

Soil Conservation Districts: Perspectives On Their Success

As Written By Hugh Hammond Bennett
Chief, USDA Soil Conservation Service
Journal of Soil and Water Conservation, July 1946

Prepared By: Thomas W. Christensen, Retired USDA Natural Resources Conservationist, February 2020



The first issue of the Soil Conservation Society of America's Journal of Soil and Water Conservation was published in July 1946. In this publication, USDA Soil Conservation Service Chief Hugh Hammond Bennett was listed as the "Founder" and Ralph H. Musser of Milwaukee, Wisconsin as the President, among the Officers of the Society. Within the 52 pages of content in this first issue of the Journal (Volume 1, No. 1) was a 13-page article by Chief Bennett titled "A National Program of Soil Conservation". This article provided Bennett's perspectives on the factors essential to a national soil conservation program. At the time of this article in the spring of 1946, Bennett pointed out that farmers were setting up their soil conservation districts at the rate of nearly two districts and a million acres per day.

Hugh Hammond Bennett goes on to say the following in his July 1946 article: "The soil conservation districts of the country are action districts. They do more than talk and hold meetings. They plan and push and work to obtain the actual application of well rounded programs of soil and water conservation on the land itself."

Chief Bennett continues by stating "Districts are getting the job done. Soil conservation districts are succeeding in their objectives. In the beginning there were many skeptics. There was talk that they wouldn't work. But they have worked, and are moving ahead rapidly. There are some very good reasons why they have worked. I would say there are eight primary reasons, although there are others.

Soil conservation districts are succeeding because:

1. They are typically American, in that they provide a means for mutual action toward common objectives as determined by the majority.
2. They are independent. Their destinies are not controlled by outside influences, either State or Federal.
3. They exist for action. Their whole being is directed toward positive accomplishments.
4. Their work is founded on widespread local understanding. When farmers learn the facts about the land and agriculture in their district, they can agree on a united course of action and carry it out with every reasonable prospect of widespread satisfaction. Moreover, districts usually bring together as supervisors, by popular election, the leading farmers or landowners of the various localities, with the result that some of the best thinking in each community is regularly interchanged with that of neighboring communities.
5. They are definitive organizations that are able to plan programs, obtain information, procure governmental and other services, and do many other things that the same farmers as individuals working alone, would not have been able to do.
6. They provide a recognized centering point and clearing house in the locality for carrying forward advanced agricultural programs and developments, in general, from weed control campaigns to group drainage projects, as they are in the best interests of soil and water conservation and proper land use.
7. They provide a practical medium through which the encouragement, influence, and assistance of local business and professional interests can be brought to bear in an effective, constructive way for the benefit of agriculture in the district.
8. They are in a position to provide helpful local guidance, responsive to the needs and desires of the local people, to such professional workers as the county agent, soil conservation technician, forester, and highway engineer."

Source: "A National Program of Soil Conservation" in Journal of Soil and Water Conservation, Volume 1, No. 1, July 1946, Hugh Hammond Bennett, Chief, USDA Soil Conservation Service, pages 21-34.