

Helpless Government In The War Against Waste

Editor's Note: This is the second of five articles describing how the Lancaster County government agencies and private organizations were needed. It was felt that leading farmers, should, direct this organization and adapt the services of government technicians to their local situations. This philosophy gave birth to a new type of agricultural organization, the soil conservation district.

The biggest hurdle facing soil conservation organizers was finding a way to work with farmers without offending their traditional independence. A series of failures taught soil conservation leaders that American farmers could neither be told by government "experts" or taught by watching demonstrations in which they had no active part. A way had to be found to gain the farmer's confidence — a way to work with him rather than for him.

Teaming-up farmers with government technicians was not completely new. Committees of local farmers were already being used as sounding boards for some agency programs. But soil conservation organizers visualized something more than just another farmer committee. Land management agencies were developing in a haphazard, piecemeal fashion. Looking ahead, conservationists saw that a hodgepodge of services administered by different agencies would confuse farmers.

A separate grass-roots government organization that could tie together all govern-

ment agencies and private organizations was needed. It was felt that leading farmers, should, direct this organization and adapt the services of government technicians to their local situations. This philosophy gave birth to a new type of agricultural organization, the soil conservation district.

County Volunteers

Pennsylvania's soil conservation districts were set up under Act 217 of the 1945 General Assembly. Unlike most states, county commissioners have the responsibility of establishing districts and appointing the governing body of district directors. Four directors are farmers nominated by county-wide farm organizations and one is a county commissioner appointed by the commissioners themselves.

Without exception, a soil conservation district is a voluntary organization. District directors serve without pay. Over the years, government agency representatives and private organizations and individuals have also given much of their time. Five of the agencies working closely with districts have signed memorandums of understanding with each district. They are the Department of Forests and Waters, The Pennsylvania Game and Fish Commissions, The Pennsylvania Department of Highways and the US Soil Conservation Service. Of course, the indi-

vidual farmer or landowner who becomes a district cooperater is the most important volunteer. He asks these technicians to help him remodel his farm and become a conservation farmer but he is not obligated in any way to follow the advice he receives.

As the founding fathers envisioned, the new soil conservation district was to be a "powerless" government Districts in effect are subdivisions of state government but do not have police, legislative or judicial powers.

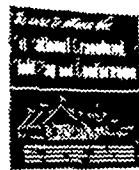
What, then can a "powerless" government do? Actually they can do many things. In fact, Pennsylvania's soil conservation districts are just beginning to utilize the many provisions of the enabling act. For example, district directors have the power to own and operate buildings and equipment, hire personnel, carry out research, establish any of the conservation practices they wish and enter into cooperative agreements with individuals and organizations. The

potential is there — the job is up to the district directors and the local people.

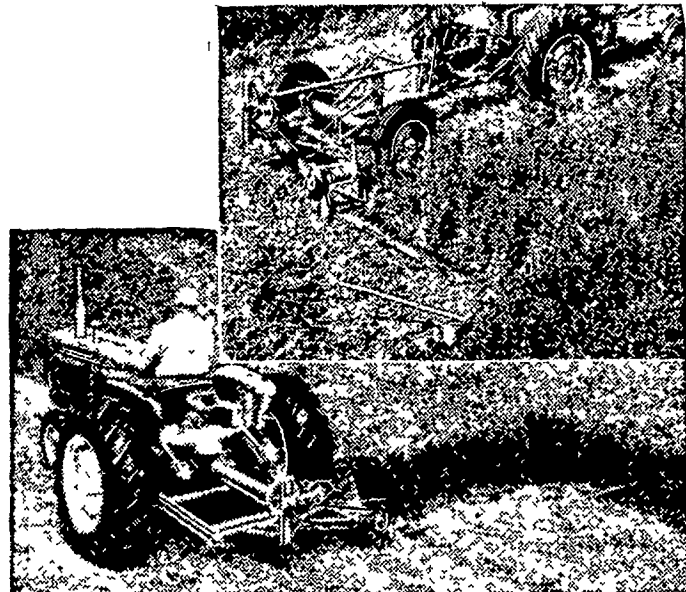
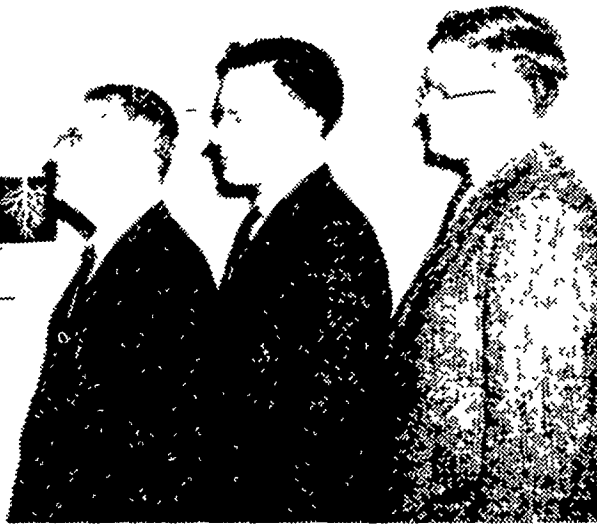
Often, soil conservation districts offer the only opportunity for all organizations dealing with conservation of the land to sit around the same table and discuss common problems. Here government representatives have an equal opportunity to voice their ideas and problems. District directors, as key farmers, can weigh the merits of these ideas in terms of local attitudes and needs. Coordination can then reach beyond the meeting table to the farmer who benefits by working with a variety of conservation agencies through one organization — his local soil conservation district. This is a story in itself to be told in the next article of this series.

Next week:

"The Key: Working With Nature."



Poster for 1st National Grassland Field Days, Aug 15-17 at Hershey, attracts, from left, Richard C. Lighter, Gettysburg; Merle V. Adams, Somerville, N.J., and Harold E. Stewart, Harrisburg. Lighter is chairman of Pennsylvania State Plowing Contest final day. Stewart is Dauphin county agent.



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