

ORAL HISTORY
JAMES R. LYONS, DEPUTY SECRETARY
NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT

00:00:14:25 Q: Today is December 4th of the year 2000. I'm Larry Quinn with the USDA's Office of Communications and today we're visiting with Jim Lyons, Undersecretary of Agriculture for Natural Resources and Environment.

00:00:27:17 And, Jim, you came to the department very early in the Clinton Administration with a significant background in the resources management area. Tell us a bit about your background.

00:00:36:28 A: Sure, Larry. I am-- actually have undergraduate and graduate degrees in forestry. Undergraduate degree from Rutgers in New Jersey and a Master's degree from the (Unint.) School of Forestry in Environmental Studies. In fact, that's where I'm gonna head after I finish up my tour of duty with the Clinton Administration.

00:00:53:17 I worked in Forestry and Natural Resources in Washington, D.C. for my entire career, in fact. Before I joined the administration, I worked on Capitol Hill and was a Staff Assistant on the House Committee on Agriculture. Dealt

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with many of the issues that I've been addressing during my tenure with the Clinton Administration.

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Between the Hill and coming to work here at the Department of Agriculture, I actually served on the Transition Team for USDA which was a very enlightening experience. Learned a lot about the department that I didn't know. Got exposed to many of the issues that confront a Secretary of Agriculture and, in fact, had an opportunity to brief incoming Secretary Espy on the issues in my particular area dealing with forestry and conservation.

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So that was a very good experience and certainly, I think, gave me a leg up, if you will, in terms of my ultimate nomination and confirmation for the position that I hold today.

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Q: President Clinton nominated you for then an Assistant Secretary position in March, I believe, and the confirmation came a couple of months later?

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00:02:02:24 A: That's right. There were actually a lot of things going on at that point in time. President Clinton, during his candidacy, made a commitment with the Pacific Northwest to try and deal with a very difficult issue that was affecting the region at the time.

00:02:15:16 It was a controversy over managing Old World Forest and protecting the Northern Spotted Owl. It was an issue that really tied the region up in knots and the Forest Services Timber Sale Program came to a halt because of a cording junction. But I was asked to do some work on that issue while at the same time working, if you will, to seek the position of then Assistant Secretary.

00:02:40:26 In working on the Transition Team, one of the issues that we addressed was the structure of the department. And given the broad range of issues that USDA deals with, there was concern expressed that there-- giving equal weight to issues within the department. That is that the issues in Natural Resources and Environment should be

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given the same standing as issues in World Development or issues in Farm Services or in Nutrition.

00:03:06:26 So one of the things we actually recommended to Secretary Espey was that he look at the structure of the department and try and determine whether or not some-- some additional changes should be made. That ultimately led to the Secretary recommending a legislative package that would restructure the department and actually make each of the missionaries, as we refer to them, undersecretary level positions.

00:03:30:12 So, in my case, what was once the position of Assistant Secretary was elevated actually by legislative direction to a position as Undersecretary for National Resources and Environment.

00:03:42:06 Q: That happened in 1994 when the Reorganization Act passed?

00:03:45:20 A: That's right. That was actually part of the

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Reorganization Act which did two things. It eliminated a number of agencies, but also restructured the department to give equal standing to each of the missionaries. And, frankly, I think in the Natural Resources and Environment area that was long overdue because half the employees in the Department of Agriculture work in Natural Resources and Environment.

00:04:04:28 Most of those with the Forest Service, about 35,000, but at the time that we took office, there were almost 15,000 people working in NRCS and close to 40,000 working in the Forest Service. So, given the fact that half the employees in the department worked in this arena, it seemed to-- fully appropriate and I think important to recognize Natural Resources and Environment as one of the key components of USDA's programs.

00:04:32:22 Q: At the same time your title changed, the name of the organization, Soil Conservation Service, changed too, didn't it?

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00:04:39:03 Q: Yeah. It was part of a philosophy that we were trying to advocate overall when we first took office. I was insistent on trying to insure that both the Forest Service and the NRCS or then the Soil Conservation Service were recognized for more than simply the focus that the foresters then had on timber and SES's focus on soil conservation.

00:05:03:01 Frankly, they were doing a great deal more and their mission was much broad. The Forest Service was focused on-- more and more on protecting the environment, on protecting water quality and wildlife habitat. The spotted owl controversy a good example of that.

00:05:15:24 And the Soil Conservation Service was doing a great deal more than simply soil conservation work. So we recommended a name change for the Soil Conservation Service to the Natural Resources Conservation Service to really reflect that breadth. In fact, Rich Romanger (ph.) was the person who came up with the name and became the strongest advocate which was, again, adopted in the

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Reorganization Act.

00:05:37:27 The Forest Service's name remained the same, but in the case of the Forest Service and NRCS, I think we really broaden the mission. Instead of two agencies focused on commodities, we started to recognize the other "commodities" that they produced like clean water and clean air and wildlife habitat and really a healthy living environment.

00:05:57:03 So, in a manner of speaking, whereas we used to focus on timber and corn and wheat and soy beans, I think we focus more less traditional commodities but commodities that had really a broad and significant value to the public overall.

00:06:12:20 Q: With the background you brought to the department, obviously you had some goals in mind of what you would like to do in this job. Could you share some of those?

00:06:20:17 A: Sure. Well, that was one. I think one was to

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assure that the Department of Agriculture stepped up to the plate, if you will, in dealing with the broader range of natural resources and environmental issues.

00:06:31:21 I think common wisdom, or at least common perception among the public was that natural resource issues were the purview of the Department of the Interior and the environment was something that EPA dealt with. But, as I mentioned earlier, since half the employees in the department of work in this arena, I think it was important to elevate our profile and, in effect, broaden the scope of what we did.

00:06:52:04 When I first took office, the Forest Service really was viewed, I think, by the public at large as focused on timber and timber production, and timber sale levels were actually significantly higher than they are today.

00:07:01:16 So one of the things I tried to focus on, both in terms of policy priorities and in terms of some of the restructuring we did in the Forest Service, was really to

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broaden the scope of their activities, to enhance their focus on land stewardship and water quality and wildlife.

00:07:16:14 Also to help the public recognize that the Forest Service was about more than simply timber. We placed a great deal more emphasis on recreation. Recreation, in my mind, was the window through which many Americans got to see their national forests.

00:07:30:03 And we tried to help the public understand that national forests were a significant source of water, water supply. The national forests are principal water sheds for most of the major metropolitan areas in the west. We provide more recreation than even the Park Service and still maintain some of the most pristine areas in the United States.

00:07:49:22 We manage, in fact, two-thirds of the wilderness system in the lower 48. With regard to the Natural Resources Conservation Service, again, they had a desire to get

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away from this perception that we were simply focused on serving farmers, but that, in fact, the work we did in conservation was much broader than that.

00:08:06:11 Not only did we help farmers or producers improve their productivity and practice good stewardship, but in doing so and in working with private land owners, we were helping to improve water quality. We were actually enhancing wildlife habitat and dealing with air quality concerns.

00:08:21:27 And so many of the policies and the programs we tried to implement had that broadened scope. And I was fortunate and able to bring in some key people who shared that philosophy and really helped to broaden the scope of what we did and I think eight years later, reflecting back, I think made a significant mark in enhancing the public perception of the role of these agencies as good land stewards, not simply as-- as the producers of commodities.

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00:08:48:23 Q: So you and the two organizations you described had a significant part of what was called the "Clean Water Initiative"?

00:08:55:22 A: Well, actually, an interesting sideline of history, when the President announced an initiative to follow up on 20 years of progress in the Clean Water Act, he asked Dan Glickman and Carol Browner (who's the Administrator for EPA) to co-chair that.

00:09:15:23 So USDA and EPA were given joint responsibility for addressing-- or I should say developing the new agenda to address the next century of challenges in clean water. In fact, the biggest challenge that remains in dealing with clean water is-- is the challenge of (unint.) pollution and that clearly is a responsibility of USDA working with forest land owners and with agricultural producers to help enhance their ability to reduce the impacts they're having on water quality.

00:09:45:16 Q: Let's talk about the forestry aspect for a bit. The

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Northwest Forest Plan was a major activity that involved you and your staff. Tell us about that.

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A: Well, actually, that was my primary focus when I first came here. I was concerned about the fact that forestry had ground to a halt in the Northwest, if you will. The issue surrounded the fact that the Forest Service in the late 80s and early 90s really had failed to address its responsibility for protecting Old Growth Forest and Spotted Owls, actually under what are known as the "viability requirements" in the Natural Forest Management Act.

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This brought things to a halt and the previous administration, the Bush Administration, was unable or unwilling to really deal with. When I worked on Capitol Hill, one of the things I dealt with was this issue and I actually put together a team of scientists that were affectionately known as the "Gang of Four" by the timber industry.

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00:10:46:03 There were four eminent scientists who provided some--
some information, in fact, a report offering the congress
some alternatives of how to deal with this. Nothing came
of that report. The congress was really unable to
develop a solution.

00:10:59:20 So when I first came to the department, my primary
responsibility was first to help the President fulfill
his commitment to hold a conference in the Northwest to
bring parties together to discuss this issue. That
conference was held in early April of 1993.

00:11:18:05 We called it "The President's Forest Conference" and
actually I worked with Katie McGinty who ultimately
became the chairperson on the Council on Environmental
Quality, and another gentleman by the name of Tom Tuckman
who worked with us in the Pacific Northwest for a number
of years in putting that conference together.

00:11:33:21 It was a really unique conference. I don't think since
Teddy Roosevelt has a President assembled so many people,

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so many experts, so much of his cabinet. A number of cabinet officials attended everything from, of course, Secretary Espey, Secretary Babbitt, the Vice President, the Secretary of Labor and others to discuss this issue.

00:11:56:04 But then, based upon the outcome of the conference, was given principle responsibility for helping to put together the team that developed the President's Northwest Forest Plan, a team that was headed up by Jack (unint.) Thomas who was a close friend of mine who actually had been a member of the gang of four that I mentioned earlier and was asked by the President to serve as the leader of this inner agency team of scientific experts that ultimately developed what was known as "Option IX" which was the alternative chosen to help resolve the long-standing issues over spotted owls and Old Growth in the Northwest.

00:12:34:02 Q: And he was the Forest Service Chief at that time?

00:12:36:14 A: No, actually he wasn't.

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00:12:37:04 Q: Oh, he wasn't.

00:12:38:04 A: Jack was still with the Forest Service. He was their most senior researcher actually based in Lagrand, Oregon. Jack came into doing this job actually about nine months before he became Chief. In fact, a story I'd share with you, when I decided that I was interested in this position, I called Jack Thomas up and told him my interest.

00:13:05:15 And I told him, "Jack, if I get this position," which was a long shot in my mind, "I'm gonna make you Chief of the Forest Service" and he kind of laughed and he said, "Well, we'll see what happens, Jim". And low and behold things did come to pass.

00:13:17:03 But Jack worked on the Northwest Forest Plan while he was still employed by the Forest Service. He was detailed to the job. And then nine months later I actually asked Jack if he would come in and serve as Chief which he

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graciously agreed to do. It was a difficult decision for Jack because at the time his wife was actually dying of cancer.

00:13:36:20 And, in fact, a story related to that, Jack put his heart and soul into putting together the Northwest Forest Plan. He did an outstanding job and it was a 24/7, as we say, job for all the researchers and scientists involved in that effort.

00:13:50:04 When it was all over and done, I sat down with Jack and I asked what I could do for him. I literally commuted out there every other week to oversee the efforts that they had undertaken in trying to put things together.

00:14:04:29 Jack, very tired and blurry eyed said, "You know, the one thing I'd like is I'd like the President of the United States to say thank you to my wife who's been separated from me while I've been working on this plan". She was back in Lagrand, Oregon, in her home.

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00:14:17:11 The President actually tried to call Mrs. Thomas twice but was unable to connect with her. She was back and forth to Portland getting chemo treatments for his cancer. But after all was said and done and Jack was nominated to be Chief of the Forest Service and come back here to Washington, D.C., I was able to arrange through Katie McGinty an opportunity for Jack and his wife to meet with the President.

00:14:43:06 It was quite an interesting and exciting moment for all of us. Margaret, Jack's wife, who was quite ill at the time, went out and bought a new dress and really got herself done up and she just looked wonderful. So she and Jack went over to the West Wing and I joined them along with Katie McGinty and we waited for the-- for the President to invite them in.

00:15:06:09 He did so and instead of the 10-minute appointment that we thought we'd have, the President and the Vice President spent an hour with Jack and Margaret. In fact, it turned out they had old common friends from Texas and

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the President was most gracious and spent most of the time talking to Margaret.

00:15:25:06 It was as if the rest of us weren't there. It was quite an incredible moment. Pictures were taken of the event and, to make a long story short, the President signed those pictures actually a couple of days just before Margaret died. And Jack-- we were able to get the pictures to Jack and Jack was able to share them with Margaret before she passed away.

00:15:44:21 The whole time that Jack lived here in Washington, D.C. after Margaret's passage, he had on a piano in their home here in Arlington -- Margaret was a music teacher, so it was her piano -- that picture of the President and the Vice President and Margaret and Jack sitting on that piano.

00:16:03:23 Just a sense of the kind of person the President was and the kind of commitment Jack (unint.) Thomas made to the job.

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00:16:10:02 Q: You had a lot of issues that I guess the best way to say were troubling issues that you had to face very early on. Besides the Northwest Forest Plan, what were some of the other challenges that you found?

00:16:22:24 A: Well, you know, it's funny. This is a job, I think, that's often overlooked in terms of its environmental significance, but I've had friends tell me they think this is the toughest job in Washington in terms of the environment. It's probably true.

00:16:36:07 Early in our tenure we had to deal with not only the northern spotted owl issues, but some issues associated with the management of the Tongus (ph.) National Forest in the Pacific Northwest. There were two long-term timber sale contracts that had been let by the government in the 1950s to try to encourage development in the Southeast Alaska region.

00:16:59:01 Those contracts were sorely outdated and unfortunately

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led to a situation where the federal government was selling timber for ridiculously low prices and impacting a unique ecosystem. I actually had to recommend to Secretary Espey that he cancel one of those contracts when the operator of the contract, the Japanese company, actually decided to close their doors and terminate their employees, yet claimed under the contract that they were still operating consistent with the contract.

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The contract required continuous operation of a mill. That issue is still in litigation unfortunately but that was one of the first, most significant controversies we had to deal with. That was followed soon after by the other contract holder coming in and actually asking for voluntary termination.

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But it was the termination of that first contract that led to quite a bit of controversy for me with the US Senate. Senator Ted Stevens who chaired the Appropriations Committee when the Republicans took the helm of the congress -- I guess it was 1995 -- was so

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outraged at the cancellation and (unint.) by some people in the Forest Service who weren't pleased with the direction it was headed that he (unint.) an amendment in the Full Appropriations Bill in the senate to strip me of my authority to manage the Forest Service.

00:18:15:09 That was actually debated at length on the floor of the senate. Senator Dale Bumpers was my-- my lead defender. But the provision passed along party lines. Actually, one Democrat, Max (unint.) voted along with the Republicans unfortunately. Max and I have since mended our ways.

00:18:34:06 But that provision stood in the Senate Bill until conference and then in conference actually the House insisted on its position and the provision was dropped. So I came very close to being terminated from my employment at least in terms of administration of the Forest Service early on. You know, one indicator of the nature of the controversial issues that we've dealt with.

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00:18:56:21 Q: Is it because there is such a clash of economics and environment? Is that one of the major causes of the controversy?

00:19:05:02 A: Well, actually, I think it's less economics than it is just passion for the issues. You know, many of these environmental issues are focused on places that people care about, whether it's Southeast Alaska or the Old Growth Forest, the Pacific Northwest, or it's wetlands in the Dakotas, the Chesapeake Bay region on the East.

00:19:25:07 People care passionately about their places and that leads to a passionate dialog and controversy. Certainly economics comes into play but we've tried all along as an administration to try and demonstrate that you can balance those two factors.

00:19:40:13 Pacific Northwest is an excellent example. In the Pacific Northwest, although there were many doom and gloom prophecies surrounding the President's Northwest

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Forest Plan, the actions that we undertook eight years later, that region is prospering.

00:19:55:17 And while some communities were impacted, we committed over a billion dollars over eight years to job training, to worker retraining, to jobs in the woods where we took mill workers and others and provided them opportunities to work in the woods to restore damaged ecosystems, to improve roads and reduce the impacts of past management practices on the environment and also invested money in rural communities to help them broaden their economic base.

00:20:23:15 So I think the challenges and perhaps the controversies associated with these issues, as long-standing as they are, really come down to the passion that people feel for those unique places. And I think one of the reasons we've had a controversial taint, if you will, in dealing with these issues, and I guess some would say I've been a controversial figure, is because unlike previous administrations we decided to try to deal with

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them.

00:20:49:17 I think we owe it to the people who live in these places to provide some certainty and some resolution to these issues so they can get on with their lives. And for all too long in many of these instances, Old Growth and the Northwest is a good example, these issues went on and on and on without resolution.

00:21:04:29 That meant people suffered, communities didn't know what they could depend on in terms of their economic base and, frankly, industries and companies couldn't decide whether or not to invest in those communities. We've tried to deal with many of those difficult issues and as a result, have helped many of these communities move on and really have redefined land stewardship and conservation in the United States.

00:21:32:01 Q: There was a Lake Tahoe Conference that the President was involved in. How did that impact some of these issues you're talking about?

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00:21:39:15 A:A: Well, the Lake Tahoe Conference which came later in our tenure was really the brainchild of Senator Harry Reid who was very interested in water quality in Lake Tahoe and very concerned that management practices around the lake were impacting Lake Tahoe's unique quality.

00:21:58:13 It's-- it's a beautiful and unique ecosystem. The waters are so clear, you can still see 15, 18 feet down. But that water quality is eroding and the ability to see into those waters is diminishing. The President, along with the Vice President, put together a conference.

00:22:19:11 I had the lead for the Department of Agriculture, actually the lead for the administration in actually convening a series of pre-conferences to that focused on the issues that were impacting the lake and then ultimately coordinating the President's and Vice President's visit out there.

00:22:33:27 It helped to highlight the fact that you can balance

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economics in the environment. I think it helped to highlight the extent to which this administration has tried to balance economics in the environment and I think it helped to highlight our understanding of the important role we play in protecting the environment, protecting these unique ecosystems and in helping to protect those special places that people care about.

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Throughout our tenure, we've taken action to try and protect other unique places. Think of the Vios (ph.) Kildara (ph.), the Baca Ranch in New Mexico, the cut-ranch just north of Yellowstone, the Giant Sequoia National Monument that the President created earlier this fall, the roadless area initiative that we've undertaken with the Forest Service which when completed will protect 58 million acres of remaining unroaded areas across the United States in national forests.

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These were unique opportunities to leave a lasting legacy, but more importantly to protect some unique elements of the American landscaping. I'm very proud of

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the work we've done. In fact, the National Forest System has grown by almost two million acres during our tenure in office, despite a Republic congress, despite many who were concerned about what they see as the federal government acquiring too much land.

00:24:00:03 We've got tremendous public support and ultimately congressional support to protect many of these unique places, these special places.

00:24:07:02 Q: And just last month you mentioned the roadless areas. There was an announcement made. Is that kind of a culmination of your work in the roadless area?

00:24:16:05 A: Well, still pending is the final decision on that. But this was an initiative that was undertaken working with Chief Dombeck of the Forest Service who succeeded Jack (unint.) Thomas as Chief. It really is a unique opportunity to set aside a long-standing controversy over how remaining roadless areas, those areas that haven't been roaded or at least don't have permanent roads on em

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in the National Forest, how they should be dealt with in the future.

00:24:45:25 Been a lot of controversy over these areas over the decades. Every time the Forest Service sought to do something in a roadless area, the agency was challenged, again reflecting the passion and concern that many of the public feel for these areas.

00:24:59:20 We decided to take that issue on as part of a new agenda we call "The Natural Resources Agenda". In fact, to give you some sense of how the Forest Services' focuses shifted, in 1993 we had a timber sale program-- scheduled program that was close to ten billion board feet in timber sales.

00:25:17:03 That program's now down to about three or just under three and the Forest Services Natural Resources agenda, which Mike Dombeck certainly helped to structure and bring focus to, includes protecting water sheds and water shed values, addressing the issue and concern about

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extensive roading on the Nation Forest.

00:25:37:27 We focus on recreation and maintaining recreation quality in sustainable forestry. So timber's just one small element of the larger picture in terms of our refocus and retooling in the agency and really a recommitment to its conservation legacy.

00:25:53:15 Q: Conservation on the farm side has dramatically changed in terms of how it has been paired with the farm legislation in recent years. Discuss that a little bit.

00:26:04:04 A: Well, we've gone through an interesting metamorphosis in dealing with conservation as well. When I took office, I had just finished work on Capital Hill as a member of the staff on the Hill (unint.) Committee on the 1990 Farm Bill, helped to craft the conservation and forestry titles there and really tried to tee-up, if you will, opportunities for the department to step up to the plate and deal with the challenges of improving land stewardship on private lands.

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00:26:34:08 The Soil Conservation Service has had an outstanding record in dealing with those issues. But some perceived, and I think rightfully so, that when push came to shove, the Soil Conservation Service would defend the farmer first as opposed to trying to balance the interest of farmers with protecting the larger environment.

00:26:50:08 I tried to place a little more emphasis on the conservation part of the Soil Conservation Service and, in fact, as discussed earlier, we changed the name to Natural Resources Conservation Service to really reflect their broader mission. Beyond that, was fortunate in bringing in as Chief early in my tenure a gentleman by the name of Paul Johnson.

00:27:11:27 Paul, like Jack (unint.) Thomas in his leadership of the Forest Services, is a visionary, was an outstanding spokesperson and really a conservation philosopher, if you will. Paul helped to restructure and refocus the agency. And working together we tried to put new

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emphasis upon conservation as the agency's bottom line.

00:27:34:11 We expanded our work in trying to reduce soil erosion impacts on water quality. We developed new programs to emphasize wildlife habitat, wildlife habitat protection; placed new emphasis on trying to restore soil quality in using less destructive tillage methods like no till, minimal till approaches to conservation; placed new emphasis on protecting wetlands and the use of something called the "Wetland Reserve Program" which was part of what was created in the 1990 Conservation Title of the Farm Bill.

00:28:11:02 We really emphasized ecosystem management, if you will, as we had done in the Forest Service so that we tried to equip the soil conservationists, the state conservationists with the tools to apply a broad range of conservation measures across the landscape.

00:28:27:28 We placed emphasis, for example, on establishing conservation buffers on waterways to serve as filters to

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filter-up pollutants so they wouldn't enter waterways. Critical issue for dealing with unique ecosystems like the Chesapeake Bay or to deal with issues such as festeria in the lower Mississippi in the Gulf of Mexico, as well as to try and tackle the challenges of restoring salmon runs in the Pacific Northwest.

00:28:53:04 We really-- we really tried to, if you will, modernize the mission of the Natural Resources Conservation Service and help the organization expand its role and its function in expanding conservation across the landscape. We also did more work in urban environments. This is an increasingly urbanized nation.

00:29:18:02 Eighty percent of all Americans live in urban environments. And, well, the Forest Service has done a great deal in trying to expand its scope mainly through a program called "The Urban and Community Forestry Program" which I actually helped structure when I worked on Capital Hill.

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00:29:30:11 NRCS had been doing less work in that arena so we developed a strategy and an approach to try and work with suburban and urban land owners to help them understand their role in conservation. So we were dealing with conservation issues, if you will, from-- from the headwaters, whether it was a headwaters administered by the Forest Service in the West or whether it was private.

00:29:51:18 And all the way the stream reaches right into those urban communities and neighborhoods where we could also help reduce the impacts of what urban residents were doing through programs like the "Backyard Wildlife Program" and a program I helped to structure, an experimental program we called "The Urban Resources Partnership", all geared towards trying to get communities more engaged in protecting the environment, practicing good land stewardship.

00:30:17:09 So conservation was something that didn't just occur in the rural landscape or in National Forests, it was

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something that could actually occur in everyone's backyard.

00:30:25:18 Q: There was quite a lot of awareness work done in this respect -- national awareness with the general public.

00:30:31:11 A: Well, again, I think, you know, one of the keys to ensuring as we look ahead to the 21st Century that we continue to invest in conservation and in land stewardship is helping an urbanized nation understand their connections to the land.

00:30:48:13 You know, at the-- the beginning of the 20th Century, we were still mainly a rural nation. Many more people lived in rural communities. Many more people had connections to the land. Many more people understood where their food came from or that the water that came out of the tap didn't simply come out of the tap. It had to start somewhere else.

00:31:12:08 We've changed dramatically as a nation and some of us in

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the conservation leadership of the nation fear that those connections are being lost. So we're looking for ways to build those connections, to re-establish an understanding and an awareness among children, among urban residents, among others that what happens on public lands and on private lands and those rural landscapes is gonna have a big impact on the quality of life for all Americans whether they live in rural areas or urban areas.

00:31:43:27 We did so through educational efforts, but we also did so through developing new initiatives and projects. I alluded to one already -- The Urban Resources Partnership. This was an experiment really designed to try to make more efficient use of the limited amount of money we had to work in urban environments.

00:32:01:01 A number of federal agencies do work in urban environments, but the money they commit to it is less than 1/10th of one percent of the total Natural Resources' budget for all those agencies. Probably 1/100th of one percent to be frank.

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00:32:13:02 We took the limited dollars we had. We brought agencies together and we used those monies to provide small grants to community groups and technical assistants to help them do things like urban regreening or urban gardening, to clean up vacant lots, to replant repairing areas and clean up waterways, to educate school kids to what good conservation was about and really trying to rebuild connections.

00:32:37:28 And the rewards, I think, have been substantial. I've seen projects, hundreds of projects, in 13 cities across the United States where we've implemented this experiment, have those projects really become the centerpiece of those communities.

00:32:53:23 One example, there's a project known as "The Rock Garden" in the South Bronx of New York. It was a project developed by the New York (unint.) Partnership. A leader of one of the projects in South Bronx came to the coordinator for the Urban Resources Partnership and asked

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for help in restoring a garden.

00:33:16:07 When this gentleman brought the coordinator to the site, the site was basically a dump. It was an area that had served basically as the place where all the refuse was dumped when the projects were built in this portion of the South Bronx 20 years earlier.

00:33:29:26 But yet, to this member of the community who was a child that played in this-- in this park, this rock garden, he still saw that rock garden and wanted to see if we wouldn't help them. We committed some money to help do design work in restoring the garden and technical assistance.

00:33:46:20 As a result of the limited federal dollars we provided, the Bronx Borough President provided funds to haul debris off the site. The Park Service provided landscape architect to do some design work. The Environmental Protection Agency put some money into the project. And today there's a garden where there was a dump once before.

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00:34:04:17 That garden is now the focus of that project and really the pride of the entire community. It brought kids together, it brought the elderly together, it brought a mix of races and ethnic groups together and they understand what conservation's about because of the work they did in that community.

00:34:23:25 Another example a little bit different, we-- we, through NRCS and the Forest Service have worked to try and improve conservation in the New York City water shed in the Catskills about two hours from New York City. Most Americans don't know that New York City's water is still unfiltered.

00:34:40:16 It comes down through huge aqueducts underground, under the Hudson River into Manhattan and other parts of the city. But the water originally is in the Catskill Mountains. Through a project we developed with local land owners through NRCS, we actually invested in establishing a conservation reserve enhancement program,

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putting buffer strips in to limit the amount of waste mainly from dairy operations that would flow into those waterways and reduce the impacts on water quality.

00:35:08:01 The Forest Services has done a great job in promoting reforestation and better land stewardship with a private forest land owners in the region. As a result, EPA decided that New York City didn't have to build a filtration plant which was-- really was the catalyst for this concern that colorform counts and other water indices were such that New York City was actually gonna have to spend billions of dollars to build this water treatment plant.

00:35:31:21 Instead, we spent several hundred million dollars, improved landscape, improved wildlife habitat and the visual quality of the area and prevented the need to make that much more costly investment. Another example of how we've tried to connect rural areas and urban environments.

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00:35:49:11 And, in fact, the city of New York committed several million dollars to this project in Up-State New York to improve their water shed. Really an unheard of investment in New York City since most New Yorkers, or at least most residents in New York City, think that Up-State New York is another country and not a part of their own state.

00:36:09:01 Q: Also, on the rural side there's been partnering with the farmer who's long been known as a good steward of the land. When economics get tight, it's often hard to make that decision to be a conserving farmer. There's been some programs that have come right along with other farm programs to give them more opportunities.

00:36:27:26 A: Well, we've developed a number of programs, worked with the congress in fashioning a 1996 Farm Bill that included some new tools to put in the "Conservation Tool Kit" as we refer to it. The Environmental Quality (unint.) Program is one example. I mentioned CREP, the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program.

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00:36:46:24 We've actually been working at a watershed level with many rural land owners to try and enhance their investments in improving water quality and in promoting the improved productivity of their land. We've worked closely with EPA on developing strategies to try and address, for example, the impacts that animal feeding operations are having on water quality.

00:37:11:20 There's been proliferation of confine animal feeding operations and a great deal of concern across the United States that they were having a big impact on water quality and air quality. Senator Harkin actually convened a forum to deal with this issue that Secretary Glickman and Administrator (unint.) were a part of a year or so ago.

00:37:31:15 I took the lead under the Clean Water Action Plan in working with my colleagues at EPA in putting together a strategy to try and deal with this. We also worked jointly with EPA on a strategy to address a concern in

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the Clean Water Act that has never been dealt with and that's something called the development of "TMDLs", Total Maximum Daily Loads for Waterways.

00:37:53:17

Basically a (unint.) budget for how much (unint.) points or run off could-- would be allowed in a given watershed and could impact water quality. It was an issue that engendered a great deal of controversy. There were opponents, particularly from the agriculture community, but most (unint.) and the House Agriculture Committee, who didn't want to see USDA working with EPA on these issues to try to reach a resolution.

00:38:17:08

In the end, we spent a lot of time-- my office spent six months working with EPA to try and resolve this issue. The President did announce a TMDL ruling. Unfortunately, the agriculture opponents who still view EPA as the enemy as opposed to a potential partner in dealing with these issues succeeded in getting an amendment attached to the Agricultural Appropriations Bill for FY 2000.

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00:38:40:12 One in the fiscal year we're in now that strips me of my authority to oversee both my agencies. Evidence of the strong feelings that still exist about these environmental issues. That provision stayed in the Bill. Though it had only minimal impact, I continued to do the work that I have done all along simply working directly with the Secretary's office as opposed to directly through the agency.

00:39:04:11 So there's still a lot of controversy about the environment and natural resources and agriculture, and how we deal with those issues. That controversy will probably continue, but the bottom line for me is that unless we attempt to tackle those issues, unless we help an urban populous understand the importance of land stewardship and environmental quality, unless we help connect world communities and urban communities, we're gonna have continued controversy and the environment will suffer, producers will suffer, our quality of live will suffer overall.

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00:39:39:13 One of the things we've tried to tackle, certainly one of the things I focused on, is trying to bridge those gaps so we make program, improve economic prosperity and improve the environment at the same time.

00:39:49:01 Q: Probably one of your biggest challenges this year was fire. What a tremendous crisis.

00:39:55:04 A: Fire was a big issue. A significant issue for us. Fire was a big issue for us. Fire's been a big issue throughout my tenure in office. I can tell you in 1993, the Fall of 1993 when the hills of Los Angeles were burning, I got a call from the (unint.) from the Secretary's office.

00:40:26:20 They had just been contacted by the White House and they said, "Send us somebody out to Los Angeles". I'd never been exposed to wild fire like that. I spent a very brief time, one summer job with the Forest Service on a fire crew. Never seen anything quite like the wild fires we've dealt with over the last eight years.

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00:40:41:21 So within 24 hours I was on a plane out to Southern California to try and deal with these issues. We've had a number of periods of severe fire. Earlier in our tenure, in, I guess it was 1995, we had a tragic fire, a South Canyon fire in Colorado.

00:41:03:22 Fourteen brave fire fighters were killed as a result of-- as a result of some mistakes that were made in fighting that fire. And a very unfortunate circumstance. Fire is a difficult issue for all the agencies that deal with it, but we've tried over time to try and improve the public's understanding of wild fire and also to improve our ability to deal with fire.

00:41:29:22 Not only our ability to fight fire, but more importantly to improve public understanding and, in fact, agencies' understanding of the importance of restoring fire-- controlled fire, proscribed fire to ecosystems where because of past management practices where every fire was put out, we have now the increased risk of these huge

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wild fires.

- 00:41:51:10 In fact, it was when the Republicans took office in 1995 that they elected to deal with this issue through an interesting approach. They passed legislation attached to a Bill that the President was forced to sign. This was a Bill that included funding for some critical issues.
- 00:42:13:14 It included a rider that was known as a "Salvage Rider". That rider basically wiped away the environmental requirements for preparing timber sales and set as a priority salvage timber sales across the United States. In fact, it was very hard fought negotiation between the Hill and the White House and people like myself who were involved in it.
- 00:42:38:23 There was a lot of resistance to allowing it to go forward. But, as I said, ultimately the President was put in a position where in order to fund certain critical programs, he elected to sign the Bill (unint.). Actually

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had a chance to visit with the President one night about this legislation.

00:42:53:07 It was a very interesting experience. I had gotten a call from Leon Panetta who was then Chief of Staff at the White House. I had worked for Leon on Capital Hill for a number of years and so Leon and I talked from time to time about these issues.

00:43:06:02 He called me up one night. I happened to be in my office at 9:00 at night and he basically said, "Get yourself over here". He didn't put it in that nice a term. Leon was a little more colorful than that. And so he summoned me over to his office in the West Wing and ultimately brought me down to visit with the President in his living quarters.

00:43:26:00 The President was grappling with whether or not to sign this piece of legislation. He knew that it would engender some controversy. He'd gotten feedback from others in the administration about the concerns

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associated with it and also some provisions in this rider that would have impacted his Northwest Forest Plan which was a huge success, at least at that point in time.

00:43:48:11 And he asked me some questions about how to deal with this issue and how he should view it in light of these other national priorities. I gave him some feedback, explained what a difficult issue it was. Explained that I thought if he signed it, he would be the first President in memory who had actually signed legislation to wave away all the environmental laws.

00:44:12:03 But I also pointed out to him that if he felt that he had to sign it for the sake of these other priorities... I think, for example, there was money included in that Bill to help (unint.) deal with some disasters that year and also, if I remember correctly, some monies to help deal with the Oklahoma bombing disaster.

00:44:30:18 So the President certainly felt some pressure to sign the Bill. So I offered him my advice and then interestingly

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enough members of the Secret Service had burst into the room because a gentleman had jumped over the south gate of the White House and had been shot by the Secret Service.

00:44:48:15 It was an interesting ending to quite an exciting evening for me. I got an armed escort out of the gate of the White House because they had gone into high alert because this individual decided to jump over the south lawn fence.

00:45:02:15 But in dealing with fire, I think we've made every effort to try and help expand an understanding of our need to better manage forests, to reduce the (unint.) that developed as a result of the century of forest suppression across the landscape (a policy that hindsight now was not the best policy to proceed with).

00:45:24:28 And most recently, as a result of the wild fires this year-- extensive wild fires this year, secured a significant increase in the Forest Services budget which

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will finally allow us -- in the context of existing environmental laws, without the need to wipe them away.

00:45:37:13 I think we demonstrated that that is not necessary -- to begin a more aggressive program of reducing (unint.), of reintroducing proscribed fire and hopefully helping focus in most especially on what we've termed "those communities at risk", communities, primarily (unint.) environments, where (unint.) are such that if a wild fire were to pass through their particular area, there would be high risk of the loss of those communities.

00:46:04:15 That initiative is now underway. I'm working very closely with David Hayes who's the Deputy Secretary at the Department of Interior in actually coordinating efforts to put that strategy into place.

00:46:15:11 Q: You probably came into this job with an informal score card for yourself in terms of what you wanted to do. How did you come out on that?

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00:46:24:01 A: Well, that's a good question. That's a good question because I had a friend who offered me some advice when I first took this job. He told me, "Jot down the four or five things that you want to accomplish and put them on a piece of paper and stick em in your desk drawer. And every once in a while take a look at them and see how you've done".

00:46:45:25 Well, I did that and I stuck that piece of paper in my desk drawer. But I'm a pack rat so it got shoved way back in the back of the drawer for a time. Recently I was cleaning that drawer out for obvious reasons since I'm preparing a transition and I found that piece of paper.

00:47:03:17 And I accomplished the five things that I wanted to accomplish. They were focused on some of the issues that I talked about. Focused on some other things as well. The Northwest Forest Plan, that was one of my goals was to address the issues in the Northwest Forest Plan and demonstrate that there was a better way to manage

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national forest system lands using the concept of ecosystem management which eight years ago wasn't even on the radar screen, so to speak.

00:47:33:11 It was a scientific term. Now it is a regularly accepted public term. In fact, Judge Dwyer, in his famous ruling which basically lifted the injunctions that impacted the Northwest, actually noted that without an ecosystem management approach to dealing with this issue, it could not have been resolved.

00:47:52:17 That was a significant finding in my mind. A second issue was to address the challenges associated with management of the Tongus National Forest. Then, when I took office, I was very familiar with the controversies associated with the Tongus because I dealt with it on Capital Hill.

00:48:07:09 Again, congress sought to deal with the issues. Never quite brought it to resolution. During my tenure, we cancelled one timber sale contract. We oversaw the

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voluntary cancellation of another and, after 11 years, completed rewriting the Land Management Plan for the Tongus National Forest.

00:48:24:19 Something that I had a personal hand in helping to complete. A third issue that I was very concerned about and interesting was water quality in the health of the nation's waters.

00:48:37:13 And so both from the standpoint of the work I did with the Forest Service in dealing with water quality and refocusing, if you will, on watershed management as a way of doing business, connected to our challenges of ecosystem management but specifically connect to challenges like restoring salmon runs in the Pacific Northwest and improving water quality in places like Lake Tahoe, I think we accomplished a great deal.

00:48:59:22 On the NRCS side, certainly we've done a great deal more to bring communities together to work in watersheds, to use the voluntary assistance and tools that we have-- the

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(unint.) systems tools we have, to refocus on watersheds and watershed health.

00:49:14:20 And I think we've made a tremendous difference there. We're starting to gain ground in that regard and I'm certainly pleased with the progress we've made there.

00:49:24:01 A fourth area of focus for me was enhancing the understanding of urban residence of the importance of conservation and investments in land stewardship. So through programs like the Backyard Wildlife Program, through the Urban and Community Forestry Program, the Forest Service and, most importantly, through experimental programs like the Urban Resources Partnership, I think we demonstrated that a minimal investment can make a big difference in expanding public understanding of the importance of conservation.

00:49:54:07 In enhancing children's knowledge of what conservation is and what soil conservation is. Improving wildlife habitat means, of-- what it means to plant a garden and

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to nurture it and to take care of it. I think we've built bridges.

00:50:07:19 In fact, I'm very proud of the Urban Resources Partnership Program. It has been attacked a little bit of recent by some in congress who think, frankly, and these are mainly farm state legislators who think that money spent on urban environments is money wasted.

00:50:23:22 I would predict that at some point in the future they're gonna find that their decisions to cut funding for that program was at a significant cost for their constituents and for agriculture overall because, again, it is an urban populous in the United States.

00:50:42:29 An important lesson I learned in working in the House Agriculture Committee on the 1990 Farm Bill was that urban legislators have a big impact on world policies and agricultural policies. Unless urban legislators understand the importance of conservation and investments in land stewardship, we're gonna lose the resources we

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have to make those investments.

00:51:02:07 And the nation will suffer. Our wealth and our well-being will be impacted. Lastly, an importance focus for me, was on in trying to improve public perceptions of the Department of Agriculture's role in conservation of forestry and of the Forest Services and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

00:51:23:28 Again, when I took office, both agencies were kind of under siege. I don't think they were well respected by the public. I don't think the role they played as conservation leaders was really understood. I think we've really turned that around through initiatives like the roadless initiative.

00:51:40:24 The work we've done to address and protect Old Growth Forest in the Northwest. Through the efforts to deal with roadless areas and to try and tackle the 380,000 miles of road we have in the national forest system. To put roads to bed we don't need anymore. To repair the

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ones that we do need. And to enhance recreation opportunities.

00:52:02:21 I think we really have changed how the public views the Forest Service. We're not the black hats anymore. We're the good guys. On the NRCS side, I think we have built coalitions. We have the industry working with privately land owners.

00:52:19:01 We have the environmental community talking with ag producers and farm state legislators about new ways to enhance conservation. I'm confident that the 2002 Farm Bill, which will be debated by the congress in the next year, will have as a significant focus conservation as an important bottom line. Opportunities to invest in conservation.

00:52:44:08 To compensate private land owners for producing those non-traditional commodities that aren't traded in the market place, at least not today. You know, we still think of farming as corn and soy beans and crop

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production. But, again, I think an important element of what a land owner does, of what a farmer or rancher does is how he or she takes care of the landscape that they own.

00:53:07:14 And more and more programs are geared to providing compensation for good land stewardship practices, whether it's through (unint.) assistance under the Quick Program or the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (unint.), or through the payments we make for the Wetland Reserve Program or the Conservation (unint.) payments we make under farm land protection.

00:53:29:01 These are important tools. The biggest conservation investment we make, in fact, is through the Conservation Reserve Program. We have over 40 million acres in a reserve system that helps to protect fragile soils and helps to filter out those pollutants before they get into waterways.

00:53:49:00 I think it's important that we continue to enhance the

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opportunity to make those investments and enhance the public's understanding and privately-owners understanding of the role they play in land stewardship.

00:53:57:25 So I think on all five counts, we've done pretty damn well in terms of what we sought to accomplish. It wasn't without some pain and suffering. Almost being voted out of a job by the congress once. Ultimately having that happen as we get ready to exit.

00:54:18:08 But I think-- you know, if you're gonna accomplish anything in a job like this, you've got to push the envelope. You've got to deal with the tough issues. You owe it to the American public to provide leadership in dealing with issues that really have an impact, not only for today but for the future.

00:54:33:18 And, certainly, I've taken that responsibility to heart. I've been on this job longer than any of my predecessors and I can tell you you can't do this job if you're gonna stay here for just two or three years. It takes you that

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long to figure out who the players are and to understand the processes..

00:54:47:24 So I'm proud of the investment I've made for eight years.

I'm proud of the record of the Clinton-Gore Administration. It really is outstanding. We've accomplished I think a great deal more in conservation and forestry than any modern administration and probably any administration since that of Teddy Roosevelt.

00:55:02:16 Ironically, you know, the administration that saw the beginning of the 20th Century, here we are in the threshold of the 21st Century celebrating a century of conservation and I think we have reinvigorated the conservation movement.

00:55:17:26 At least we certainly have here at USDA in the leadership of the Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

00:55:23:25 Q: Thank you, Jim Lyons, for talking about your time as

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Undersecretary for Natural Resources and Environment at the US Department of Agriculture. I'm Larry Quinn with USDA's Office of Communications in Washington.

END OF TAPE