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Theme: "Headwaters of Conservation"

Soil Conservation and SWCS: A Forty-year Retrospective

By Max Schnepf

It was 40 years ago today, give or take a week, that I attended my first annual meeting. The event was in Philadelphia. I was a new hire, not yet on the job. That meeting, a 20-year-anniversary celebration for the Society, was my introduction to the organization and its multidisciplinary, multi-institutional membership. Things have changed dramatically over the intervening decades.

At the time, the Society—then called the Soil Conservation Society of America—was a growing organization, with about 10,000 members worldwide. The annual meeting was the big activity of the year for the organization. It typically attracted 600 to 800 registrants and a like number of family members and friends. I'll never forget that first meeting: I think I met each and every one of the folks attending the event in the receiving line at what was then called the president's reception on Sunday evening. Protocol at the time required the entire board of directors and staff, with spouses, to stand in a receiving line at the entrance to the reception. Each meeting participant then dutifully made his or her way through the receiving line, often with spouse and children, on the way to the table with punch and cookies. No beer and cocktails, mind you, no cheese and crackers, no hot hors d'oeuvres, just punch and cookies. It was a different time and place!

A Bit of History

Let me recount for you a bit of our organization's early history.

The year was 1941. Hugh Bennett, first chief of the Soil Conservation Service, and a small group of conservationists met in November to talk about the need for a new professional society that could accommodate the interests of the growing number of men and women who were joining the fight to control soil erosion and protect the productivity of American agriculture.

Numerous professional societies existed at the time. Most represented specific academic disciplines. Some were already contributing to the soil conservation cause. None, however, focused on soil conservation to the extent soil conservation leaders at the time thought necessary. A major concern among proponents of the new soil conservation society was the preoccupation with basic research in many of those professional societies and a lack of attention to the applied research that was an essential underpinning for soil conservation efforts.

While the intention to form a new society was clear at that 1941 meeting, it was not until September 1943 that a public announcement of that intention was made. World War II put many things on hold. Temporary officers were then elected, and qualified members were invited to participate in the new endeavor.

In December 1944 those temporary officers were reelected and a council was formed. Those individuals agreed to serve until the first annual meeting of the new organization, which took place in Chicago on December 12-13, 1946. Nearly 250 members, spouses, and guests attended, including representatives from seven countries other than the United States. Bennett was honored at the banquet as the founder of the Society. At that point, the Society had about

2,000 members in 48 states, 3 territories, and 17 countries; 17 chapters had already been chartered.

The Society almost immediately initiated publication of two periodicals; both were quarterlies at the outset. "Notes and Activities" was to keep members abreast of internal events and activities. The *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation*, edited on a voluntary, part-time basis by Walter Gumbel, who lived in West Virginia, was to present the latest and most authoritative information about land use and the science of soil and water conservation. Gumbel articulated the magazine's mission this way in an editorial in the first issue:

"First, we believe the *Journal* should represent the Soil Conservation Society of America. Secondly, it should present, with each succeeding issue, the latest and most authoritative information about the science of soil and water conservation, and the principles of sound land use. It should be practical. It should be easy to read. It should be stimulating. It should actively champion the cause of soil and water conservation. It should above all be useful."

The Society's first president, Ralph Musser, emphasized that the *Journal* should provide (1) a medium for the discussion of issues that could further advance the science, (2) an opportunity to state the position of the Society on controversial matters, and (3) a member forum for the discussion of such matters.

The Society filed articles of incorporation in 1949 and continued to operate with elected officers and council members and a part-time, volunteer staff until 1951. That year, H. Wayne Pritchard was hired as the organization's first full-time executive secretary. Pritchard, a former vocational agriculture instructor who was working for Iowa's state soil conservation agency at the time, accepted the position on the premise that the international headquarters office would at least temporarily remain in Des Moines.

An Impressive Track Record

Almost from the outset, and apart from its two primary programming activities—the *Journal* and the annual meeting—the Society began to exert its influence on the course of conservation events and to shape public policy. In 1949, for example, the organization sponsored a conference on national land use policy and adopted a policy statement on the topic that was later published in the *Journal* and widely distributed to policymakers and conservation leaders across the country. That type of influence has ebbed and flowed now for nearly six decades and taken widely different forms.

Interestingly, one of the first prominent activities undertaken by the relatively new professional society was not a scientific endeavor at all, but rather a public education project. "Down the River," a short booklet about the consequences of soil erosion on the American landscape, was introduced at the 1951 annual meeting. The proclaimed goal was to place a copy in every American home. That goal was never achieved, of course, but several hundred thousand copies of the publication were sold over the next few years. The revenue generated nicely supplemented member dues during the organization's formative years, and the experience led to creation of a much more extensive public education effort involving educational cartoon booklets. Those educational cartoon booklets, and there were nearly a dozen of the booklets published between the mid-1950s and late 1970s, became widely recognized as among the best conservation education tools available for young people in the elementary grades. Millions of copies of the booklets were sold in the 1960s and 1970s, producing important revenue for the growing organization.

An emphasis on the appointment of standing technical study committees, later called divisions, gave a renewed technical focus to Society programming in the 1960s and 1970s. Providing important impetus to this focus was the work of one committee in particular—the Mined Area

Restoration Technical Study Committee. That committee in the 1960s assembled an impressive multidisciplinary, multi-institutional group of experts that met each year at different locations to study mined-land reclamation techniques. A tour of reclaimed areas was generally combined with a technical program, all of which contributed to the science of reclamation work and to important policy initiatives at state and federal levels later in the 1970s. This activity also generated considerable enthusiasm among the members of other technical study committees and to groups of members who were interested in particular conservation issues. There followed over the next couple of decades the development of numerous policy statements and the organization of annual meeting concurrent sessions and a long series of conferences that sought to advance conservation science and policymaking:

- Two national land use policy conferences, one in 1972, the second in 1977.
- The first national conference on conservation tillage, held in the early 1970s.
- A conference on the application of waste materials to agricultural land.
- A national conference on soil conservation policy in 1979.
- A conference on use of remote sensing in natural resources management.
- A conference on use of legumes in conservation tillage systems.
- An international conference on control of soil erosion on steep lands, organized in collaboration with the World Association of Soil and Water Conservation.
- A national conference on sustainable farming systems.
- A national water quality conference.
- A series of conferences, seminars, and listening sessions between 1988 and 1995 that made the Society a nationally recognized forum for the discussion of farm bill conservation issues. Included was a national farm bill conference in 1998 to assess implementation of the conservation programs in the path-breaking 1985 farm bill that attracted nearly 500 participants, a national conference in 1994 on the future of the Conservation Reserve Program, and a series of three policy seminars, held in Washington, D.C., about the time the 1996 farm bill debate began, on soil conservation, water quality improvement, and fish and wildlife habitat.

SWCS customarily published a book based on each of these conferences, and experience with the earliest of those events spawned a successful book publishing program in the 1980s that not only disseminated important conservation information and drew international attention to the organization, but also produced important revenues in trying financial times. More than 30 titles were issued during the 1980s. Book sales during the decade exceeded a million dollars.

The emphasis on publishing also generated other important conservation outreach activities during the decade, including commemorative and educational posters and brochures.

In the late 1980s, programming emphasis took another turn when the Society began soliciting, or was solicited, to undertake research-oriented special projects. The first of these was a three-year field evaluation of USDA's implementation of conservation programs in the 1985 farm bill—a study requested by SCS. That effort was followed by the first two national mail surveys of Conservation Reserve Program contract-holders. a series of focus groups on the pilot Wetlands

Reserve Program, another series of focus groups on conservation planning, a series of regional listening sessions conducted on behalf of NRCS just prior to the 1996 farm bill debate, and the activities over the past six years relating to farm bill policymaking, which included another series of regional listening sessions prior to the 2002 farm bill debate, comparisons of the conservation title provisions in various farm bill drafts as they were introduced, a series of Conservation Security Program workshops, a recent report assessing implementation of the Conservation Title programs in the 2002 farm bill, a study of the conservation implications of climate change, and ongoing work regarding how to assess the environmental outcomes of applying conservation practices to the land.

This is a truly remarkable series of accomplishments for any organization and particularly a professional society. I dare say few other organizations, certainly no other professional one, has done as much over the years to shape public policy and advance the conservation cause.

Institutional Tensions

It's ironic, therefore, that while amassing this long record of accomplishments, the Society was beset by tensions and turmoil, both internal and external. Those tensions generated an organizational schizophrenia that profoundly influenced many decisions made by Society leaders regarding membership, governance, and programming.

Those tensions initially had three principal sources. First was the fact that the discipline of soil conservation that Hugh Bennett and his colleagues envisioned in the early 1940s never fully materialized as a true academic discipline. At one point there were a handful of academic institutions that offered a degree program in soil conservation, but those programs generally were short-lived. Soil conservation remained reliant on a mix of academic disciplines.

Second, the soil conservation community, because it lacked an identifiable discipline, was forced to draw its employees from elsewhere in the academic system. Elsewhere in those first two or three decades meant agricultural colleges generally and soil science, agronomy, agricultural engineering, and related departments specifically. In contrast to where Bennett and his colleagues were philosophically in the 1940s, this reality, over time, narrowed the philosophical base of the community that provided much of the Society's membership potential.

A third source of tension grew from the fact the organization was founded largely by SCS personnel. Given those roots, the Society was presumed by many to be a mouthpiece for the agency. The organization never has been able to rid itself successfully of that label, though I think it may be closer to doing so now than ever before.

As I mentioned, those tensions generated an organizational schizophrenia that influenced many decisions over the years, not all of which were in the best interests of the scientific and professional society that Bennett and his colleagues had in mind when they founded the organization. Questions already were being raised when I joined the staff in September 1965 about what kind of organization the Society really ought to be. Should it be a scientific and professional society as Bennett and his colleagues envisioned or a more lay-oriented, political activist organization? Was its scope of interests soil conservation solely, or soil and water conservation, or natural resources conservation? Should its base of operation be limited to the United States, or should the organization strive to connect internationally, as Bennett and his colleagues clearly believed?

Debate on these and related questions occurred periodically throughout my tenure at the Society. There were questions being raised already in the 1960s about how technical the Journal should be and the extent to which it should accommodate success stories, much like those already appearing in the SCS magazine Soil and Water Conservation News. There was talk about what emphasis public education activities. the kev in some people's minds to building stronger soil

conservation programs, ought to get relative to more traditional science-based and member-oriented professional development activities. Earth Day and the advent of the environmental movement in the early 1970s gave further impetus to talk about the Society's potential as an activist group. Comparisons were regularly drawn between the Society and groups like the National Wildlife Federation or the National Audubon Society; membership goals of 50,000 or 100,000 individuals were even tossed about.

Those were trying times for the Society's leadership. Name changes were regularly considered. I recall, for example, the council's refusal to consider dropping "of America" because Soil Conservation Society produced the same acronym as SCS. Likewise, "Soil and Water Conservation Society" was rejected because a significant contingent within the Society's membership favored keeping the organization a more pure soil conservation organization. An even more outlandish proposal in the early 1970s—renaming the Society the Natural Resources Conservation Society or Natural Resources Management Society—was rejected outright, as were alternative proposals to rename the Journal using such terminology as "natural resources" or "land use."

Ultimately, of course, the name of the organization was changed from Soil Conservation Society of America to Soil and Water Conservation Society. This change, made in 1987, was to accomplish three things. First, it was to broaden the appeal of the Society to additional constituencies by adding "water" to the name. Second, it was to re-emphasize the organization's soil conservation roots. And third, it was, by removing "of America," to signal an international perspective that clearly was not there previously.

In spite of these and other changes, the organizational schizophrenia persisted through much of the 1980s and 1990s, ebbing and flowing with leadership changes and the times. There was talk in the 1980s, for example, of moving the Society's international headquarters to Washington, D.C., ostensibly because any organization wanting to influence public policy had to be located in the seat of government. There was the failed attempt to publish two magazines in the 1990s, ostensibly to accommodate the less technically oriented constituencies in the soil and water conservation community, which never did support the experiment by the way.

Fortunately, this organizational schizophrenia has subsided in recent years. The Society, in my view, has essentially reverted to what Bennett and his colleagues perceived it to be, a scientific and professional organization.

The Profound Influences

I mentioned the tensions and turmoil that beset Society's leaders and members and exerted some profound influences on membership, governance, and programming. Let me share with you just a few examples of those influences and their impacts.

Membership

As mentioned, Hugh Bennett and his SCS colleagues founded the Society, but it was not their intention to create an organization exclusively for SCS employees. Their intent instead was to create a scientific organization that could foster the new science of soil conservation and represent the growing number of individuals in government, academia, and business working professionally in soil conservation. Early on, the Society acquired members from a wide range of academic disciplines, including soil science, forestry, and wildlife biology. Recall that Bennett collaborated with the likes of Aldo Leopold. Bennett's perspective of soil conservation was broad. His cardinal principle—use each acre according to its individual capabilities and treat each acre according to its individual needs—appealed to the multidisciplinary and multi-institutional interests the Society was seeking to attract. Business interests were even prominently represented in Society leadership circles.

The lack of a true soil conservation discipline and the fact the soil conservation community was

forced to draw many if not most of its employees from agricultural colleges produced a movement within 15 to 20 years that some would consider out of step with where Bennett and his colleagues started. By the time I joined the staff, two issues were paramount in the soil conservation community: How could structural conservation measures be used to control soil erosion? How could structural measures be used to control flooding? This was in real contrast to thinking in the Society's earliest years. In case you doubt that, let me read a short paragraph from an editorial by the *Journal's* editor that appeared shortly after the Society's first annual meeting:

“Although the soil conservationist could derive encouragement from the meeting, he could not fail to come away disturbed about some of the things he heard. An engineer spoke of controlling nature. Even maintenance of structures, he said, was a fight with nature.... An industrialist said of soil conservation that it promised the blessing of man's dominion over the earth. How does this tally against the comments of an editor that the soil conservationist is setting an example by working with nature, not against her? Natural forces are powerful forces, and they influence every operation on the land. Is the soil conservationist working with them, or against them?”

When I joined the staff, the Society had about 10,000 members. Roughly two-thirds of those members were SCS employees. Membership peaked about 1977 or 1978, slightly above 15,000. With the exception of a year or two, it has been on a declining trend ever since. Membership is now about 7,000, and the percentage of NRCS employees within the Society's membership has dropped to about a third.

There are any number of explanations for this dramatic growth over the Society's first three decades and subsequent downturn. Early on, it was extremely beneficial, if not mandatory, for SCS employees to become a member of the Society. Society membership was an important item on an employee's resume, and becoming an officer, council member, or even a committee chairman, with an acceptable degree of performance, almost guaranteed promotion within the agency.

This reality was a plus, of course, for Society membership, but it also reinforced the perception of the Society as an SCS-dominated organization. Coupled with the agricultural roots of its primary member constituency, the perception left the Society at odds with many interests in the natural resources conservation community. This became especially apparent during the divisive debate over the merits of the small watershed program in the late 1960s and early 1970s. People in the environmental community for years found it difficult to interact with soil conservation leaders. At one point, the Society even contemplated withdrawing its membership in the Natural Resources Council of America, a national association of associations that included a number of the prominent national environmental organizations.

There were other forces at work as well that greatly influenced the member potential and make-up of the organization. Early on, for example, there was the bitter turf battle between Extension and its ally, the Farm Bureau, on one side and SCS and conservation districts on the other side. Many Extension employees as a result, with their strong ties in the academic community, never felt comfortable as members of the Society.

Then there was the tiff between the Society and what should have been a prominent partner, the National Association of Conservation Districts. Some in NACD took issue with the Society's educational cartoon booklet program; the fact the booklets were marketed largely to conservation districts was considered a financial drain on their organization. While perhaps minor, the tiff produced a degree of tension in the relationship between the two organizations that precluded what could have been a far more cooperative and constructive relationship.

During its first four decades also, the Society's interests encompassed both public and private

land issues. That produced a significant contingent of members from the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and other public land agencies. In fact, an analysis of membership trends through the early 1980s showed a higher correlation between total Society membership and membership across all federal conservation agencies than between total Society membership and SCS member levels. That correlation began to shift in the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, when the Society, consciously or unconsciously, began narrowing its program focus more on agricultural conservation issues. This contracted mission perhaps was inevitable, given the proliferation of new and specialized conservation and environmental organizations in the 1970s and 1980s, but it clearly had an impact on the Society's membership.

Four other developments deserve mention. All exerted a negative influence to one degree or another on Society membership numbers. First was the designation in 1981 of the SCS chief's position as a political appointment rather than a civil service post. That changed the dynamic within the agency. No longer could employees aspire to the top position, and professional affiliations and activity within organizations like the Society suddenly became less important on employee resumes and in personnel performance evaluations.

Second was the controversy emanating from the Society's field-based evaluation of 1985 farm bill programs. While conducted at the behest of SCS, with a clear charge of the work to be done, a change in administration within the agency between the start and finish of the three-year project produced a circumstance in which the project's findings proved politically unacceptable.

Third was the Society's attempt in the mid-1990s to publish a second more popular-type magazine and the unfriendly message that sent to the research constituency within the organization—a constituency that over the years had accounted for about 40 percent of the Society's membership. The resulting alienation of that constituency clearly had a negative impact on membership within that constituency.

The fourth and final development revolves around recent questions about the ethics of federal employee involvement in scientific and professional organizations. This development already has had some negative impact and could have far more.

Governance

The organizational schizophrenia and resulting tensions also have had enormous influence on the Society's form and style of governance. The founders of the Society provided for the election of prominent individuals at large from government, academia, and the private sector to serve as leaders of the new organization. Not only did these officers and council members have a big-picture view of the soil conservation challenge, nationally as well as internationally, but their formal and informal networks enabled them to make constructive things happen on behalf of the new organization—prominent speakers at the annual meeting, industry support for the Society through *Journal* advertising, business support for the printing and distribution of educational cartoon booklets, and experience and expertise in organizational management.

But the Society also put great emphasis on grassroots activity. Chapters were viewed as an opportunity to develop leadership qualities among young professionals and, because so many members and potential members worked at the local level, a further opportunity to market membership. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Society invested significant amounts of staff time and money to foster active chapters and the hoped-for accompanying growth in the parent organization. This worked while conservation employment levels in federal conservation agencies were on the rise, but in the end, given some of the developments I cited, this program focus proved so resource-intensive that it was unsustainable.

The early emphasis on grassroots activity prompted calls already in the 1950s for regional representation on the council. The at-large seats on the council gave way first to a combination

of at-large and regional council positions and, ultimately, to a council comprised of all regionally elected positions, save for the officers, who continued to be elected at large. Over the span of a couple of decades, those changes significantly altered the make-up of the council. What had been a body of primarily senior conservation officials, elected at large, became a body with a majority of regionally elected and mostly field-based employees.

I'll make no judgment on which model is preferable, but which model is followed clearly affects the type of organization that results. People who work in local or state offices throughout their careers obviously see the world much differently than those with experience at national and international levels. Their networks are much different, which in many cases limits the extent of their influence at levels beyond where they work day in and day out.

In response to those developments, a strategic planning exercise conducted in the mid-1980s produced a recommendation that the Society not only downsize its council, or board of directors as it had become known by then, but also revert to a majority of the board members elected at large. The sitting board of directors rejected that recommendation.

Governance has another component that has proved particularly critical to the Society over the years. I'm referring to the organization's chief executive officer and staff. The Society had the good fortune of hiring Wayne Pritchard as its first full-time executive secretary. Wayne learned quickly the ways of keeping a new organization afloat financially and otherwise. For nearly three decades he guided the Society in a very hands-on way through its formative years and some tough times. It was the epitome of a staff-driven organization, with a relative degree of administrative stability.

That changed after Wayne suffered a debilitating stroke in 1974 and retired four years later. In the next 14 years, the Society hired six different chief executive officers. That introduced a degree of instability to the Society's administrative structure and ongoing debate over the merits of a staff-driven organization versus a board-driven organization. The circumstance further fed the organizational schizophrenia and led to programming choices that resulted in significant financial problems. This culminated in a 100 percent turnover of staff at the Society's international headquarters over a two- to three-year span in the mid-1990s and a near total loss of institutional memory.

Fortunately, the Society has emerged from those episodes in something resembling one piece and on its feet, financially and otherwise. That is largely the result of the board's foresight to hire Craig Cox as the seventh executive director since 1979. Success in the association management business, much like success in conservation, is people-driven. Craig very much understands the Society's roots and what a scientific and professional organization might strive to do. The key question now is whether the board of directors, members, and broader soil and water conservation community will follow his lead and help the Society realize its full potential.

The Future

This will, of course, require a look at some of the big-picture challenges that currently confront our community. It is those issues that will largely set the Society's agenda in the years ahead. Let me mention just six:

1. Many people within our soil and water conservation community don't yet realize it, but our community's mission has changed dramatically in the past decade. In Bennett's time and for several decades thereafter, soil conservation was exclusively about developing the nation's soil and water resources for agricultural production purposes and protecting the productivity of those resources. That resource conservation mission now has given way to a new environmental management mission: How can farm bill and related

conservation programs be used to produce environmental goods and services for the broader public? If you doubt this, consider the political dynamics necessary to pass a farm bill today, and note the titles and objectives of programs in the bill's conservation title. Our principal cost-share program is no longer the Agricultural Conservation Program, but rather the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. Our principal land retirement program is no longer an annual set-aside program or payment-in-kind program, but rather a multiyear Conservation Reserve Program. NRCS no longer provides technical assistance to drain wetlands, but rather administers a Wetlands Reserve Program. Our mission has indeed changed!

2. Our early conservation leaders had great foresight. They created an innovative model for intergovernmental cooperation back in the 1930s that remains as relevant today as it was then. The model encompasses all of today's key buzz words—collaboration, linkages, leveraging, public/private partnerships. Phil Glick, one of the architects of the model, described the model as marbled cake, as opposed to layered cake. The world is more complex today. Our community counts far more stakeholders than was the case back in the 1930s. But the model remains adaptable to our current circumstance. How can the Society take advantage of this model that has withstood the test of time?
3. Having acknowledged that this model still works does not preclude raising the tough question about whether our new-found wealth of conservation programs in the 2002 farm bill will produce the environmental benefits necessary to justify the public's substantially increased investment. In short: Can we continue doing things in the same old way? All the programmatic pieces seemingly are in place, but that produces no guarantee of success. It seems to me that three further considerations, and maybe a fourth, are necessary. First, we desperately need to abandon our stove-piped delivery of individual conservation programs and create an integrated portfolio of programs. This portfolio of programs needs to provide for a base conservation program, a project-based program to ensure that we achieve the critical mass of conservation action needed to bring about real improvements in environmental quality on a landscape scale, and a land retirement program designed to protect environmentally fragile land and critical wildlife habitat. Second, our delivery of programs must become more proactive than reactive. From the beginning, we've served those clients who willingly walked through the front door. That approach no longer ensures success. Those clients who are the source of our environmental problems must be engaged even if they don't walk through the front door. Third, recognizing again the need to achieve a critical mass of conservation effort to achieve certain conservation objectives, we need to rethink our approach to dispensing cost-share funds. Today, there is every reason to award some cost-share assistance to groups of clients willing to act collectively to achieve specified environmental outcomes. Bonuses for collective action and/or the achievement of specific environmental outcomes across multiple units of land are also option. The fourth consideration might be the institution of a regulatory framework if our traditional voluntary approach does not or cannot result in sufficient progress on all fronts. Bottom line: How do we achieve an acceptable degree of accountability while permitting sufficient local flexibility in program delivery that remains science-based?
4. For the first time in our movement's history, the fact we have lots of money may not be all good news. In a telephone conversation some weeks back, Jeff Zinn at the Congressional Research Service remarked that we should be "cautious about what we wish for." Why? Three reasons: First, as suggested a moment ago, the increased public investment contained in the 2002 farm bill will not automatically produce the desired environmental benefits the public is seeking. Second, the conservation share of our nation's agricultural budget is now large enough that it will no longer escape the attention of competing interest groups during congressional budget deliberations. Third,

- if and when a program like the Conservation Security Program becomes a true entitlement, we will have to ensure that the focus of that entitlement remains on environmental improvement and not income transfer. Public perception of the program as the latter will likely, over time, put the program at risk politically.
5. Our current mix of conservation assistance programs creates a real dilemma for us. The technical assistance component of that mix becomes far more important as we use our substantially increased funding to treat more and more land. There is the prospect currently that the available technical assistance will fall short of demand. If that disconnect occurs, our programs and associated funding could be at risk with both the authorizers and the appropriators. The current differences of opinion between Congress and the administration over funding for technical assistance demand resolution. The need for and value of technical assistance needs to be far better articulated, and continuing thought needs to be given to the most effective and efficient use of technical service providers.
 6. Over the past decade, our movement has enjoyed a reasonable degree of political success; success on the technical side is less apparent. Questions are regularly raised about the quantity of technical assistance available as well as the quality of that assistance. Are the people who daily work with clients in the field adequately trained? Do they have the tools in their field offices to facilitate comprehensive environmental management planning? Can their preoccupation with the physical and biological sciences once and for all include the integration of the critically important social sciences as well? Are we asking too much of one individual to possess all the skills needed to facilitate comprehensive environmental management planning? This issue will demand the attention of NRCS and the other institutions that traditionally have possessed responsibility for conservation technology development and transfer, and to effectively address the issue will likely require new or added commitment from other partners and constituencies in a position to help. Land grant institutions and agricultural interest groups quickly come to mind.

What Role for the Society?

Now, what do these issues portend for the Society? As I mentioned moments ago, I think the Society has clearly rediscovered the need for and value of its scientific and professional roots. The challenge now is to create a strategy that allows it to foster the professional development of its members while attempting also to shape public policy. Certainly the organization's multidisciplinary, multi-institutional membership remains a strength in that regard.

The *Journal* remains an important forum in which to raise and discuss issues important to our cause and to educate and inform members and others interested in our cause. This and other recent annual meetings show clearly that the Society can provide important professional development opportunities and provide a venue for presenting and discussing the latest in conservation science and policy. Chapters likewise can continue to offer members the opportunity to develop leadership capabilities. And there obviously remains considerable potential for the Society to build on its substantial track record of special projects that attempt to influence conservation technology development and to shape public policy. In fact, that track record suggests that the Society might become the soil and water conservation community's permanent think tank. Formation of a research foundation within the Society was briefly contemplated about 20 years ago. That idea is even more viable today. Why shouldn't the Society pursue the idea of using academicians and other leading scientists, whether on sabbatical or detail, to conduct research, analyze important conservation issues, and/or develop new conservation technologies? Why shouldn't the Society strive to inject science into public policy debates? Why shouldn't the Society conduct program evaluations and/or provide oversight to public and even private conservation activities and thus lend a measure of

independence, objectivity, and credibility to those efforts.

Knowing what little I know and have read about Hugh Bennett, Ralph Musser, and the others who founded this Society, I have all the confidence in the world that they would relish the opportunity to confront today's environmental management agenda and all of the scientific and policy issues associated with that agenda through this institution they created. Their message to the Society's leaders of today almost certainly would be "just do it" and "God speed." We must rediscover our scientific and professional roots and not let our founders down this time around!