

Md.'ers give qualified support to Block's conservation program

COLLEGE PARK, Md. — A majority of Marylanders who commented on proposed changes in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's soil and water conservation program gave qualified support to Secretary Block's preferred program by 2 to 1. Almost half of those who responded nationwide opposed it.

Nationwide, respondents favored an alternative calling for continuation of current conservation program trends. Department officials admit that this alternative would result in lower funding and further degradation of soil, water and related resources. The alternative receiving the least support would redirect USDA conservation activities to areas of critical concern.

Public comment on the alternatives for a national soil and water conservation program were solicited last fall by the USDA's Soil Conservation Service. About 83,000 people commented nationwide, about 1,300 from Maryland.

Among those responding were governors, state and local agency officials, conservation districts, individuals, farmers, and civic and environmental organizations. About 62 percent of the respondents nationwide identified themselves as farm owners or operators; about 53 percent in Maryland.

Last fall Block called erosion on farmland one of the most critical

problems facing the nation. Yet the alternatives set forth did not ask for any significant funding increase for conservation nor did USDA specifically ask the public to comment on funding levels.

Nevertheless, an overwhelming majority of those who commented in Maryland volunteered that funding for conservation should be increased over that called for in the program alternatives. Many were concerned that the present level of federal assistance in Maryland would decline under Block's proposals. They felt that erosion would increase and the resource base degrade if this happened.

Block's preferred program, consisting of 20 features, would both redirect federal programs and give a greater role to state and local governments. While giving overall support, Maryland respondents objected to several aspects.

They were divided on one of the most controversial features, targeting USDA funds and people to areas with critical erosion and flooding problems. Comments showed, that they support targeting in concept, but not if it means taking money away from current conservation programs.

Many felt that targeting would penalize states like Maryland that were doing a good job of conservation by reallocating money and assistance to states that weren't. In fact, the department

has already begun to shift funds into targeted states. About 60 percent of respondents nationwide supported targeting.

A related feature that would provide USDA block grants to states for critical erosion and flooding problems by reducing budgets of other conservation agencies was rejected by 71 percent of the Maryland and 64 percent of the nationwide respondents. Those who commented said block grants were a good idea, but only if accompanied by additional funding.

Respondents from Maryland defended the present structure for administering conservation programs. They opposed proposals to establish new local, state and national coordinating boards to oversee conservation activities.

They felt that existing local soil conservation districts and the State Soil Conservation Committee were doing a good job. They said creating new boards would be wasteful and a duplication of effort. Nationwide, respondents opposed the new boards at the state and national level but were divided on the question of new local coordinating boards.

A majority of Marylanders agreed with the general population that farmers should be required to have a conservation plan to be eligible for Farmers Home Administration loans. Many who commented recommended that FmHA also require the plan to be

implemented before approving loan requests.

Sixty-three percent of Marylanders supported the proposal that cooperative actions be based on an agreement between each Governor and the Secretary of Agriculture. Only 32 percent of respondents nationwide supported this feature.

The other features of Block's preferred program received general overall support. They dealt with strengthening data collection and research programs, improving USDA programs by

eliminating conflicts and duplication of effort, emphasizing cost effective conservation practices and strengthening relationships with landowners and state and local government.

Although comments were received from all parts of the country, over one-third of the response came from five states: Kentucky, Oklahoma, Texas, California, and Tennessee. The comments received will be considered by the Secretary in finalizing the program proposal he submits to the President.

Wool, mohair support prices set for '82

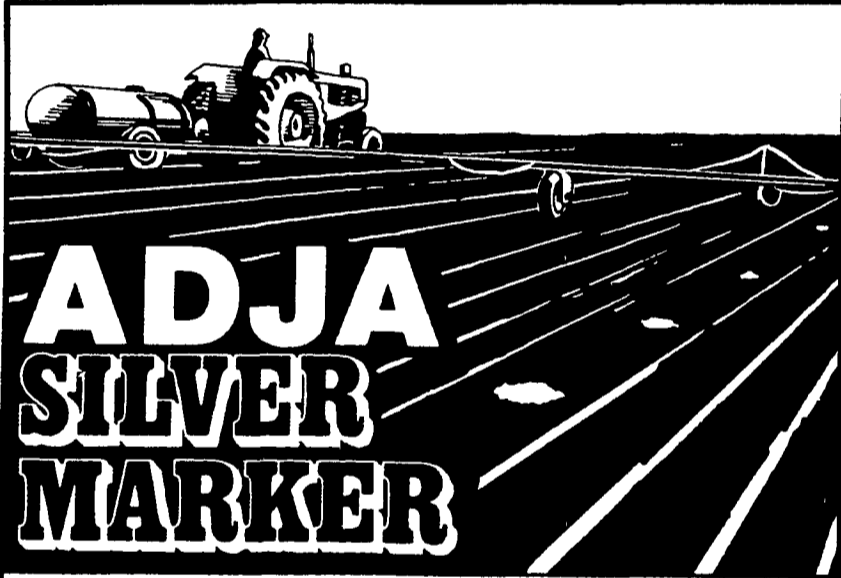
WASHINGTON, D.C. — Wool producers will receive support prices of \$1.37 per pound for 1982 marketings of shorn wool and \$3.977 per pound for mohair, according to Everett Rank, administrator of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service.

Pulled wool will continue to be supported at a level comparable to the support price for shorn wool through payments on unshorn lambs, Rank said.

As in past years, shorn wool payments will be based on a

percentage of each producer's returns from sales, Rank said. The percentage will be that required to raise the national average price received by all producers for shorn wool in 1982 up to the support price of \$1.37 a pound, he said. In 1981, shorn wool prices averaged about 95 cents per pound, he said.

Any mohair payments will be calculated in a manner similar to wool. After not making any mohair payments for ten years, payments were required for 1981 marketings and projected prices indicate payments may also be necessary for 1982 marketings, Rank said.



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