

USDA calls for comments on conservation

HARRISBURG — Citizens will have an opportunity to comment on the future of the Nation's soil and water conservation programs during a 60-day public review period, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has announced.

Carl L. Kaufman, State Executive Director of the Agriculture Stabilization and Conservation Service said the proposals for a national soil and water conservation program were developed by a coordinating committee made up of members from nine USDA agencies, plus the Office of Management and Budget, and the Council on Environmental Quality.

The process included consideration of public input from 9,000 public meetings held nationwide in 1978.

The Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act was enacted in 1977. The Act called for the U.S. Department of Agriculture to appraise the condition of the nation's renewable natural resources, and to propose alternative conservation programs to guide the nation's future conservation activities.

Basic information about the RCA process and proposals may be seen in four draft documents available for public review in the county ASCS Offices.

The first document, Draft Appraisal Part I, describes the status and condition of U.S. natural resources and provides information on: quantity and quality; resource legislation and regulations; and major uses of nonfederal land.

The Draft Appraisal Part II, identifies and analyzes national resource conservation problems for: reducing erosion and preserving prime farmlands; improving water quality; conservation water; improving fish and wildlife habitat, including the preservation of wetlands; reducing upstream flood damages; conserving energy; and solving related resource problems.

It also projects demands on soil and water resources to the year 2030 and suggests levels of management that could be used to preserve these resources. Further, it summarizes trends in rural land ownership and describes the contribution of state and local programs to soil and water conservation.

The third document, Program Report and Environmental Impact Statement, presents the goals for resource conservation over the next 50 years, and details activities needed to meet those goals.

Seven alternative soil and water conservation programs to carry out these activities are also discussed. They are:

Redirection of Present Programs - USDA would continue existing programs, but the allocation of funds and personnel would be redirected to better solve certain national resource problems. Cooperation would continue to be mostly voluntary.

Cross Compliance - Producers would be required to apply effective conservation measures to qualify for benefits under other USDA programs, including commodity price supports, low interest loans, cost sharing, and crop insurance.

Regional Resource Project Approach - This strategy would direct USDA programs toward the more urgent and chronic regional resource problems. Federal participation would be available only for programs that contribute to meeting national conservation objectives.

State Leadership - States would assume leadership for planning and carrying out conservation programs. State and local governments would develop conservation programs for USDA approval, provide technical assistance to producers, and fund those activities that benefit mostly state and local people. USDA would fund activities that have national benefits but are

beyond the interest or financial resources of the producer or state and local governments.

Regulatory Emphasis - This strategy would emphasize the use of backup regulatory authorities at the local, state, and national level to carry out an effective national soil and water conservation program. This approach would be coupled with a strong cost share and technical assistance program and low interest loans that would offer incentives for resource management.

Conservation Performance Bonus - This strategy provides incentives to producers who voluntarily apply and maintain conservation measures that meet USDA standards. It offers incentives to obtain benefits under federal programs but has no required cross compliance. Priority would be given to resource areas where present conditions pose the greatest threat to future food and fiber production.

Natural Resource Contracts - USDA would offer to purchase erosion reduction, irrigation water reductions, and other outputs of conservation farm producers. The public would, in effect, buy specific benefits from those who run, operate, or control private natural resources.

A fourth RCA document or Summary is a condensed version of the information in Draft Appraisal Parts I and II and in the Program Report and Environmental Impact Statement document.

During the public review period, regional, state, and local meetings will be held to inform the public on the contents of the documents. The public is urged to provide comments on all parts of the RCA process. Citizens are invited to send written comments to the RCA Response Analysis Center, P.O. Box 888, Athens, Georgia 30603.

The RCA process is an

effort to look ahead to the future, to project resource demand over the next 50 years, and, based on this information, to select a strategy or combination of strategies that will be acceptable to producers and will also meet national objectives.

"Many questions need to be answered, such as how much are we willing to invest in conservation to insure a continued supply of food, fiber, clear water, and wildlife," said Kaufman. "At what level of government should a national conservation program be developed and carried out? Who will pay for these conservation efforts?"

Kaufman added citizen input will play an important role in deciding what strategies will be used to develop the national conservation program, to be transmitted by the President to Congress in 1980, and again in 1985.

Anyone interested in reviewing the documents or in finding out more information about upcoming

RCA meetings should contact their local Soil Conservation Service office of the ASCS staff.

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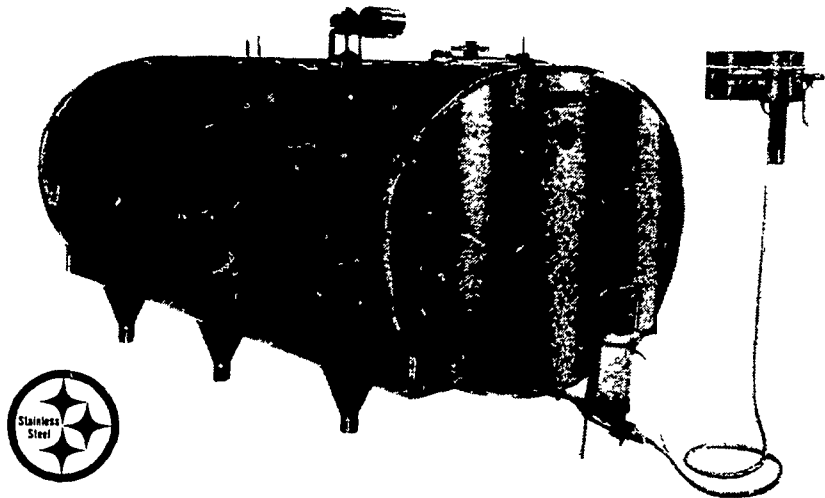
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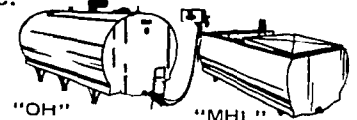
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