

# America's Farmers and Ranchers: Partners with the Environment

By Ernest Shea

**IN RECENT YEARS,** America's farmers and ranchers and the conservation professionals who work directly with them have come under attack for failing to adequately protect and conserve the nation's soil and water resource base. While such a charge may accurately reflect the attitudes and actions of a few, it is hardly representative of mainstream U.S. agriculture.

If we have failed at anything, it has been our inability to effectively communicate the nature and magnitude of the problems we work to address, the gaps in technology that impede our progress and the accomplishments that we have achieved along the way.

## Expanding Responsibilities

For the past 50 years, America's soil and water conservation districts, along with their federal and state agency partners, have been helping farmers and ranchers solve complex natural resource problems. Born in the Dust Bowl days with an original mandate to address cropland erosion concerns, districts have worked successfully to incorporate erosion control practices into most farming operations.

While erosion control work is an ongoing program objective, district workloads have expanded dramatically in recent years to address a broad spectrum of natural resource concerns. A quick examination of almost any district's plan of work reveals that it is also delivering water quality protection, forest and rangeland management, wetlands conservation, wildlife habitat enhancement, recreation, stormwater management, and urban erosion and sediment control assistance directly to local land managers.

## Cooperation or Regulation?

In advancing the conservation, wise use and orderly development of the land, water and related natural resources of the United States, districts work cooperatively with land managers using educational, technical and financial assistance tools to achieve program objectives. Although this approach runs contrary to those who advocate the use of command and control regulatory programs to achieve natural resource goals, we believe it is still a sound and practical strategy for addressing today's environmental agenda.

## Stewardship

As conservation professionals, we understand and appreciate the stewardship ethic that most farmers and ranchers have towards their land and water. To be sure, there are many problems that still need to be addressed, but farmer commitment to resource protection is not chief among them.

## Opportunities

As we move through this decade of the environment, it is incumbent on all of us who are closely associated with production agriculture to seek out opportunities to tell the American public about the positive commitment that farmers and ranchers have towards conservation. Let's go on the offensive and talk about our successes. Agriculture and the environment can coexist and, in fact, are inseparable. By advancing economically viable and environmentally sound agricultural production systems, we can achieve sustainability. In doing so, we will be providing an invaluable service not only to the producers of food and fiber, but to the American public and the environment as well. ■

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