

USDA official stresses conservation of rural resources

WASHINGTON, D.C. — "There is an overriding need to conserve and improve in rural areas those basic resources on which life depends — our soil and water and forests. The continued availability of ample agricultural resources is basic to maintaining our current standard of living," Anson R. Bertrand, director of science and education for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, said recently.

Speaking at the Conference on Rural Conservation sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the National Association of Conservation Districts in Washington, Bertrand said, "We have come to see that there are limits to good farmland and water even in the United States. Most people now realize that we can no longer squander either land or water as if we had an unlimited drawing account in these two resources."

Bertrand said many people are attracted to rural areas today because of certain traditional advantages that persist there, such as the lack of congestion and the strains that go along with it, opportunities for nearby recreation, and a more instructive environment for bringing up children. "The trick, as our population increases, will be to keep rural America a pleasant and fulfilling place to work and live, while improving its capacity to grow the food, fiber and timber on which we

depend," he said. "Rural America is a place to live, but it is also where our agricultural plant is located."

Bertrand said the conservation of rural resources and communities is not going to be easy. "We now recognize that much worth saving in rural America is threatened and that something needs to be done about it."

He said recent studies by the USDA make clear that demand on rural resources will continue to grow rapidly in the years ahead.

"If current trends persist, demand for timber will more than double by 2030, water consumption will increase

by 60 percent, and demand for range grazing will rise by 40 percent," he said.

Soil erosion will continue to be a problem, with adverse impacts on crop yields and water quality.

"We are currently losing some 4 billion tons of soil a year to all types of erosion, despite 47 years of federal soil conservation programs," he said.

Bertrand cited problems such as prime farmland being converted to nonfarm purposes, the diminishing supply of irrigation water, and the vanishing wetlands.

"We are not facing a crisis today, nor do I believe we will face one tomorrow," Bertrand said. "I am saying that if we go on as we have, there is certain trouble down the road."

"If we take more good land out of farming, if our yields level off, if soil erosion continues unabated, if demand continues to increase — someday we will run short of food and fiber. It may first come in a drought year, or when unexpected crop disease takes its toll."

"Secretary of Agriculture Bergland has called current

trends a 'collision course with disaster.' But trends don't have to come true. These projections are nothing more than warning signals, and a wise nation can heed those warnings and take steps to turn things around."

Bertrand said it would be useful to emphasize a few basic principles in developing a national strategy for rural conservation. He recommended providing rural people with more information about resource management; more attractive incentives for land users to apply soil and water conservation techniques; better management of private forest lands; adequate research and extension help and conservation assistance directed to the needs of the small farm; and coordination of federal, state and local efforts to serve rural people.

Bertrand closed his address by urging that continuity in rural America be preserved and that we not forget our past as we wrestle with the problems of the future.

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