

The FmHA administers farm operating, land ownership, rural housing and beginning-farmer loans. It often is called the farm lender of "last resort."

The ASCS and FmHA might logically be merged, although Farmers Home has major rural development responsibilities.

Yet, the proposal to end the independence of the Soil Conservation Service, perhaps the most proud of the USDA's agencies, could seriously set back efforts to reduce soil loss and improve water quality.

The SCS, which at the state and local levels continues to be headed by professional conservationists, would become part of a big, politically oriented organization. In time, jobs now reserved for trained staffers would be parceled out as political plums, which currently is the practice at the ASCS and at the FmHA.

The SCS budget would represent only about 10 percent of the total for an overall Farm Service Agency. Conservation functions would be overwhelmed by the bureaucratic and political clout wielded by portions of the new agency that controlled most of the money and people.

Gerald Digerness, president of the National Association of Conservation Districts, said merger of the SCS into an overall farm agency could "result in significant decreases in staffing and funding for conservation programs, as well as erosion of support for non-farm conservation programs. Another concern is the potential for this agency to have a political, rather than professional, focus."

The association calls, instead, for creation of a USDA Natural Resources Agency to administer all federal conservation programs.

That should be explored. Meanwhile, the SCS, which was founded early in the Franklin Roosevelt administration by the legendary conservationist Hugh Hammond Bennett and nurtured by Agriculture Secretary Henry A. Wallace, must not be destroyed through hasty and ill-conceived efforts at reorganization.

Soil and water conservation groups and environmental organizations should move quickly to oppose any plan whose effect would be to bury and politicize the SCS.

Espy has said he wants to be the greatest agriculture secretary ever. To achieve that sort of recognition, he must surpass Wallace. Dismantling the Soil Conservation Service isn't the way to do that.