

Rangelands in the 1977 Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act

R.M. DAVIS

Editor's Note: This is the final of three articles telling about recent legislation affecting rangelands in the United States. The other two are in the December 1977 issue of *Rangeman's Journal* on pages 170 and 172. The first is by John R. McGuire, Chief of the Forest Service; the second is by George L. Turcott, Acting Director of the Bureau of Land Management.

Concerned ranchers and farmers in all parts of the nation told the Federal Government in 1978 their views on the future course of soil and water conservation in the United States.

They spoke out at some 8,700 public meetings, held by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service in cooperation with local conservation districts and State conservation agencies. About 160,000 people have attended and participated—individual farmers, ranchers, and rangers; representatives of organizations and government at all levels; and other citizens with an interest in the future direction of conservation programs.

The public meetings were held in response to a new law signed late in 1977, the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act (RCA).

The RCA is similar to an earlier measure, the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 (RPA), in that it establishes, not new programs, but new *processes*. These processes should enable USDA to develop new strategies for designing, carrying out, and evaluating progress in meeting the objectives of its conservation programs.

Unlike RPA, which encompasses the National Forest System Lands and other Forest Service responsibilities, the Resources Conservation Act is primarily concerned with developing better programs for the conservation of soil, water, and related resources on nonfederal lands.

As might be expected, opinions on the most critical problems facing conservation today, as well as proposed solutions, varied widely from West to East, from arid regions to high-rainfall regions, and from thickly populated areas to those of low density.

In Texas, with its large acreage in range, ranchers participated in public meetings and identified "conservation programs with conflicting purposes" as a major problem in national conservation efforts.

In Montana, ranchers pointed to overgrazing and conversion of rangeland to cropland as significant issues. Wyoming ranchers were worried about the poor condition of native grasses and called for increased help in future conservation programs in combating weeds and poisonous plants. Ranchers in New Mexico expressed similar concerns.

In carrying out the mandate of the Resources Conservation Act, their opinions are going to help.

RCA reflects the concern of Congress that all USDA programs for conservation of soil, water, and related resources will be responsive to the long-term needs of the Nation.

By 1980, USDA will report to Congress on the status and condition of America's natural resource base, the present and likely future demands on those resources, the kinds of programs needed to protect and enhance those resources for sustained use, and any new approaches that may be needed.

In January 1981, the President's budget recommendations to Congress for fiscal year 1982 will include an RCA evaluation report. That report will be an outline of the progress made in soil and water conservation programs, their costs and benefits, and recommendations for any new legislation or other needed action.

RCA, in other words, enables the Administration yearly to recommend midcourse corrections needed to assure that USDA conservation programs are responsive to the American people and the short and long-term resource needs of the Nation.

Within USDA, the Departmental RCA Coordinating Committee, established in October 1978 and headed by Deputy Assistant Secretary Dave Unger, is responsible for overall review and monitoring RCA activities. The Committee is made up of representatives from the following USDA agencies and offices: Soil Conservation Service; Forest Service; Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service; Rural Electrification Administration; Farmers Home Administration; Economics, Statistics, and Cooperatives Service; Science and Education Administration; and Office of Budget Planning and Evaluation. The membership also includes representatives from the Office of Management and Budget and the Council on Environmental Quality. SCS has been assigned as the lead agency for RCA.

Many see the RCA as a significant opportunity for the Nation to begin to cope more coherently with the mounting pressures on our natural resource base. For example, SCS estimates that Americans since 1968 have converted the equivalent of the State of Louisiana—about 29 million rural acres—to nonfarm uses. At that rate, by the year 2000 we will have withdrawn another 60 million acres of such land—equivalent to the State of Oregon—for nonfarm purposes.

Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland last year called on the Nation's conservation district officials to lead the way in using RCA as a vehicle for helping to create a dynamic soil and water conservation program.

"We are not going to solve the resource problems ahead with the programs of the 1930's and 1940's," he told the board of directors of the National Association of Conservation Districts.

In carrying out RCA at the local level, SCS is working closely with its traditional partners in conservation—State soil and water conservation agencies and local conservation districts. SCS is authorized to make grants to these agencies for their work on the RCA appraisal, district long-range programs, Statewide soil and water conservation programs, and the national soil and water conservation program.

Public participation is unquestionably an important cornerstone of RCA. If concerned citizens recognize and take advantage of the opportunities to give their views at every step along the way, there is a good chance that any future conservation programs will be the kind that people want and need. SCS is interested in citizens' opinions on all facets of conservation issues.

New information will, of course, need to be collected to meet the requirements of RCA. The SCS national erosion inventory now in progress will provide critically important information on conservation needs, as have recent SCS studies on potential cropland and prime farmland.

Heartening as the response was in the first series of RCA public meetings, we are concerned about the people who did not attend for one reason or another, yet who may have excellent suggestions to offer. These people will have a chance to speak out next spring and summer (1979) when a draft of the first national appraisal and the first proposed national program will be presented in more public meetings over the country.

Probably no category of land will benefit more from the RCA requirement for coordinated effort and integrated data than rangelands.

A start on the RCA integrated data system has been made. A formal, five-way agreement has been arranged between SCS; Forest Service; and the Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Geological Survey, Department of the Interior, to attempt to share and standardize natural resource data. Our joint efforts initially will emphasize inventory methods, a resource classification system, analysis techniques for use in projecting trends, and mapping. The data exchange covers forest, rangelands, water, soil, vegetation, and wildlife. Much of the data is being stored in computers and will be made readily available to the many decisionmakers for our natural resources.

Under RCA and RPA, USDA has a direct responsibility for appraising the present and future potential of rangelands and for assessing the impact of past and existing practices on rangelands.

For many years, rangeland suffered from neglect and mismanagement, dating from severe overgrazing in the earliest westward expansion on the continent. The vastness and diversity of the range, together with the relative dearth of knowledge about its conservation management, no doubt accounted for range receiving less attention than other lands in prior years. As the body of knowledge called range science steadily increased in this century, rangeland has benefited from greater attention to present and future conservation needs. The condition of non-federal rangeland has improved markedly since the early 1960's.

Like other lands, rangelands have increasing demands made upon them, from increased livestock and wildlife numbers to increasingly diverse recreational uses. Range can thus be better used through improved planning and resource management systems.

No one suggests that rangeland has been given all the attention it deserves. That is why many ranchers look forward to the appraisals of the condition, capabilities, and management needs of the range as a whole under RCA and RPA.

It is up to organizations like the Society for Range Management and to individual range scientists, managers, and users to make themselves heard in the RCA public meetings and elsewhere on the critical matter of improving and sustaining our Nation's rangelands.

USDA solicits the participation of range-user groups and individual ranchers so that rangeland conservation needs will be fairly and adequately represented in the RCA national appraisals and programs. For those who are unable to attend the public meetings, written comments can be sent to: Administrator, Soil Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, P.O. Box 2890, Washington, D.C. 20013.

Whatever we are able to achieve with RCA, there are some things RCA will *not* do.

RCA reports to Congress will not be substituted for service to land users. USDA's soil and water conservation programs for range and other lands will go forward, with services tailored for the natural resources at hand and the wishes of the people involved.

Nor will RCA replace America's voluntary conservation programs with Federal or State mandates or land-use laws. Conservation of natural resources will continue to be a blend of technical ideas, economic and environmental realities, and private preferences. SCS conservationists will continue to be consultants to land users who want to safeguard the natural resources they manage for the rest of America.

Wild Meat Better

Wild game usually has higher amounts of usable protein than domestic meat. It also has fewer calories and less fat, which makes it one of our healthiest food choices. For example, venison has 15% fewer calories, 50% more usable protein, and 60% less fat than an equal portion of beef. Although wild pheasant has 22% less protein than domestic roast turkey, it also has 25% fewer calories and 38% less fat. The meat of wild duck compares just about across the board for a T-bone steak.—*Oregon Wildlife*