1970s. Soil and water conservation progress has been good in irrigated land and rangeland. Dry cropland areas need more priority.

Jones:

Contributing to the soil erosion problem over the years were the conflicting agricultural programs and the effects of the almighty dollar in causing changes in land use. It's a continuous problem and may never be completely solved. Corporation farming and the use of larger farm equipment has had an adverse effect, in many cases, on erosion control and conservation farming to obtain high yields and profits.

Closner:

Soil erosion is a natural process that is always going on. During my career there were times when we let up on our efforts to control it. When I first went to work, that's all we worked at or talked about. Then for a few years, it was irrigation. And then project type activities based on irrigation purposes, primarily.

I look back at the old Sand Creek Watershed Project and the Rock Creek Watershed in Power SCD that Blaine Morse and I tried to sell to National Office with the need for land treatment programs to control runoff and erosion. After 15 years or so and a change of some old heads at the National level, some progress has been made.

Erosion has just not been a top priority of SCS, and we haven't worked at it hard enough all the time. We often let the demands of the farm public control too much, perhaps, on what we end up doing in some areas, rather than promoting what needs to be done. The old problem of following the easiest path.

Carlson:

Erosion is a sin to the land. Stewardship of our most important resource, the soil, must not only be in the mind but in the hearts of farmers as well. It takes not only education of the people, but an awareness of the value of conservation of our soil. We have just begun,

and 50 years is not a very long time to establish in the hearts of men love for their soil.

Rab dau:

Yes, soil erosion is still a major conservation problem. There are many reasons why better results have not been achieved. I suppose the main one is fluctuation in the national farm programs that almost annually change to try to keep up with market demands, and ever present over-production due to ever-increasing yields because of improved technology.

Good conservation practices call for long term planning and application. It seems like the formula for crop production controls have always been too complicated and not realistic.

Another reason is the ever-changing people in control of the land, as well as the ever-changing personnel giving technical assistance.

With better equipment available to maintain residue on the soil surface through the next growing season, and with the elimination of clean cultivation for weed control by chemicals and more annual cropping of grain, there will be more progress.

With the need to reduce production, which can be done by supporting only the amount of crop needed instead of paying to curtail acres to be seeded, and by requiring that set-aside land be put into permanent cover, then we will see more conservation on the land. Instead of giving each farmer a cropland base, based on some complex formula, the entire farm should be considered cropland base whether its in hay, pasture, or wheat. In the past, those farmers who had taken out a lot of their land by seeing soil building crops like alfalfa and grass, had their base acres for price support crops reduced by that much. Farmers who planted cash crops fence-to-fence ended up with a larger percentage of their land allowed for crops with price supports.

Question: What kind of progress occurred in conservation work during the time you worked for SCS?

Berg:

I spent over 40 years of career public service, most with SCS. The progress started with soil conservation district formation and the building of their abilities. The network and the broadening of their responsibilities is most important.

- Better research now gives better answers.
- More dedication by Extension Service spreads the word. Other agencies like ASCS, FmHA, etc., are now part of the team.

- We have good answers for most conservation problems. We have not solved yet the motivation factor and/or the economics of conservation.

Jones:

- The organization of soil conservation districts and the formation of state and national district associations.
- The development of a strong technical program in all phases of conservation. The combining of these technical practices into a complete conservation plan for farms, areas, and watersheds.
- The use of grasses and legumes for an effective erosion control cover and to stabilize soils. The Plant Materials Program gave us adapted grasses and legumes for various land uses and different soil and slope conditions.
- An effective range reseeding program through proper techniques and selected species of grasses and legumes adapted to soil and rainfall conditions.
- A complete and effective watershed program.

Closner:

To me the greatest progress in conservation during the time I worked was the growth and development of the soil conservation district program.

When I first started to work, soil conservation was new to farmers and ranchers. No one came to the office or called for assistance of any kind. I used to carry my saddle, bridle, rubber boots, shoes, etc., in my pickup. I'd offer to help work, drive or round-up cattle, just to get a chance to talk conservation to someone. If I saw a farmer out in the field irrigating, I put on my boots, took my shovel and spent three or four hours helping him irrigate just so I could talk conservation to him. I spent a week one time on Milt Branch's place working and talking conservation with him because he was a national figure and needed some training. In those early days, conservation farm plans were really helpful, and we had to do a good planning job since the material in the plan was about all the farmer or rancher knew about conservation.

I recall one time at Weiser, during a National Office review, five plans were selected and visits made to the farms. More than 90 percent of the items in these plans that were three to five years old had been carried out as planned.

Question: What did you like best about working with conservation during your SCS career?

Berg:

The people in SCS, the people running districts, and the stewards on the land.

Jones:

The growth in the organization of districts and seeing supervisors take an important part in the responsibility of conservation.

I had a personal sense of satisfaction and accomplishment in working with farmers in planning and applying conservation practices.

Closner:

I have always said the thing I liked most about working with SCS and conservation (and what I missed most on retirement) was the dedicated people I became acquainted with and worked with.

Some of the district supervisors became my best friends, and still are. For the most part, they are dedicated, sincere and an appreciative group.

I also met, worked with, and associated with a lot of good career people not only in SCS but other local, State, and Federal agencies.

And then there was conservation itself: its need and the satisfaction of being a part of the development of a great program in Idaho.

Carlson:

I loved the challenge of selling conservation and seeing the application of the practice. I liked the people I worked with in SCS and the cooperators and farmers in the field. I was always aware that my job was worthwhile and was needed for the future strength of my country.

Question: Where is the soil conservation movement in Idaho headed during the next 50 years?

Berg:

The basic question is: Will it still be voluntary for the land user?

Nonpoint impact will get attention. State and local governments will bear more responsibilities as the federal resources are moved to other priorities. Soil conservation and farm policy must be integrated at the national level. Soil conservation will benefit from the new technology of the future.

Jones:

I have enough confidence in SCS, Districts, and Idaho farmers and ranchers that they will not let erosion destroy our farm and ranch lands to the extent erosion was occurring in the 1940s when we first started the program.

Carlson:

The conservation of water and soil is so necessary that we must sell, educate, and make more people aware of its importance. The problem is so large that we need the backing of all social and scientific endeavors to do the job.

Our job will be to create an awareness in all people of the blessings of our soil resources and the need to take care of this magnificent resource.

Closner:

I don't know where conservation is headed in Idaho in the next 50 years. It has come a long, long ways in the more than 40 years I have been associated with it.

From that 15th day of February in 1943 when I reported to work, to February 15, 1985, there has been lots of progress, lots of changes in emphasis and the approach to our soil and water conservation problems. I am sure that it is going to continue. The need for soil and water conservation is greater today than it was 50 years ago, and the job will never be totally done.

The federal government will probably be less involved in the actual application and installation of conservation measures and take on more of a promotional guiding role.

Rabdau:

In the foreseeable future, conservation should continue as is. If funds are reduced, there should still be a strong technical program made available to districts. If direct assistance to districts was discontinued, there would be back sliding.

Read more about it: "Serving People and the Land, a History of Idaho's Soil Conservation Movement," published by IASCD, February 1985. Copy is located in each field/SCD office.