

Conference committee faces conservation differences

POLLUTION

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ACP program, which currently is operating on a \$226 million budget, has given proportionately more of its money to farmers for practices aimed at "stimulating agricultural production," said the GAO. "Less than half the program funds have been used for measures that are primarily oriented toward conserving the nation's topsoil."

Bergland, himself a former ASCS official, acknowledged in testimony before a Senate Appropriations subcommittee recently that ACP is "ostensibly" a conservation program but that in reality "long-term conservation benefits have not been the program's principal thrust." The "production enhancement practices" financed by ACP are things that "most farmers would pay for themselves," he said.

"Many congressmen have looked on ACP as a pork barrel," said William H. Greiner, executive vice president of the Soil Conservation Society of America.

Executive branch officials have recognized ACP's shortcomings for years, and several times have tried to eliminate or reform it. All such efforts have been blocked by Whitten, who, because of the curious workings of the House of Representatives, holds almost total control over the U.S. Department of Agriculture budget.

Several years ago, the USDA tried to impose a review procedure over ACP-financed practices, so that it could rule out money for such things as applying limestone to land, rebuilding irrigation systems, buying seed and fertilizer, and similar practices that serve mainly to boost farmer income.

Whitten blocked that attempt by inserting in the USDA appropriations legislation provisions blocking departmental review of how ACP funds are spent, and declaring certain practices to be proper.

House Bill

In the now-pending fiscal 1979 USDA budget, for example, Whitten has inserted language in the House-passed bill saying that ACP money "shall be available for the purchase of seeds, fertilizers, lime, trees, or any other conservation material, or any soil terracing services." Other Whitten provisions leave all decisions on proper ACP funding to ASCS county committees, and bar state committees and the USDA from reviewing the decisions or from requiring farmers to submit information about what they are doing.

Since county ASCS committees are elected by farmers in what amount to popularity contests, there is great pressure on the committee members to approve practices popular with their constituent farmers, whether or not the practices provide enduring conservation benefits.

ASCS state committee heads are chosen by the state central committee of the political party that holds the White House.

The result of all this is a strong political network involving Whitten, ASCS officials all over the nation, and special-interest industry groups that sell the products used in the ACP program. "It's like a separate political party," said one farm-state congressional staffer.

A prime example is the application of limestone, for which some \$7 million in ACP funds is spent in a typical year. Lime is used to adjust the acidity of the soil and make it more suitable for raising crops. According to Neil Sampson, executive vice president of the National Association of Conservation Districts and a former USDA official, limestone use is "80 percent crop production and 20 percent conservation."

Nevertheless, limestone use is popular with farmers, and Whitten has made sure it remains legal under ACP. Whitten is a close friend and political ally of Robert M. Koch Sr., the Washington lobbyist for the limestone industry.

Koch, president of the National Limestone Institute, regularly praises Whitten in his newsletter, which is a sort of informal political broadside, mailed not only to limestone industry people but also to ASCS officials throughout the country.

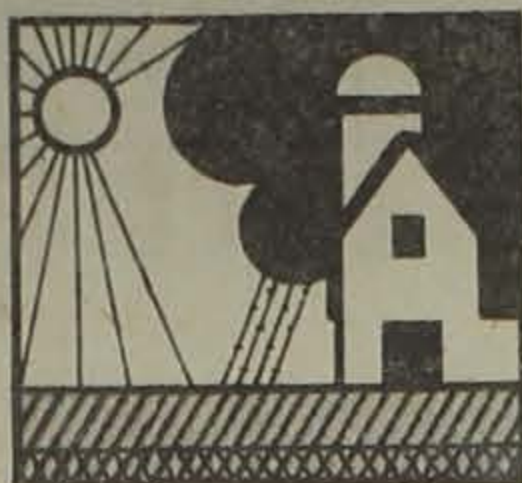
In one newsletter, Koch praised the "grassroots and congressional leaders like Jamie Whitten" for protecting ACP from change. Koch also conducts tirades against policies of the Soil Conservation Service and helps to keep alive the hard feelings between that agency and the ASCS, primarily because Koch knows that if ACP administration was ever turned over to the SCS, his limestone sales through the program would screech to a halt.

Clark, Culver Hit

Koch also criticizes Iowa Democratic Senators John Culver and Dick Clark for their role in getting SCS named the lead agency to administer the Rural Clean Water Program. It was only at the last minute, as the authorizing legislation for the program swept through Congress last year, that Whitten managed to add a phrase that permits Bergland to designate some other agency than SCS to run the program if he wishes.

Bergland went ahead early this year and named SCS anyway, on grounds that it has superior technical knowledge and an interest already in water quality, and would work well with the Environmental Protection Agency, which also has a role in the program.

But the language inserted in the legislation by Whitten gave the Mississippi Democrat an opening wedge



to bring the ASCS into the new program, and so far he has exploited his advantage well.

When the Carter administration budget arrived on Capitol Hill earlier this year, with no money recommended for Rural Clean Water Program because of the budget crunch and other reasons, Whitten stepped in. When the agriculture appropriations bill emerged from his subcommittee, and as it eventually passed the House, it contained \$25 million in cost-sharing money for farmers under the rural water program — all of it to be dispensed by the ASCS. The SCS would get only an additional \$4 million to provide "technical assistance."

(The Whitten bill also provides \$190 million next year for the ACP program, nearly double the amount sought by the administration.)

The Whitten bill was attacked, when it reached the Senate, by environmentalists and by Senator Edmund Muskie (Dem., Maine), chairman of the environmental pollution subcommittee, who said that, in giving the new program to the ASCS, the bill "ignores the clear legislative intent in the authorizing statute."

Senator Thomas Eagleton (Dem., Mo.), Whitten's agricultural appropriations counterpart in the Senate hierarchy, agreed with Muskie. The Eagleton subcommittee produced a bill that granted \$100 million in the first year for the Rural Clean Water Program, with three-fourths of it going to the SCS as the lead agency. The other one-fourth would go to the ASCS to make the 50 percent cost-sharing payments when no state agency or local conservation district is available to administer the program under contract with SCS.

The total program amount was cut to \$80 million, but with the three-fourths/one-fourth proportion retained, when the bill cleared the Senate recently. The Senate bill also chopped ACP funding back to \$85 million, and said it should be used only for enduring conservation practices.

The struggle will continue in a Senate-House conference committee, which will iron out differences in the two bills, starting today. The outcome is uncertain, but if history is any guide, Whitten will do well in keeping things the way he wants them.

Differing Views

In a speech Wednesday to state directors and committee members of ASCS, Whitten vowed to fight for full funding for ACP. Cuts in the program would hamper soil conservation efforts and are being proposed by "people at the Office of Management and Budget and at the White House who have forgotten or haven't read history," he said.

Whitten boasted that he has continually thwarted executive branch efforts to trim ACP. "Since the ACP was started," he said, "we have planted more than 8 billion trees, constructed over 2 million water impoundment structures, terraced more than 40 million acres of land, and provided many millions of dollars of other soil preserving practices."

Whitten won three standing ovations from the ASCS officials, who see their importance as being reduced if ACP is cut back and if SCS gets control of the new clean water program.

However, Bergland, in an appearance at the same meeting, warned the officials that they may be living in the past. "The old programs may no longer be valid," he said. Past efforts have "not solved the soil erosion problem by any means," and "we are afraid the pressures are just starting to build," said Bergland.

The secretary estimated that some \$500 million in conservation aids, installed with federal cost-sharing funds, were "plowed down" in the early 1970s, when grain prices were high and farmers went into all-out production.

On the dispute over who will administer the new Rural Clean Water Program, Bergland told the unhappy ASCS representatives that "we are supporting the Senate bill" giving overall responsibility to SCS. But he added, to applause, that for distributing federal assistance payments under the new clean water program, "you've got the machinery and we'll use it."

Whatever happens, the maximum amount of money that may go into the new program in the coming year will be only a small fraction of the \$10 billion that government experts say it will take to clean up pollution caused by agriculture.

Fears Raised

Also, it may be some time before the program gets started, as farming and other interests argue over program regulations proposed by the SCS. Witnesses at public hearings around the country have raised fears that the 50 percent limit on federal cost-sharing will keep many farmers from taking part in the voluntary program. Also, some said the requirement that owners of 75 percent of the land in a designated treatment area must sign up before any funds are

made available also could be a stumbling block.

Congressional and private advocates of the program are scornful of the White House handling of the matter. By endorsing the program, but recommending no funds, the White House simply opened the door for Whitten and others to twist the program purposes, they say.

One top USDA official said the situation was the result of an "unrealistic attitude" by budget experts at the White House Office of Management and Budget, who want to reform cost-sharing programs like ACP but, at the same time, chopped up the new rural water program.

"Not providing any money just doesn't make any sense," said another high department official. "There wasn't any communication between

USDA and the White House and OMB."

OMB would prefer to put all soil conservation cost-sharing programs, including rural water pollution control efforts, into one. In theory, that might be sound, "but in practice it can't work, mostly because of Whitten, and so OMB got caught with its pants down," said a Senate aide who has played a key role in the rural water program legislation.

Farm organizations have been of little help. The American Farm Bureau Federation initially opposed any sort of cost-sharing program for rural water clean-up, and other farm groups were not particularly supportive.

The Farm Bureau, the largest farmer organization, was at least being consistent. The organization generally plays down any environ-

mental problems associated with agriculture and opposes government intervention and regulation of such things as pesticide usage. In the case of the rural water program, the Farm Bureau wants the ASCS to handle the program and determine what are the appropriate "best management practices" for farmers to use in cleaning up their operations.

Policy stands taken this year by the Farm Bureau also oppose controls on discharge of possibly polluted irrigation water into streams, call federal controls on livestock feedlot waste disposal too tough, and say all normal farm operations should be exempt from the National Environmental Policy Act.

Such views are regarded as shortsighted by environmental experts in Congress and executive agencies, but they probably do represent consider-

able farmer resentment over what is regarded as unnecessary federal intrusion into their lives.

SATURDAY: For agriculture's environment problems, no easy solutions are in sight.

Pioneer Craft Festival Saturday near Oskaloosa

The Register's Iowa News Service
OSKALOOSA, IA. — The 14th Annual Pioneer Craft Festival, sponsored by the Mahaska County Historical Society, will be held at Nelson's Farm and Museum, two and one-half miles northeast of here, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday. All buildings on the site will be open and many crafts will be demonstrated. Pony rides will be held and dinner will be served on the grounds. Admission is \$1 for adults and 25 cents for children, ages 8 to 16.

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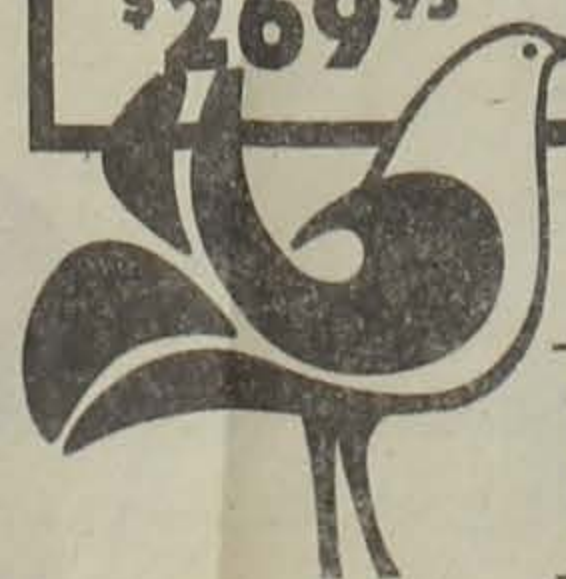
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