
AN EXCERPT FROM
A NEW LOOK AT AGRICULTURE



Redefining agriculture's role in our
economy, landscape, environment
& social culture

EXCERPT #10
National Themes

March 2001

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The focus of the concept paper is on South Florida. But it contains many topics that reach far beyond its intended area of focus. Comments from producers in other states have shown that many of the same topics resonate with ranchers and growers and the owners of woodlands and forests across the U.S.

This was underscored when results became available from five regional Private Land Conservation Forums, held in October 1999 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to discuss conservation issues affecting America's farm, forest and ranch lands. The forums were held in Oregon, Colorado, California, New York and Georgia. Each forum, hosted by a senior USDA official, consisted of an open dialogue with seven to eight panelists representing a cross-section of interests in private land conservation. Public comments from the audience followed the panelists.

Nearly 200 public statements were made at the forums. The following topics were raised time and time again.

Please note: the emphasis of the forums was on CONSERVATION, not economics or other issues. Hence, comments tended to focus on conservation. Nevertheless, comments about profits and regulations still figured prominently. These comments provide a useful yardstick to show which of the issues presented in this paper are specific to South Florida and which have national significance.

"The American landscape is largely in private ownership .. the future of American conservation is going to be determined by the conservation practices, the land ethics of the people that own and operate this private land."

– **Jim Lyons, Undersecretary, Natural Resources and Environment, USDA**

The continued struggle to protect natural resources in the new millennium was a concern of many speakers at the Private Land Conservation Forums. Economic strains, including the pressure to sell land for development, were most often cited as the reason for increased fragmentation of forest and farm lands. Uncontrolled growth, wildlife overpopulation, and public land acquisitions – carried out without consideration for adequate staff resources and ongoing funding for proper management – also were cited as deleterious impacts on land preservation and water quality.

Tax Relief. Panelists and respondents at the forums repeatedly stated the importance of

tax relief. While tax law reform was considered necessary to provide relief for private landowners who are practicing good conservation, many saw the need for tax relief in terms of the survival of family farms and small private forests. Examples include: elimination of capital gains and inheritance taxes so that land can be more easily maintained from generation to generation, tax exemptions for conservation payments, and tax credits for applying conservation practices.

"Tax incentives should be used to encourage wise stewardship and permanent protection of private land ... income, estate and property tax incentives can make it easier for private landowners to choose conservation. These incentives can work at federal, state, and local levels."

– **Jim Howe, Director of Conservation Programs, Central and Western New York Chapter of The Nature Conservancy**

Outreach to Landowners. In general, participants believed that incentives should be strengthened to provide more opportunities for limited resource farmers. Some believed USDA's conservation programs should focus on family and small farms. Others feel rapidly changing patterns of land ownership and land use demand implementation of new and innovative programs to reach and address needs and concerns in growing rural communities. It was strongly recommended that the Secretary of Agriculture fully implement recommendations from the Civil Rights Action Team and the Commission on Small Farms to assist the under-served in achieving conservation on their land. Linking conservation with profits also was mentioned.

"Outreach needs to be expanded because it helps establish two-way communication, builds trust where trust is weak and informs tribal people about government programs."

– **Bobby Brunoe, Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, General Manager, Natural Resources**

Conservation Assistance. Participants expressed concern about the lack of funding for existing conservation programs. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Wetland Reserve Program, Forestry Incentives Program, Stewardship Incentives Program, Conservation Reserve Program, and the Farmland Protection Program were specifically mentioned on numerous occasions. In addition, there was strong support for additional funding for technical assistance and research to support these programs and to carry out basic conservation activities at the field level.

"(Technical support) is critically important and must be expanded as we think about improved conservation measures on the private lands in the next millennium."

– **Garth Youngberg, Executive Director, Henry A. Wallace Institute for Alternative Agriculture**

"I respectfully urge Secretary Glickman and the USDA to enhance the federal funding streams for both technical and financial assistance as they may be provided through these various programs."

– **Rick Zimmerman, Deputy Commissioner, NY Department of Agriculture and Markets**

Some public comments indicate the direct relationship between conservation and economics. Poor land management, including over-harvest and conversion to non-agricultural lands, results from the pressures of economics. A primary concern for many is providing private landowners with enough financial incentive to ensure some financial security so they can participate in a long term, meaningful way in conservation programs.

Most speakers made it clear that their ideas about conservation implementation are solutions to specific barriers created by current policies. Some speakers note additional barriers, including weak commodity prices, the disconnect in the public and policymaking consciousness between environment-based quality of life concerns and the role of private landowners as stewards, and the possibility that significant change will not occur until a crisis captures the public and political consciousness, as the Cuyahoga River fire did with respect to water pollution in the 1970s.

"As caretakers of the private lands, we know how to grow healthy crops, tall timber and raise livestock better than any nation on earth. However, society is demanding that we produce more than food and fiber. We are being asked to filter water as it enters our land and clean it before it reaches others who use it. We are being relied on to produce open space and viewscapes. Global warming research points to agriculture and timber as an ideal way to sequester carbon, offsetting that produced by industry and high population areas. We are also being asked to raise and harbor the fish and wildlife for everyone to enjoy. This is okay with us Mr. Secretary. We are eager to do our part to help society by producing more than just food and fiber. But we desperately need your help. We can't sell enough food and fiber now to keep the family farm and ranch alive so how do we offset the heavy costs of these other products? We need society to partner with us in meeting these goals."

– **Speaker from Resource Conservation District, Ames, Iowa (#133)**

Stewardship Payments. Profitability was considered key to conservation and it was believed that land stewardship would suffer given the present economic crisis in rural America. Most respondents support conservation. One theme that pervaded comments on private stewardship is that private landowners should not be made to bear the financial burden of conservation practices that the public demands and benefits from. The issue is how to make conservation fair and financially viable for private landowners. Support was expressed for use of stewardship payments as a means of providing income

assistance to producers for the environmental benefits they produce rather than the traditional price support and disaster payments. Such payments were considered an important part of the "green box" discussions now taking place as a part of the World Trade Organization negotiations. Strong support was expressed for legislation authorizing payments coupled with "safe harbor" provisions for those that practice good conservation.

"What goes on private lands for the most part is based upon economics, whether it be forestry or agriculture or recreation or other opportunities. (The) landowners themselves are the ones to get the job done. These programs are extremely important and helpful and we need to have them continue to be funded."

– **Joe Gergela, President, NY State Association of Conservation Districts and Executive Director, Long Island Farm Bureau**

Farmland/Forestland Protection. Participants expressed concern about the conversion of farmland and forestland to nonfarm uses, and the associated environmental and social consequences. Weak agricultural markets and ill-conceived federal programs, several participant claimed, have made the small farmer an endangered species, and led to fragmentation and over-development of the rural landscape. Tax law reform was cited as a major part of the solution to reduce such conversion.

"You can't argue about its [land] management if it's got houses planted on it."

– **Daniel Hall, Director, Forest Biodiversity Program, American Lands**

Conservation Delivery. There was a consensus that conservation partnerships, coordinated through a locally led conservation process, were critical in achieving conservation on private land. However, there were differences of opinion on the amount of regulation needed relative to voluntary efforts. There was a strong belief by most, however, that increased regulation would lead to extinction of the small family farm.

"Drastic cuts in funding and personnel have rendered technical assistance to farmers and ranchers in many states practically unavailable at a time when conservation needs are critical."

– **Bob Drake, Director, Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association; National Chair, Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative**

Resource Protection. Considerable public demand for natural resource protection was expressed. Forum participants emphasized repeatedly water quality and wildlife habitat enhancement. Concern was expressed on numerous occasions that the U.S. Department of Agriculture was not providing adequate assistance on private grazing lands. Forest health on private forestland was also raised as a concern.

"The Farm Bill says one thing and that sets a whole array of regulations ... yet you [USDA] advocate locally led conservation efforts and sometimes the two really collide. We are faced with two sets of priorities that don't always match."

– **Jim Toland, RC&D, California**

Urban Conservation. The forum participants were somewhat critical of USDA's lack of conservation assistance to urban landowners. USDA was perceived as delivering crop subsidies and food programs with little recognition about its conservation efforts. A few recognized the interconnectedness of rural and urban areas.

"I believe urban landowners should be encouraged to share responsibility for meeting overall public goals for habitat recovery and water quality."

– **Clair Clock, Dairy Farmer, Biologist, Conservation Tour Leader**

Private Property Rights. Concern for the protection of private property rights and the taking of those rights for conservation on private land were expressed. Most participants believed that the private landowner should take responsibility for land stewardship with minimal federal government involvement and regulation.

"It has been said numerous times that if [private landowners] don't have enough economic viability, we're not going to be there to conserve the resources."

– **Steve Stinson, Tree Farmer, Lewis County, Washington**

Collaboration. Both panelists and respondents agree that collaboration is important for conservation of private lands, and needs to occur between all levels of government, tribes, local organizations and landowners. A common theme is lack of consistency, particularly among federal agencies, programs and regulations. Some advocate USDA dialogue with other agencies. One person recommends interagency barriers to collaboration be removed as soon as possible. Some respondents had specific recommendations for collaboration.

"The turf issue should be irrelevant or transparent to people. The people want answers, they want help, they want support."

– **Milan Rewerts, Director of Cooperative Extension, Colorado State University**

A wealth of additional information is available on the Private Land Conservation Forums via the Internet:

“Executive Summary of Private Land Conservation Forums: Analysis of Verbal Content”
– http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/CCS/Forum_al.html. Contains:

- Overview of Common Themes
- Discussion of Specific Themes
 - Outreach to Landowners
 - Public Outreach/Education
 - Voluntary Programs versus Government Regulations
 - Economics of Conservation
 - Private Stewardship Initiatives
 - Need for Private Land Conservation Forum
 - Financial and Tax Relief
 - Funding Conservation Programs
 - Conservation Implementation
 - Resource Protection
 - Wildlife Habitat
 - Water Quality
 - Urban/Suburban Conservation
 - Farmland/Forestland Protection
 - Private Property Rights
 - Interagency Cooperation and Collaboration
 - Organizational Effectiveness
- Overview of Regional Themes
 - California and the Northeast
 - California
 - The Northeast
 - The Southeast
 - Denver
 - The Northwest

“Analysis of Verbal and Written Comment: Private Land Conservation Forums and the National Conservation Summit” – <http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/CCS/anritvrb.html> .
Contains quotes from participants on each of the specific themes listed above.

“Executive Summary of the Atlanta Private Land Conservation Forum: Analysis of Verbal Content” – http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/CCS/Forum_At.html.

“Executive Summary of the Denver Private Land Conservation Forum: Analysis of Verbal Content” – http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/CCS/Forum_De.html.

“Executive Summary of the Portland Private Land Conservation Forum: Analysis of Verbal Content” – http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/CCS/Forum_Po.html.

“Executive Summary of the Sacramento Private Land Conservation Forum: Analysis of Verbal Content” – http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/CCS/Forum_Sa.html

“Executive Summary of the Syracuse Private Land Conservation Forum: Analysis of Verbal Comment” – http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/CCS/Forum_Sy.html

“Analysis of Verbal Comments: USDA National Summit on Private Land Conservation, Ames, Iowa, December 7, 1999” – <http://nhq.nrsc.usda.gov/CCS/analverb.html>.