

Promoting Sustainable Development

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Annually, nearly 90 million people are added to the global population, with the U.S. population increasing by 3 million each year. Within the next 40 years, the world's population is anticipated to reach 9 billion. By beginning to actively discuss the concepts of sustainable development, it is more likely that future generations will be afforded an improved quality of life. As world food demand increases, total farm acreage in the United States has been declining since the 1950s. Pressure to develop land for other purposes has been escalating, resulting in the conversion of millions of acres of productive agricultural land to suburbs, strip malls and other purposes. Protecting farmland, promoting agricultural production systems that produce adequate food without destroying natural resource base that future generations will rely upon, as well.

Put simply, sustainable development is a focus on meeting the needs of current world populations without sacrificing the quality of life of future generations. From promoting sustainable agriculture and resisting urban sprawl in America to helping address desertification and deforestation in the developing world, President Clinton and Vice President Gore understood that sustainable development is a global challenge – one that addresses environmental quality, economic opportunity and greater social equity for all populations.

Background

In 1992, more than 100 heads of state met in Rio de Janeiro for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. This "Earth Summit" was convened to address urgent problems, ranging from food security, biodiversity, deforestation and desertification, dwindling water supply, increasing populations and energy use, climate change, and the growing disparity between developed and developing countries. At the Earth Summit, the United States signed a number of sweeping international agreements to promote more sustainable development in the 21st century.

The President's Council on Sustainable Development

To follow through on the commitments made at the Earth Summit, President Clinton established the President's Council on Sustainable Development. This 25-member Council included representatives from government, business and industry, environmental groups and other. The Council made a wide range of recommendations aimed at ensuring the Nation's use of natural resources, Federal money, technology and government policy address the country's future as well as current needs.

Deputy Secretary Rich Rominger was an active USDA leader on the Council, serving as co-chair of the Council's Task Force on Sustainable Agriculture. His leadership was critical to translating the concept of sustainable development into USDA forestry, agricultural conservation and other programs. One key change he helped bring about was the creation of the position of USDA Director of Sustainable Development in 1995. This person would advocate integration of the concepts of sustainable development into USDA policies and programs. Because sustainable development is not a "program," but a way of thinking and doing business, USDA opted against building a separate new administrative structure, focusing instead on coordination among all Department agencies through a USDA Council on Sustainable Development.

Sustainable Agriculture Learning Initiative

Central to sustainable development is sustainable agriculture – farming and ranching that balances economic profitability with environmental stewardship. Farmers who want to engage in

sustainable agricultural practices often have trouble obtaining credit for their pursuit of new farming approaches.

Education about lending, crop insurance and sustainable agriculture may help remove these barriers to greater adoption of sustainable farming practices. The Sustainable Agriculture Learning Initiative is intended to facilitate the introduction and adoption of new sustainable enterprises and practices by addressing credit and crop insurance obstacles. The objectives are to (1) educate farmers, and those who assist farmers, so they understand how lenders typically evaluate business--including agriculture--loan applications; this should improve the success rate for obtaining credit; (2) educate lenders, so they understand sustainable enterprises and practices; this should reduce lenders' risk concerns; (3) create a dialogue with producers about ways to lift the barriers in crop insurance policies, and educate the crop insurance industry--and others--about sustainable agriculture; this should improve the use of crop insurance as a risk management tool; and (4) expand acceptance of sustainable agriculture by giving lenders, farmers, crop insurance representatives and others a practical understanding of sustainable agriculture and the resources to encourage and support its growth.

A pilot project will be conducted in 2001 to (1) survey and assess geographic areas to select the training seminar site; (2) ascertain the type and nature of the obstacles to sustainable agriculture; (3) develop training materials and training evaluation tools; and (4) conduct the educational seminar/module.

Sustainable Forest and Resource Management

After endorsement of the Statement of Forest Principles at the Earth Summit, in 1993, Canada convened in Montreal an international seminar of experts on sustainable development of boreal and temperate forests. Subsequently, an initiative was launched to develop and implement internationally agreed criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management at the national level. This "Montreal Process" began in June 1994 and concluded in 1995 in Santiago Chile where 10 countries, including the United States, endorsed a comprehensive set of 7 criteria and 67 indicators for the conservation and sustainable management of temperate and boreal forests. Two additional countries have joined the initial 10, and several other similar styled processes for different forest types are proceeding around the world. These criteria and indicators relate to forest conditions, attributes or functions, the values or benefits associated with the environmental and socio-economic goods and services that forest provide, and the overall policy framework of a country to facilitate sustainable forestry. These criteria and indicators help fulfill international agreements made on biodiversity, climate change and desertification, and furthers commitments made by tropical timber consumer countries in January 1994 to the sustainable management of their respective forests by the year 2000. The United States will report on domestic implementation of these criteria and indicators in 2003.

The Clinton Administration, through the USDA Forest Service, has undertaken a variety of mechanisms to move toward the goal set by President Clinton to achieve sustainable forest management in this country by the year 2000. Some of these actions include:

- The Forest Service became the first USDA agency to establish national leadership roles for sustainable resource management.
- A Sustainable Development Issues Team was chartered in 1996 in the Forest Service to integrate sustainability issues through incorporation of the Criteria and Indicators for

Sustainable Forest Management into agency operations. An Ecosystem Sustainability Corporate Team was established in 2000 to explicitly focus on achieving the goal of sustainability. These bodies will help ensure a more integrated approach to management and planning of all national forest resources based on the balancing of ecological, economic and social aspects of forestry, including local, community-based forestry.

- National accountability tools have been established through the national strategic plan to include corporate goals, objectives, and land-based performance measures and line officer performance standards that are linked to sustainable forest management. From now on, sustainable forest management will be the standard by which all Forest Service employees will be assessed.
- The recently published final rule on National Forest System Land and Resource Management Planning is focused on sustainability. This means that management of the National Forests will be based on a premise of ecological sustainability that protects the forest ecosystem in addition to economic uses of the forest.
- At the forest management unit scale, the agency completed an independent study in 1999 of various criteria and indicators of sustainable forestry involving the Boise National Forest and other public and private organizations as part of a larger project of the Center for International Forestry Research. Studies are now underway in six additional National Forests to help determine how Forest Service and local forest managers need to change how they do business to assure sustainable forest management.

The leadership of the Clinton-Gore Administration, along with the work of the President's Council on Sustainable Development and the international forestry community, have led to changes not only in the Federal sector, but in State and local governments and private industry, as well. All of these activities help in moving the Nation towards the Clinton goal of sustainable forest management.

There are numerous other activities across the forestry community that focus on sustainable development actions in which the Forest Service and other USDA agencies participate including:

- the Sustainable Forestry Initiative of the American Forest and Paper Association;
- the Sustainable Forestry Partnership, a joint university effort begun in 1995 to jointly focus on sustainable forest management by non-industrial private forest landowners and others who own, manage, and affect non-Federal forests (As part of the work of the roundtable on sustainable forests and follow-up on the National Research Council's report on non-Federal forests);
- the National Association of State Foresters and State forestry organizations efforts to advance statewide use of sustainable forest management criteria and indicators. For example, the State of Oregon is using this framework to assess its state lands, and the State of Maryland has a Strategic Forest Resource Assessment underway that will link to the criteria and indicators.
- As recommended by the President's Council on Sustainable Development, the Forest Service is participating in the multi-stakeholder Roundtable on Sustainable Forests that involves more than 40 organizations. The forum seeks to achieve active and meaningful participation by all sectors with an interest in sustainable forests to help forest owners work together, through the criteria and indicators, to achieve Sustainable Forest Management in this country.

- Criteria and indicators are being explored for other resources, particularly rangelands. Also a diverse group of government, industry, non-government organizations, and academia are working together through a sustainable minerals roundtable to define the place of minerals in sustainability and then to work collaboratively to develop a consensus set of mineral indicators applicable at the national scale.

In addition to domestic implementation, sustainable development and various facets of its agenda are reviewed, discussed, and negotiated with other countries. USDA's Director of Sustainable Development provides technical and policy expertise to the State Department and represents USDA in State Department negotiations on sustainable agriculture, including at the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development and the U.N. General Assembly Special Session on Sustainable Development. Other international fora at which issues of sustainable agriculture are integral include: the Asian-Pacific Economic Council's Agriculture Technical Committee, the Bolivia Summit of the Americas and specific bilateral discussions, including those with China and Russia.

A Sustainable Agriculture Success Story - Twelve Aprils

Tom Trantham is a dairy farmer near Pelzer, South Carolina, who has grappled with what it means to be sustainable in agriculture. During the 1980s and early 1990s, Trantham was a top producing dairyman in his State. He relied on conventional dairy methods of keeping his cows in the barn, using his fields to grow corn feed and silage, and then hauling the feed to the barn. Successful when judged by a high level of milk production, Trantham felt he was losing his shirt financially. One morning he woke up, "wishing the dairy barn would burn down." He was faced with the predicament of taking on more debt to increase the size of his operation and maintain his cash flow. Conventional wisdom in agriculture has been that farmers need to get bigger operations or get out of farming. Instead, Trantham found a different approach to dairy production. Unable to afford commercial fertilizer for his fields, he applied some of his cow manure to his pasture and observed excellent growth in the pasture plants. He then began to plant some of his fields to pasture and take his cows out to graze rather than haul feed from the fields to the barn.

Trantham calls his new dairy system "Twelve Aprils." His goal is to have lush, spring-like pastures year round to graze his dairy herd by planting a variety of pasture plants and rotating cows frequently among pastures. Others refer to this new style of dairy operation as "management intensive grazing." It differs from traditional use of pastures in that cows are not simply turned loose into one large pasture for the entire summer, but are instead moved frequently among many small pastures that are intensively managed.

Rotational grazing has lowered Trantham's production costs dramatically. Although the milk production per cow dropped some initially, it later returned to the level he had achieved with a conventional approach. His net profits are now higher, and instead of having to develop a larger operation, he has actually been able to reduce the size of his herd. Along with higher profit, Trantham says his environmental problems have been reduced, since cow manure is not accumulating in the barn. His enjoyment of farming has increased, with less time spent in the barn, and more time working with his animals outdoors. He also has eliminated the labor time he used to spend growing corn to feed his cows. Overall, Trantham feels his new system has greatly improved the overall sustainability of his farm.

Tom has been innovative in using a variety of USDA programs to help him change directions including the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program and many of the

environmental programs administered by the Department's Natural Resource Conservation Service.

Conclusion

USDA has begun to institute several programs that better integrate a number of elements of sustainable development. Some programs such as the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, integrated pest management, and no-till conservation have been a priority for a number of years. The 1996 Farm Bill reauthorized several existing conservation programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program and established some new ones such as the Environmental Quality Improvement Program, the Farmland Protection Program, and the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program. Secretaries Espy and Glickman did much to add a new dimension of thinking to USDA by: broadening the understanding of who the USDA client base is and stressing new approaches to farm, forest and rural community viability, such as the farm-to-school program of the Food and Nutrition Service; increasing the number of farmers markets, developing new regulations on standards for organic agriculture and national forest planning; initiating a role for USDA in community gardens; emphasizing the importance of food security both at home and abroad; enhancing the understanding of what is needed in a farm safety net; expanding the crops available for crop insurance, and increasing public participation in USDA programs and decision-making.

There remains, however, much room for more changes and new ways of doing business. New programs, different choices, and more education are needed. The larger task is for USDA to better integrate the concepts of sustainable development throughout its programs and policies for agriculture, forestry and rural communities. The Department also must continue to seek new ways to serve USDA constituents wishing to move forward on the path of sustainable agriculture, forestry and rural communities, whether it be in new research and marketing programs, education, or extension for individual farmers, statistics and information in new markets, or development of information and processes that foster integration of social, economic, and environmental data for community decision making.

As Bill Clinton and Al Gore have both said and shown through their leadership and actions, economic prosperity and environmental quality do not have to compete. They can be achieved together. It is important that the Nation keep foremost in its priority-setting and policy-making this belief that the Clinton Administration used to guide so many of its decisions. In the 21st century, the Nation can no longer go back in our thinking of how we meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The way the country, and the world, now look at development and environment issues has changed forever. The idea that environmental quality, economic development and social equity can be compatible and achieved, not one at the expense of the other, but together and for the long term, is now a lasting approach to current decision-making and future strategic planning. In fact, sustainable forest management has become such a commonly accepted idea that major national hardware chains, like Home Depot, are starting to sell wood only from forests that are "certified" to be managed sustainably. The notion of sustainable agriculture becomes more central every day as we work to eradicate poverty and hunger in the world, while maintaining the environment, so food security can be achieved not just now, but for future generations. While the Clinton-Gore legacy is a world-wide approach to addressing this most pressing issue, given the scale of the challenge facing the world, the work itself has just begun.