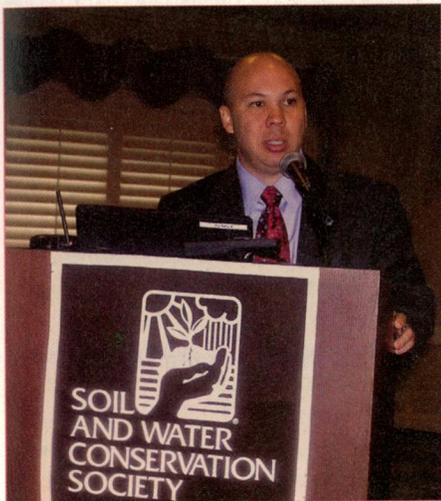


# Making every acre count for conservation

Arlen L. Lancaster, chief of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service



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**T**homas Jefferson extolled “agricultural societies as a means of spreading good stewardship of the land.” SWCS shows how right he was.

I want to put the Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) in the context of our NRCS Strategic Plan, the 2007 farm bill, and three key messages I am taking to my team, our conservation partners, and our customers as I do the agency’s business.

While there is a lot happening in conservation (I am continually surprised by how broad the interest is), three themes seem intertwined wherever I have traveled:

1. Are NRCS and the conservation community as a whole ready for changes and challenges just over the horizon?
2. Some of our programs are hard to access, apply for, implement; some are redundant, some unnecessarily complex; our standards and practices do not always seem reasonable or to fit the situation.
3. Are we able to demonstrate where tax dollars go, and can we quantify our practices?

These are important issues and will not be quickly resolved. But I believe in turning “challenges” onto their heads so they become “opportunities to excel.” As such, I have reframed those concerns as drivers to expand our horizons and prepare the agency to meet new challenges, make conservation easier, and be fully accountable, transparent, and gain recognition for the benefits of conservation.

So when I travel around the country or go up to the Hill, I share my three priorities:

First, we must continue to prepare ourselves as an agency and as a conservation community to meet new challenges. How are we doing that? Let me give you some examples.

We are executing our overarching NRCS Strategic Plan, with its “foundation goals” of high quality, productive soils, clean and abundant water, and healthy

plant and animal communities. The plan also contains “venture goals” to address emerging trends and position us to seize new opportunities. These include clean air, an adequate energy supply, and working farm and ranch lands.

Because delivery of technical assistance and conservation planning define us and our work, we are committed to developing the technical services infrastructure—including skilled leaders and field staff with enough diversity and experience—to provide the highest quality service to all clientele, equally.

We are executing our Human Capital Strategic Plan and emphasizing basic conservation planning knowledge, skills, and abilities in our training programs. We have reinvigorated our National Technology Support Centers and are focusing on the unique needs of beginning farmers and ranchers, limited resource producers, and other underserved communities.

We have also outlined a five-year investment plan for technology to guide research needs to the right places, to maintain currency of the science that underpins our policies, procedures, handbooks, and manuals, to enable transfer of new science to state-level specialists, and to capture “lessons learned” from innovations. We recently awarded nearly \$20 million in 2007 Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) to 36 states to fund 51 projects to develop and refine cutting-edge technologies and new approaches to help producers.

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Further, we have crafted a five-year vision for CEAP to ensure, as the SWCS-led Blue Ribbon Panel suggested, that the effort “looks to the future” and has the capacity to effectively analyze alternatives to expend resources the wisest way—that is, to be adaptive managers.

*These remarks were delivered at the opening plenary of the 2007 SWCS Annual Conference, Tampa, Florida, July 22, 2007.*

We continue to expand partnerships as a force multiplier; a memorandum of agreement signed earlier this year with the US Fish and Wildlife Service to look at endangered species habitat trading is one example of this. We also look to strengthen our traditional conservation partnership with conservation districts to meet these new opportunities effectively.

These efforts are in various stages of development, but their existence and forward momentum underscore our awareness of the need to be ready for "challenges in a changing landscape" and our commitment of talent and resources to that end.

Second, we must make conservation easier for landowners. We need to ensure they have timely and authoritative information about our programs, that eligibility and requirements are easily understood, and that the application process is as user-friendly as possible. We want to offer one-stop shopping, whether delivered online or one-on-one. Our 2007 farm bill proposals encourage simplifying and consolidating programs to help with this.

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It is both essential and humbling to remember that two-thirds of our nation's land is in private hands, and participation in every NRCS program is strictly voluntary. These private partners are central to our ability to truly effect change on the land. After a year in this seat, I am more convinced than ever that if you give landowners the tools, they will implement conservation. They want to do right by the environment and right by future generations, including their own children and grandchildren.

As an agency, we need to focus on making conservation easier and more accessible. I have asked for an adaptive management approach to our standards wherein we continue to recognize that while we must have quality criteria, we are designing for our customers. We should also seek to find more standards that are affordable and more easily implemented. We need to foster greater use of our online

resources. And, we need to develop tools and interfaces that make conservation more user-friendly.

I believe strongly in partnerships. The infrastructure I talk about in my first point is also critical to making conservation easier. We cannot do it without the landowner, and we cannot do it alone.

Our mission is "helping people help the land." If we are not doing that, there is no reason for us to exist. Having said that, I will also say our existence is critical. No one else can or will do what we do at NRCS, with respect to surveying our soil, water, and other natural resources, establishing technical standards, and offering technical assistance to create solutions.

Conservation planning is complex. We need to ensure we are providing farmers and ranchers with meaningful data and technical expertise based on sound science, so they can make difficult decisions from positions of strength. CEAP, of course, supports this and is key to "making every acre count."

Third, we must be able to demonstrate the benefits of conservation. How do we do this? We do it through accountability, transparency, and good stewardship of taxpayer dollars. We do it through projects like CEAP that demonstrate the benefits of conservation. Quantifying the environmental outcomes will help the producer and us. Again, CEAP supports this, and the Secretary's farm bill proposals, including for increased monitoring of outcomes, also encourage this. Exercising a fiscally responsible approach to conservation is absolutely fundamental to accomplishing our mission and to validating our work in the eyes of our partners, Congress, and citizens—all of whom have a stake in our success.

Happily and perhaps not surprisingly, the main provisions in the Secretary's farm bill proposals have a lot of synergy with the NRCS efforts I just outlined. The proposals would increase conservation funding by \$7.8 billion over 10 years; simplify and consolidate programs, for us and our customers; support emerging priorities, such as renewable energy research; and direct benefits to beginning farmers and ranchers and socially disadvantaged producers. In fact, our proposal is that 10% of farm bill

conservation funding be dedicated to these producers to better level the playing field.

Our proposals are reform minded, for programs that are merit based and market oriented. They resonate with me and SWCS and our partners and end-users because they grew out of 52 forums in 48 states, along with 4,000 additional comments we received. All of this will lead ultimately, I believe, to legislation that better serves farmers, ranchers, the environment and all US citizens. SWCS can take a lot of pride in your contributions to that outcome.

In the end, it is all about outcomes. It is about whether our cooperative actions on the land yielded improvements, and whether our research and data collection and technical advice and financial incentives served as the basis for landowners to make sound decisions—decisions on behalf of their businesses, their families, their neighbors up and downstream, and everyone else who cares about productive lands and a healthy environment. That brings me full circle to CEAP.

If we are to successfully manage natural resources for sustainability in a changing landscape, we have to be able to measure the effects of our actions and spending, and to evaluate the impacts of proposed future actions. Or, said another way by the SWCS-led Blue Ribbon Panel, "CEAP's most important contribution will be to inform strategic resource management in the long term."

CEAP's first four-plus years have been busy ones and, with the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and other USDA colleagues, I'm committed to building on the existing momentum. At our NRCS National Leadership Team meeting 10 days ago, state conservationists were briefed on the preliminary results of cropland assessments and activity in the other CEAP components. While the results themselves are interesting and promising, a couple of other thoughts struck me as I listened.

First, whatever the results are, just the fact that we are attempting to measure the effects of conservation on this scale and at this intensity is important, in and of itself. It is truly groundbreaking work.

My second thought: What is even more amazing is that we as a conservation com-

munity have taken on this enormous challenge voluntarily, though I—along with many others—will take credit for prompting the agency in this direction. From my time working for Congress, I know how persuasive this kind of reporting and decision-making capability will be in convincing appropriators and other stakeholders of the continuing need for conservation. It is far superior to be figuring out for ourselves how to do this, before we get told how to do it. As SWCS Executive Director Craig Cox said recently, “If we know we’re going to be called to account—and we know we are—how much better if the accountability is meaningful.”

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Third, I am really proud that in addressing the need for such a process, we did not invent a template by committee and force each component to make it fit its unique situation. Because we put great people on the task and allowed sufficient latitude to decide what works best where, we are developing creative methodologies and different solutions for each aspect of this work. This lets us take maximum advantage of existing scientific studies and data—30 years’ worth of soil samples, for instance, or 10 years’ worth of Doppler radar readings collected by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the US Department of Defense—while also maximizing partnerships with entities expert in all these areas.

As SWCS’s engagement in this project highlights, CEAP done right is and will continue to be inherently cooperative. “Cooperative conservation” starts with federal agencies like NRCS and ARS working together on projects like CEAP to help farmers and ranchers make the right conservation decisions. Although USDA has the lead, the US Geological Survey, the Environmental Protection Agency, Fish and Wildlife, the NOAA, land-grant institutions, and many others are key partners.

Now, let me give you a quick status of each component.

**Cropland:** Approximately 70% of early CEAP funding has been spent on this component, and it is well along. We are now starting to shift our funding focus and are analyzing “lessons learned” as we move to the next phases of CEAP.

**Grazing Lands:** This assessment is just getting underway. Grazing lands include rangeland, pastureland, and grazed forests. Grazing lands pose a huge challenge for CEAP, as they extend from coast to coast, border to border, from Death Valley to Maine. With complex soils, topography, diverse climate, and mixed land ownerships, research efforts have been more dilute compared to cropland. A recent agreement between NRCS, ARS, and the Society for Range Management is designed to capture the scientific “state of the art” for rangeland through a new literary synthesis, following the model of the recently released cropland synthesis. ARS has been gearing up across multiple laboratories to assist in refining our erosion estimates on grazing lands, with new data sets and improved models. A new National Resources Inventory pilot on pastureland, modeled on the NRI rangeland onsite effort, is collecting data to “feed” these models.

**Wetlands:** The CEAP wetlands component will take much longer to yield actionable intelligence, as there’s much work to be done to establish baselines that already exist (at least partially) in the other components. However, we are making progress on that front. Five CEAP wetlands regional investigations are currently underway. We are also making progress with our collaborators to develop and validate landscape models that will allow NRCS to routinely estimate changes in wetland ecosystem services and condition, within the context of the National Resources Inventory.

**Wildlife:** Wildlife efforts to date are exciting because of the many partnerships formed with unique regional and local organizations to assess specific animal communities. Partnerships with the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, for instance, and other members of the wildlife conservation community have enabled us to apply high-quality wildlife data and expertise to the CEAP cause. I

also want to acknowledge the important contributions made to CEAP by our Agriculture Wildlife Conservation Center. We have initiated 11 specific, regionally focused assessments with these partners so far, and some are beginning to produce results.

We are closing in on producing results from the cropland component, and the next substantial tranche of information will arrive in about a year and a half, after we refine the preliminary cropland data. At that point then, for the first time with other than soil erosion, we will be able to measure the effects of our work in a way that is really meaningful to Congress and consumers. Hopefully, this work will be a catalyst to others to take on similar assessments at the state level, or even below, to provide increasing granularity of information.

We also know there will be some challenges with CEAP as time wears on. One will be communicating the results of these assessments to nontechnical audiences. A second will be ensuring our assessment methodologies have legs and remain credible. Ensuring the transparency of our work will be a third.

As Wayne Maresh, our point man on this initiative, often says: “Everyone understands why we need CEAP.” Then he also always reminds me of the long-term commitment of staff and resources the program calls for. I am happy to report we now have leaders in place for each component of CEAP: for cropland, Bob Kellogg; for wetlands, Diane Eckles; for wildlife, Charlie Rewa; and for grazing lands, Leonard Jolley. We are focused on developing additional staff and the necessary technical services infrastructure to keep that long-term commitment.

I began my remarks this morning with a mention of Thomas Jefferson, so let me close with one, too. It is from an essay on Jefferson as agronomist. “Jefferson was one of the first Americans to realize that the bounty of this continent was finite. If the nation and its citizens were to continue to enjoy the fruits of the New World, then its resources must be husbanded with proper stewardship.”