

USDA poll says people believe in conservation

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Results of a national survey of the public's attitudes on several major agricultural issues, including conservation of soil, water and related resources, were released on January 17 by M. Rupert Cutler, assistant secretary of agriculture for natural resources and environment.

"The survey revealed that most American people believe more soil and water conservation is needed and are committed to a conservation ethic," Cutler said. "A majority also favors a public and private partnership to resolve soil and water problems."

Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., interviewed 7,010 adults—representing a cross section of the nation's population—during the survey, conducted between Oct. 19 and Nov. 21, 1979.

"We conducted the survey to assess the public's opinions, attitudes and understanding of soil and water conservation problems and practices," Cutler said. "We will use the findings to help design future USDA soil and water conservation programs." Other questions sought public opinion on such issues as gasohol, small farms and priorities in land use.

Some of the survey's major findings are:

—half of all Americans consider misuse of our soil and water resources a serious problem.

—53% consider the loss of good farmland a serious problem.

—people see conservation as a joint public and private responsibility and feel the burden should be shared fairly between government and farmer or other landowner.

—by 7 to 1, Americans accept federal action to protect farmland from erosion as a proper role for government.

—Americans support the concept of small, family farms and federal policies aimed at preserving and increasing them. However, people understand that most of the food grown in this country is produced on large farms.

—the public consistently indicated a preference for allocating a greater share of soil and water resources to agriculture—specifically to food production—rather than to competing housing, industrial, energy or recreation uses.

—more than eight of 10 Americans are rated moderate-to-high on a conservation ethic scale, believing conservation is important for the country.

—more than three-fourths of Americans feel we have not reached the point in soil and water conservation efforts where we should be more concerned about holding down costs than completing the work that remains to be done.

—by more than 2 to 1, the American public says gasohol should receive more government support than synthetic fuels. In head-to-head choices, gasohol is seen as more likely than synthetic fuels to reduce oil imports, keep down gasoline costs and less likely to damage the land.

—Americans value highly citizen participation in federal decision making, even though their reported participation is rather low (33%). A large proportion value the ability to have a say in decision making. They would participate more, they say, if they felt the effects of government decisions were more direct or if they felt they were truly being heard. While 21 percent say they would participate much more if the government were to help pay the cost of their participation, twice that number (44%) say government financial help would not increase their participation.

—a substantial majority of the public feels government should provide loans to

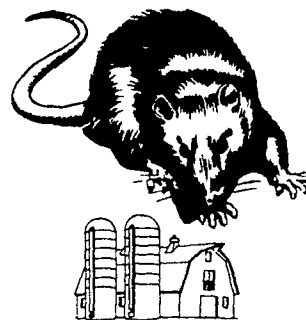
people trying to get started in farming.

"The survey is one of the public participation activities undertaken in the development of the future USDA program for conserving soil and water resources," Cutler said. "This effort is a response to the Soil and Water Conservation Resources Act of 1977 (RCA), P.L. 95-192."

Cutler said the USDA's Soil Conservation Service commissioned the survey on behalf of the USDA and the RCA Coordinating Committee. Later this month USDA will release drafts of proposed conservation objectives and program strategies for conserving soil and water resources. At that time the public will have the opportunity to comment on the various proposals.

About one-fourth of our nation's farms, or roughly 600,000, produce nearly 80 percent of our food and fiber, with the largest 200,000 farms already producing half the agricultural supply.

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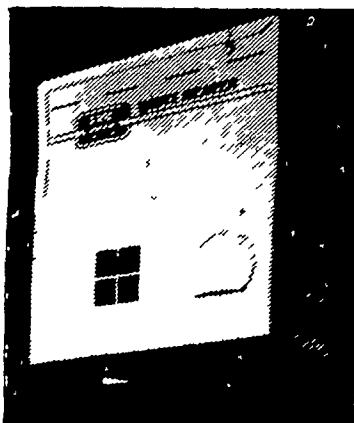
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