

The Resources Conservation Act preferred Program"

CHAPTER 7 THE PREFERRED PROGRAM

After considering the alternatives as presented in chapter 6, the Secretary of Agriculture selected alternative 3 as the one most likely to approach, within the overall budgetary guidelines of this Administration, the requirements for protection of the Nation's soil and water resources.

The preferred program is based on cooperative actions among local and state governments and the federal government for solving resource problems. Cooperative solutions to resource problems are not new. Local conservation districts, county Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation (ASC) committees, and extension advisory committees work closely with the local offices of the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS), and Extension Service (ES) to provide technical assistance, financial assistance, and information and education services to land owners. The preferred program retains these existing organizations and relationships to expand the capacity of state and local governments to recognize and solve resource problems.

The preferred program moves away from the "cafeteria," or "first come, first served," approach of traditional conservation programs conducted by the United States Department of Agriculture. It addresses instead specific national resource conservation priorities. The top priority is the reduction of soil erosion, and the second priority is the reduction of upstream flood damages. The cornerstone of the preferred program is the targeting of soil conservation actions to reduce soil erosion and related conservation problems that impair the Nation's agricultural productivity.

USDA developed the preferred program after carefully considering the responses received during the 1980 RCA public comment period and views obtained from the 1979 public opinion survey conducted by Louis Harris and Associates, Inc. These activities show that the public favors a program that achieves conservation objectives through voluntary participation with more emphasis on decisions made at local and state levels. People view soil, water, and related resources as national assets that should be used but not wasted and are concerned that not enough is being done to preserve the capacity of the Nation's resources to meet future needs. The public says that adopting specific objectives would lead to more effective action on addressing critical resource problems and that agricultural use should be given priority over other uses of these scarce resources.

Most of all, the public expects a cooperative partnership among land owners and users, local and state governments, and the federal government in meeting national priorities and protecting the public interest in the conservation of soil and water resources. Therefore, the preferred program is the most responsive and practical approach for meeting national, state, and local needs as identified in the appraisal, the analysis of alternatives, and the public's comments,

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*From U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act: Program Report and Environmental Impact Statement," revised draft, 1981.

This chapter presents an overview of the preferred program. To review a full description of alternative 3, see again pages 6-18 through 6-33.

Highlights of the Preferred Program

The preferred program--

- o establishes clear national priorities for addressing problems associated with soil, water, and related resources over the next 5 years. The highest priority is reduction of soil erosion to maintain the long-term productivity of agricultural land. The next highest priority is reduction of flood damages in upstream areas. Water conservation and supply management, water quality improvement, and community related conservation problems have next priority. Fish and wildlife habitat improvement and organic waste management are an integral part of solutions to these problems.
- o strengthens the existing partnership among land owners and users, local and state governments, and the federal government. This partnership will identify needs and develop and implement soil and water conservation programs. Through this partnership, the program--
 - provides federal matching block grants to states for an expanded role in developing and implementing conservation programs, the federal funds to be obtained by reducing current federal conservation program funds.
 - provides for a Local Conservation Coordinating Board made up of representatives of the conservation district, county ASC committee, extension advisory committee, and other interested parties. This board will appraise local conditions and needs, develop programs, and work through existing local, state, and federal institutions. The local board will concentrate on solving problems and achieving program objectives.
 - provides for a State Conservation Coordinating Board, with members appointed by the Governor, to appraise overall state conditions and needs. The state board will use programs adopted at the local level to develop and implement state soil and water conservation programs.
 - establishes a USDA National Conservation Board to advise the Secretary of Agriculture on conservation matters.
 - bases state and federal cooperative conservation actions on an agreement between each Governor and the Secretary of Agriculture.
- o provides for increased and more efficient cooperation and budget coordination among USDA agencies with conservation program responsibilities.
- o continues or initiates the following program actions to achieve conservation objectives. The program--

targets an increased proportion of USDA conservation program funds and personnel to critical areas where soil erosion or other resource problems threaten the long-term productive capacity of soil and water resources.

emphasizes conservation tillage and other cost-efficient measures for reducing soil erosion and solving related problems.

calls for evaluation of tax incentives as an inducement to increased use of conservation systems.

increases emphasis on technical and financial assistance to farmers and ranchers who plan and install needed and cost-efficient conservation systems.

targets USDA research, education, and information services toward immediate and long-term objectives that will protect and maintain the productive capacity of agricultural lands.

permits and supports the use of pilot projects to evaluate solutions for persistent resource problems and to test potential new solutions.

requires conservation plans consistent with locally determined standards for recipients of Farmers Home Administration loans.

minimizes conflicts among features of USDA programs that limit achievement of conservation objectives.

strengthens collection and analysis of data on resource conditions and trends and conservation needs and provides data useful at the state and local levels.

provides for systematic evaluations and analyses of conservation programs to determine their effectiveness and progress in achieving conservation objectives.

expands the use of long-term agreements in providing technical and financial assistance to farmers and ranchers.

Effectiveness of the Preferred Program

Evaluations of current soil and water conservation programs were considered in formulating the preferred program, as discussed in chapter 5. Therefore, the preferred program--

- o establishes clear program objectives to increase efficiency.
- o sets priorities to help field personnel plan and schedule their work to improve program implementation.

- o recognizes the diversity of resource conditions and formulates national policies and procedures that can be adapted to state and regional needs to increase program effectiveness.
- o encourages the involvement of individuals and organizations in changing the program to make it more effective and acceptable.
- o emphasizes increased research, education, and technical assistance to develop resource management and conservation systems that are cost-efficient.
- o provides for better coordination among USDA agencies to achieve unanimity of purpose in planning and budgeting for conservation programs.
- o requires monitoring and evaluation that lead to prompt adjustments in the program to achieve maximum effectiveness and acceptability.

Funding for the Preferred Program

The distribution of federal funds under the preferred program over the next 5 years is shown in table 7-1.

Chapter 8 shows the expected consequences of implementing the preferred program.

Table 7-1. --Projected fifth-year distribution of funds among major components, preferred program --/

Major component	1981 (base year)	Funding		
		Level funding (millions)	Upper bound of	lower bound dollars)
1. Technical assistance----	198	211	212	185
2. Financial assistance:				
a. Cost shares to operators-----	278	164	166	179
b. For project activities-----	177	167	211	134
c. Subtotal financial assistance-----	(455)	(331)	(377)	(313)
3. USDA matching funds-----	---	105	175	30
4. Education/ Information (Extension Service)-----	12	14	15	10
5. Research and technology development-----	74	80	88	71
6. Data Collection and analysis-----	81	79	87	72
Emergency programs 2/---	17	17	17	17
TOTAL -----	837	837	971	698
Loans -----	(77)	(72)	(82)	(60)

--/ All funds are shown in millions of constant 1979 dollars rounded to the nearest million.

2/ Held constant because it is impossible to predict emergencies,