



Farmers plant trees on the Roscoe farm Rice County in 1948. Conservation is a very old idea that is continuing to change and develop with new technology and farm practices expanding the field.

Conservation an old time religion

The idea that Americans should conserve soil to maintain the Nation’s capacity to produce food is neither new nor outdated. Some colonial Americans knew the dangers of exhausting the land and undertook conservation measures even then. Some of the earliest conservationists increased fertility and lessened erosion by maintaining ground cover, improving soil tilth, and instituting pasture, legume, and crop rotation systems.

Though he invented neither, Thomas Mann Randolph, Thomas Jefferson’s son-in-law, quickly perceived the advantages of the hillside plow and horizontal, or contour, plowing. As a convert to the idea, Jefferson believed that “In point of beauty nothing can exceed that of the waving lines and rows winding along the face of the hills and valleys.”

Nicholas Sorsby combined horizontal farming with the early progenitor of the terrace—the hillside ditch—and greatly popularized “level culture” throughout the South.

The most outstanding of the pre-Civil War agricultural reformers, Edmund Ruffin, experimented to learn the effects of green manures and liming on soil conservation and soil fertility. After the Civil War, Priestly Mangum of Wake Forest, North Carolina, perfected the broadbased Mangum terrace for managing surface runoff.

Hugh Hammond Bennett, who led the soil conservation movement in the 20th century, first called for research. Largely at his prodding, the USDA appropriation act for 1929 included provisions for soil erosion and moisture conservation research stations. Bennett’s first assistant at

the Soil Erosion Service, Walter Lowdermilk, made seminal discoveries in the relationship of forest litter to runoff.

**Education**  
When Hugh Hammond Bennett began his crusade for soil conservation as a soil scientist in the USDA, he proposed to use demonstration methods so that farmers would observe proven methods of soil conservation, then go forth and do likewise. He located the earliest demonstration projects near the erosion and moisture conservation experiment stations, where the results of the research could be put to use.

**Sharing the Costs**  
Sharing the cost of conservation became a major part of agricultural programs with the passage of the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act in 1936. Spending public money on soil conservation is premised on society’s having an interest in preventing erosion. It is viewed not only as a matter of equity, but also as an inducement for farmers to practice conservation.

**Stewardship**  
According to some sources, Patrick Henry proclaimed shortly after the American Revolution, “since the achievement of our independence, he is the greatest patriot who stops the most gullies.” The sentiment that conservation should be viewed not only as a matter of self-interest, but as an obligation, had, and continues to have many forms of expression. Certainly, a dispassionate case can be made for soil conservation, but like many another movement that came to be enacted into a national program by Congress, it involved emotions.

Soil conservation as a religious duty found expression in “Soil Stewardship Week.” Farm and Ranch magazine sponsored a “Soil and Soul Sunday” from 1946 until 1954. The National Association of Conservation Districts assumed responsibility in 1955 and elicits support from many denominations.

**An Enduring Agriculture**  
When a national soil conservation program began in the 1930s, the young group of conservationists attacked their job with enthusiasm. Being optimists, and no better seers than we are today, they perhaps were unmindful of how a dynamic agriculture could undermine some of their good works.

But they did establish an objective by which to judge various conservation methods—an enduring agriculture. Enduring did not imply a static agriculture, but it held that the means to sustain agriculture, the physical integrity of the soil resource, must be maintained.

Please contact your local NRCS office or conservation district office located at your local county U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Service Center (listed in the telephone book under United States Government or on the internet at [offices.usda.gov](http://offices.usda.gov)) for assistance. More information is also available on the Kansas Web site at [www.ks.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.ks.nrcs.usda.gov). Follow us on Twitter @NRCS\_Kansas. USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

Conservation compliance still an important issue

Calendar year 2015 marked the 30th anniversary of the Food Security Act of 1985 (also known as the 1985 U.S. Farm Bill) being signed into law. Since 1985, millions of acres of agricultural lands have had conservation plans developed on them with assistance from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Furthermore, millions of tons of soil have been saved due to the planning efforts made by NRCS and the producers who implemented the practices outlined in those conservation plans. Even though conservation compliance is not foremost in everyone’s mind in recent years, the regulations of the Food Security Act are still something producers must adhere to if they wish to continue to be eligible for U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs and benefits. A few of the USDA benefits and programs that can be affected due to non-compliance issues include:

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) eligibility
- Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) eligibility
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSTP) eligibility
- Agriculture Easement Conservation Program (ACEP) eligibility
- Other Farm Service Agency (FSA) benefits
- Federal Crop Insurance benefits

Each year, NRCS field staff is provided a list of randomly selected tracts of land to review to ensure producers are implementing or using conservation systems that meet conservation compliance criteria. During the review process, the current conservation system is evaluated in the field to ensure the system being implemented is properly maintaining or reducing the tolerable soil loss limits for the highly erodible field. In addition to reviewing soil loss limits, NRCS staff also reviews whether

or not the protection of wetland areas is being observed by producers.

In recent years, there has been a marked increase in the amount of trees being cleared along riparian areas or issues of stream channels being either filled or straightened. Many of these actions can carry consequences to USDA benefit eligibility, but could involve other issues or violations to regulations to Section 404 of the Clean Water Act. Producers who are thinking of removing trees or manipulating possible wetland areas, need to consult with their local FSA or NRCS office to ensure their proposed actions do not affect wetlands or cause violations which may carry heavy fines and costs for mitigating affected wetland areas.

Since the Food Security Act of 1985 was signed into law, many changes in farming

practices and farm programs have taken place, but one remaining fact still endures, compliance with the Act is still the law. Producers can protect their program eligibility and benefits by practicing good conservation methods and understanding the laws that were designed to protect our natural resources. Contacting and working with your local FSA and NRCS office can help you protect your land and your USDA benefits.

For more information visit the Kansas NRCS Web site ([www.ks.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.ks.nrcs.usda.gov)) or your local U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Service Center. To find a service center near you, check your telephone book under “United States Government” or on the Internet at [offices.usda.gov](http://offices.usda.gov). Follow us on Twitter @NRCS\_Kansas. USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

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