



The new Soil Conservation Service administrator, Peter Myers, recently spoke to newspaper farm editors about his controversial appointment and erosion problems facing the nation. With him was Neil Sampson, seated at his left, executive vice president of the National Assn. of Conservation Districts.

Peter Myers

(Continued from Page A1)

Myers who has experience with both flood and center-pivot irrigation used to grow crops on his Mississippi Delta soils. And, he's been practicing minimum tillage for the past 15 years.

Myers, like Block, is a hog farmer and has a 50-60 sow farrow-to-finish confinement hog setup with a central manure lagoon.

"I am a farmer even though I've managed to scrape the hog manure off my boots and I don't wear my bib overalls," said Myers, jokingly, about his transition from his Missouri farm to the nation's capital. "And I'll tell you what. I'm enjoying the new position and I feel very confident that I can handle the job."

Myers credited the professional staff at SCS with making his first day on the job in Washington a smooth transition, allowing him to move forward instead of slip backward.

"What I want to do and what I foresee myself doing is being the spokesman for the Soil Conservation Service and managing its 14,000 people. That's a little different than managing 3 or 4 guys, and about 50 or 60 sows, and maybe a few cows once in a while. But I look forward to the challenge."

Myer's conviction to soil conservation led him to the "challenge," despite the fact that, for a month, he turned down Block's offers to come to Washington. He admitted he finally decided that "maybe one guy can have a small impact on one of the most serious problems facing our country."

"We're blessed in this country with our soil, water, and climate. There are few countries in the world, there have been few nations in history, that have had this combination. And what we're rapidly doing is taking one of these resources and letting it run down the hills into the Mississippi and ruin the water. In a short number of years, we're not going to have anything left."

Soil blowing in the Great Plains, people who think breaking plows are still the best thing ever invented — these, said Myers, are the serious erosion problems he's facing. Another serious problem is the farmer's "image."

"I'm a farmer, and I'm hard-headed, and I'm independent, and I like to look at that clean plowed field out there. We see beauty in ground rolling behind us in the breaking plow when we're up on the tractor seat," Myers said, adding in the same breath that this "beautiful image" has to be destroyed in the farmers' minds and replaced by an image of residue "sticking up on top of the

ground."

"We've got to have grassed waterways, and farm with different methods. We have to change our habits and do some things the neighbors may frown on for a few years," Myers said.

Myers put the problems of saving the nation's natural resources "right up there with national defense."

"In a few hundred years or less, if we continue like we're doing, we're not gonna have anything to produce a crop to sell overseas," Myers predicted, along with a hesitant forecast that this nation should still be able to produce enough food to feed its citizens."

Referring to the figures that link every bushel of exported corn to two bushels of 'exported' soil, Myers stressed that "there are things we can do" to curb this soil loss.

"We've got a lot of tools (conservation practices) to fight this, and very little money," stressed Myers. He added the biggest challenge facing SCS is dealing with "good ol' hard-headed farmers like me who have to change our concepts" of conservation.

Myers acknowledged there are a lot of farmers and other landowners who are doing an excellent job in conserving the soil, but noted there are other people "handling land" that aren't.

Waking up these land abusers, said Myers, is one of his roles as SCS administrator.

"As a farmer, I can go out and say 'Hey guys, I'm one of you and I see the problems. And I see that you and I are causing the problem.' And maybe they'll listen to me. I haven't been in Washington long enough to be considered a bureaucrat."

"We as farmers and landowners have got to take a hold and manage this soil," said the new SCS administrator.

He openly opposed any federal regulation of soil erosion, stating that each state can handle enforcement in their own manner.

Citing the state erosion control regulations and resulting conservation in Iowa, Myers said "You can see the terraces, you can see the strip tillage. They've told their people 'Your going to have to do something about erosion, or something's going to happen.'"

"I don't like that. As a farmer I don't like to have someone saying 'You've got to do so and so,' because this country was built on private ownership of land and free enterprise. But somehow we've got to do this, and I wouldn't want to see it (regulatory authority) any higher than the state level."

Myers said the SCS role in this challenge of erosion control is to provide the needed technical

service to landowners and to educate the public, from school children to adults.

Regarding the Resources Conservation Act survey conducted by SCS last year, Myers announced the results of the survey and SCS's recommendations were given to the Secretary Block. He added that USDA would be passing this information on to the White House by June and that he was optimistic the president would be announcing a program by mid-July.

Myers mentioned that the "sticky" item on the RCA questionnaire about developing state and local coordinating boards would not be advocated by Block or himself. "We're advocating cooperation among the boards that are already there — Districts, ASCS, SCS, Extension Service," he revealed.

Further discussion of the RCA survey, Myers said, would be premature. However, he did say SCS would not curtail its urban landowner assistance since 97 percent of the U.S. taxpayers are nonfarmers.

Concerning the possibilities of getting the Rural Abandoned Mine Program funds released from the federal Department of Interior, Myers said he's got "a real hangup" with the situation.

"The coal mines have put this money in the trust fund and there it's sittin' while we've got all kinds of work we need to get done in the country."

"I feel very sympathetic toward this. It's a real problem and a squabble that I'm going to get in. I don't know if I'll win or not," Myers stated.

Taking a final look at the criticism that surrounded his

appointment, Myers pointed out that the person filling the chair as SCS administrator has been changed politically in the past but has never been an outsider before he accepted.

Will his being an outsider hinder his ability to make policy decisions? According to Myers, the answer is an emphatic "no."

"It's a two-way street. I hope I'm more than a policy-implementer," he said, then added after a pause, "I think the chief administrator can be a policy-setter if he goes about it right."

With his strong convictions about soil conservation and his determination to succeed, this Missouri farmer is bound to 'show' everyone else that the soil conservation business can be learned from the ground up and that good administrators don't have to grow up in the SCS ranks.

Conservation data shows more land open to erosion

WASHINGTON D.C. — The subject of soil conservation has reached the greatest level of public interest in the last several decades, reports Neil Sampson, executive vice president of the National Association of Conservation Districts.

Why this sudden interest in what used to be just a farming problem? Says Sampson, it's a product of the times and the availability of more sophisticated, public information.

One of the first sources of soil conservation information was the Soil Conservation Service's 1967 Conservation Needs Inventory which went almost unnoticed during the time of crop surplus during which it was taken. The survey was conducted at the time by SCS to justify its soil and water conservation services which were carried out since the 1930s.

"People kept using that as the authoritative data base on the agricultural land resource

situation in the country," Sampson says. But this wasn't enough information to "look at what was going on" in agriculture — merely enough to make some guesstimates.

Then in 1975, the Potential Cropland Study was completed which quickly revealed that the U.S. "did not have an unending supply of unused cropland. We couldn't just keep wearing it out and moving on."

The 1977 Natural Resource Inventories confirmed and fortified these earlier studies.

"It began to dawn on people that we were going to have to start thinking about limits," says Sampson, noting that the Soil Conservation Service is once again compiling information to be released in the next 6-8 months. This new data should reveal what has happened to American agriculture since 1977.

But, remarks Sampson, the mammoth task of gleaning this

information is not an easy one. "I estimated that if you were driving down the highway 55 miles an hour and were able to see a half mile each way, you'd drive steady for 13 years before you'd ever get a glimpse at the non-federal land that is used to grow crops and cattle. That's the size of the resource base we're talking about."

In 1977, SCS estimated there were 127 million acres of potential cropland remaining in the land inventory. Today's inventory shows an additional 50 million acres have been converted to cropland during the past 5 years, reports Sampson.

What happened during that time to create a price signal which would bring almost half of the estimated potential cropland in the nation back into production? The answer, says Sampson, will be in the new SCS statistics.

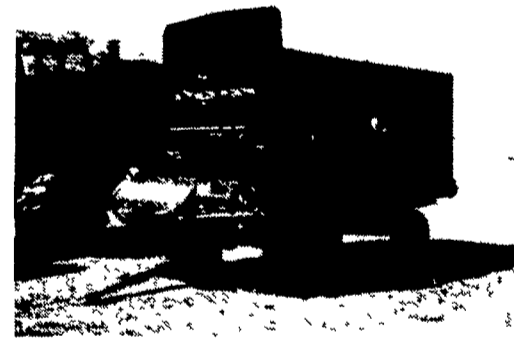
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(Turn to Page A22)

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