

TIME TO CELEBRATE

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

I think we should take a moment to celebrate the summer of 2004. I say that because I think the summer of 2004 will be remembered for two important milestones in the recent history of our Society. In May, we issued our two-year evaluation of the implementation of the conservation provisions of the 2002 farm bill entitled "*Realizing the Promise of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002: How Implementation of the Conservation Provisions Measures Up.*" This report culminated four years of work trying to shape the conservation provisions of the farm bill—one of the two priorities that has dominated our efforts over the past five years.

The second priority was recovering the financial strength of the Society and this summer marked an important turning point in that effort too. As of the end of July, we paid off our debt to our endowment funds—the final step in our financial recovery plan. That debt was incurred in 1997 and 1998 when endowment funds were used to cover shortfalls in operating expenses—the harbinger of the financial crises that would drive much of our work over that past five years.

I can't tell you how good it feels to have achieved these two milestones this summer. I think all of us should take a moment to celebrate.

Your Board of Directors and staff have already started this celebration by starting work on the milestones of the next five years. At the summer Board of Directors meeting we set new priorities to direct our work. The first and most urgent priority is to strengthen our basic operation—the ongoing programming largely funded by members—that we rely on year-after-year to achieve our mission.

We've outlined three ways to strengthen the basic operation: (1) broadening our programming to reach more professionals, particularly those working in the environmental management arena and in

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nonagricultural landscapes; (2) retooling our information technology to make it easier for members to take care of basic business and to open up opportunities to expand the services we provide; and (3) building a full-time, headquarters-driven professional development program.

Taken together, these three initiatives, if successful, will bring SWCS to a higher level of service to conservation and environmental professionals and open new avenues to achieve our mission.

Strengthening the basic operation is our most urgent priority, but building on the success of our special project programming is also crucial in the next five years. Special projects—short-term activities funded through grants and cooperatives agreements—have grown to rival the basic operation in terms of budget and impact on our mission. Our goal is to strengthen special projects programming and the basic operation simultaneously so they complement each other and enhance our capacity to achieve our mission.

This summer we started two new special projects—thanks in no small part to your contributions to our Program Development Fund. One project involves an intensive literature review to document that state of our scientific knowledge about the environmental effects of conservation practices applied to working land. In the second project, SWCS will guide the work of a blue-ribbon panel of scientists and leaders of nongovernmental organizations and state and tribal agencies to review USDA's plans for the Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP).

We are also working to find additional funds for two projects we have partial

funding secured. One of those projects will follow up on the findings in our previous report on the conservation implications of climate change—the need to build the effect of extreme events into conservation planning and environmental management at the field and landscape scale. The second project would help build a blueprint for a new set of soil management standards that go beyond T, the soil loss tolerance level, to recognize the gamut of agronomic and environmental services soils provide and the gamut of activities that can degrade or improve soil.

Fostering the science and art of conservation and environmental management is our mission. It is a mission that is just as urgent today as it was in 1943 when the idea of a society devoted to conservation professionals was conceived. We've accomplished much in the last five years to make good on our mission and strengthen our Society at the same time.

Thanks to hard work by members, Directors, and staff at the chapter, state, federal, and global levels, we are starting from a higher plateau as we look ahead to the next five years. That truly is a reason to celebrate.



Craig A. Cox, executive director for the Soil and Water Conservation Society since 1998.