

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT FOR THE FUTURE

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

This summer marked my fifth anniversary as your Executive Director and—more importantly—the mid-point of our first fiscal year since completing the financial recovery plan that has guided so much of our work since 1998.

We've cut the staff at headquarters to about half its size during peak years of the 1990s and we've reduced senior staff positions from six to three. We've modernized our information system, rebuilt our member database, and implemented a new fiscal management system. We restructured membership levels and benefits and enhanced the technical quality and professional development opportunities available at our annual conferences. We combined Conservation Voices and the *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation* into a single, flagship publication and initiated a web-based monthly newsletter.

These changes have made us leaner and meaner, as the cliché goes, and also wiser. We've learned some important lessons in the past five years that we need to keep in mind as we look forward to the next five years. Here are the two I think are most important.

We've learned we can't rely on membership dues to provide enough income to achieve our mission. Close to three-quarters of the basic dues you send in with your renewal form pays for the nuts and bolts of a membership organization. There is not much left over to pay for new initiatives and programs to serve our members, the conservation profession, and the conservation movement. We would have to nearly double our annual dues paying members, for example, to raise enough revenue to add a full time staff person to beef up our professional development services to members—something we would desperately like to do.

We want and need new members. We need your energy, commitment, and contribution to our shared mission. And we

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need your money too. But at least in the near future we can't depend primarily on membership dues to build the financial strength we need to aggressively pursue our mission.

Our most important short-term task is to learn to succeed as a soft-money institution. The most important contribution to stabilizing our financial health has come from a very aggressive and thankfully successful program of grant-seeking. Grant income has more than doubled since 1998, and grant income is largely responsible for pulling us out of the financial hole we were in five years ago. As important, the special projects grant income has allowed us to aggressively pursue our mission and raise the visibility and profile of SWCS in the conservation community.

Now we need to build our capacity to sustain that effort over the long-term. We will need to make room in our budgets every year for the staff time and resources to develop and fund special projects. We need to build the flexible staff or consultant structure we need to adapt to the peaks, valleys and constantly changing skill sets demanded by short-term special project grants and contracts. We need to learn to live and prosper in the face of high turnover in project staff.

So, where do we go from here? I don't know yet, but we are starting to finding out. The Board of Directors devoted most of its meeting time this summer to an in-depth discussion of this issue. I

expect it will remain at the top of our agenda this year and next. Our goal is to come up with a plan of operations that will make us a stronger and more active on your behalf. We'll be keeping you informed about our deliberations over the coming months.

And we'll also be asking you to do more. This fall we'll be asking you to make a special contribution to help fund the program development and fundraising work we urgently need to do this year just to sustain the level of effort we've achieved in the past five years. Frankly, we may need to ask for your help to fund program development every year.

I used to look forward to the time when we "were out of the woods." Now, I want to be happy living in the woods. That's progress, I think, and evidence of our growing strength and confidence as a Board, staff, and membership. I look forward to the next five years.



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