

## WILL WE MEASURE UP?

A VIEWPOINT FROM THE SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION SOCIETY'S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Two years ago, on May 13, 2002, President Bush signed the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (FSRI) into law. SWCS concluded in a report issued in June 2002 that the conservation provisions of the new law created the greatest opportunity for conservation on private land since 1985 and that the additional conservation investment and authorities provided by the law could, if well-directed, make historic progress in managing environmental quality and ensuring the commercial viability of American agriculture.

On May 13, 2004—the second anniversary of FSRI's enactment—SWCS released a new report analyzing what Congress and the Administration have done to date to implement the law. We found a combination of progress and missed opportunities. Most of the funding the law provided for conservation programs through fiscal year 2004 has been realized, and most of the basic conservation components of FSRI have been put in place. Rules for at least 10 programs and provisions have been promulgated, program guidance produced, training completed, and outreach to producers and partners undertaken. Conservation activity on the ground has accelerated.

An impressive vehicle to accelerate conservation has been built, and Congress has provided a lot of fuel. Now it's time to make sure that vehicle takes us in a direction that pays off fully for producers, taxpayers, and the environment. I've written many times in these pages that our new job as conservationists is environmental management. I am convinced environmental performance will—and should be—the yardstick used to measure whether we lived up to the promise of FSRI. In our report we identified four opportunities—missed so far—that need urgent attention.

First, the Administration must request and Congress must provide all the conservation funding FSRI provided. Things looked good through fiscal year 2004. But

the President's fiscal year 2005 budget request is a step back. Most programs take significant cuts in the proposed budget. FSRI won't pay off unless Congress and the Administration pay up.

Second, we must construct a conservation technical services infrastructure suitable for the 21st century. Commodity Credit Corporation technical assistance funding—nearly \$700 million since 2002—must be coupled with strategic increases in general appropriations for research, education, and the conservation technical assistance program. Those resources should be allocated to federal, state, and local governmental agencies; nongovernmental organizations; and the private sector based on a realistic assessment of the potential for each sector to contribute to an infrastructure tailored to meet the site-specific needs of local communities.

Third, we must change the way we are implementing programs. Much more program funding should be directed to place-based projects that can achieve critical mass and produce the environmental benefits taxpayers are seeking. NRCS should allocate \$400 million in Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) funds in fiscal year 2005—about one-third of the FSRI funding level—to place-based initiatives driven by watershed or other place-based strategies. Unless we focus staff and resources on specific projects designed to produce specific and tangible improvements in soil, water, air, and wildlife habitat, we simply won't measure up to the promise of FSRI.

Finally, we must ramp up the Conservation Security Program (CSP) quickly and thoughtfully. CSP should become the primary base conservation effort in the United States. As CSP ramps up, more EQIP money should be directed to place-based projects. CRP, WRP, and other land retirement programs can be marshaled to protect and restore sensitive landscapes and critical habitats while EQIP and CSP improve the management

of working land. The result will be a balanced portfolio of conservation programs to better suit the range of environmental management challenges we face.

FSRI created a window of opportunity. I don't know how long that window will stay open. U.S. federal budget pressures are growing, and taxpayers will be looking to policymakers to choose wisely among priorities. Social security, Medicare, education, homeland security—taxpayers have many priorities to balance. If we want conservation on working land to be one of them, taxpayers need to see their investment paying off in cleaner water, clearer air, healthy streams and lakes, and thriving populations of fish and wildlife.

Sixty years ago, conservationists were challenged to protect soil and water resources and enhance the productivity of U.S. agriculture. We measured up to that challenge and turned a crisis into an ongoing concern—a major accomplishment. The environmental management challenge is tougher. But if we act soon and strategically, we will measure up to our new challenge. Frankly, what other choice do we have?

Our new report, "Realizing the Promise of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002: How Implementation of the Conservation Provisions Measure up" is on the SWCS website at [http://www.swcs.org/t\\_seeking\\_intro.htm](http://www.swcs.org/t_seeking_intro.htm).



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