

FORESTRY AND THE FARM BILL: NRCS AND THE EQIP COST-SHARE PROGRAMS

By Dr. Robert Cooper, 2008 National Tree Farmer of the Year

It has been difficult for some of us to understand how a governmental organization dedicated to improving agriculture in this country and supported by large sums of taxpayer money could omit and in some cases intentionally obfuscate funding for forestry.

It has also been alarming to see that the United States Department of Agriculture statisticians in presenting data about farming, show to their audiences the marked decline in the number of farms in this country and omit any mention of tree farms.

Further confounding the issue was to be told by the state conservationists that the largest fund for cost sharing in the 2002 Farm Bill, the EQIP program, was not available for non-industrial private landowners with tree farms, but only intended for row crops and livestock production.

Further, the concept that EQIP funds were off limits to tree farm Best Management Practices has been perpetuated at the local level by the Soil and Water Conservation districts and is a prevalent concept throughout the country.

It is obvious that a culture has developed in this country that forestry is not agriculture. And yet the concept that forestry was an alien part of agriculture and that a dichotomy existed in conservation between forestry and other more ingrained programs was not new to the forest industry.

The history of forestry in this country may suggest a partial explanation for this dilemma. First glimmers of this debate surfaced in 1900 when foresters began to advocate the need to manage our forests and approach the growing of trees in a manner similar to other types of agriculture.

Gifford Pinchot was appointed the first chief forester of the new Forest Service by President Roosevelt in 1905. At that time there was no "School of Forestry" and no courses in forestry in universities of our country. Pinchot had to receive forestry training in France.

Pinchot, with Roosevelt's willing approval, restructured and professionalized the management of the national forests. He had a strong hand in guiding the fledgling organization, emphasizing that forest management consisted of long-term decisions. Because of Pinchot's leadership our forestry program was transferred from the Department of the Interior to Agriculture and the new Forest Service in 1905. It was at this time that the Forest Service began to evolve and professional foresters recognized the need for long-term management of our forest lands. In a speech in 1935, Pinchot emphasized that wood is a crop and forestry is tree farming.

Although the Forest Service had been placed in the Department of Agriculture, in 1905 an intense inter-departmental rivalry occurred between the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior as to where this new program should be housed. This controversy brought together disparate elements within our country to preserve the Forest Service. The common assumption linking professional foresters in the Forest Service, the Society of American Foresters, and the Association of State Foresters was to preserve forestry as a program in the United States Department of Agriculture. They emphasized that forestry is a crop and should be uniformly classified as a branch of Agriculture.

The forestry community also emphasized that giving commercial forests to Agriculture and national forests to Interior would create an artificial distinction, which does not exist in nature. Interestingly, the Interior Department leaned to the view that forests should be preserved for aesthetics, enjoyment, and recreation, and was much more reluctant to harvest trees than the Forest Service. It should be noted that this concept continues to this day with some groups emphasizing

that our national forests have a single urban objective of recreation and non-use, compared to the more sane concept of sustainable forestry promoted by professional foresters.

The controversy over transfer of the Forest Service during the 1930s was brought to a truce with the entry of the United States into World War II and the need for Congress to address more global issues. The observation that foresters are an independent-minded people and that forestry is a different type of agriculture led to the notion that forestry needed conservation programs different from that of row crops. It is a somewhat biased observation that a bureaucratic solution to problems results in a proliferation of organizational entities rather than confronting the core issues. This, coupled with the insatiable appetite of Forestry for funds to fight forest fires, may explain much of our dilemma in equitable funding through cost-share programs in previous Farm Bills.

In addition to the cultural and organizational issues influencing a new Forest Service in 1905 were the many challenges facing the United States Department of Agriculture that strongly influenced its objectives and stressed its limited resources. Perhaps no individual has influenced the direction of the USDA more than Hugh Hammond Bennett, a native of Wadesboro, North Carolina. Bennett led the soil conservation movement of the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, and combined science with showmanship to influence Congress to establish the Soil Erosion Service in the Department of Interior. He later became its director in September of 1933.

Capitalizing on the dust storms from the Great Plains states, which were carried over Washington, DC in the spring of 1935, he created the Soil Conservation Service of the USDA. Initially named the Soil Erosion Service, it then became the Soil Conservation Service in 1935 and subsequently was established as the NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service) in October of 1994. Its emphasis on the importance of the preservation of soil and water led to one of the most effective conservation programs in our country, and has ingrained in our culture the importance of this issue. Perhaps forestry was not intentionally de-emphasized by the emphasis on soil conservation, but its relative neglect did have unintended consequences. It led to the marginalization of the allocation of resources and the separation by bureaucratic organizational forces with the development of a powerful NRCS "conservational program" by professionals who had little training or experience in the science of forestry.

Cost-share programs are vitally important to farmers to promote utilization of Best Management Practices developed by agricultural agencies. In 2004 and 2005 forestry had its own cost-share programs, FLEP (Forest Lands Enhancement Program), which enabled the Division of Forest Resources to encourage some Best Management Practices. Although federal funds were allocated by the 2002 Farm Bill, it soon became apparent to the forestry leadership that these funds were being utilized to finance the cost of fighting forest fires primarily in the western part of the United States. Eventually all of the FLEP funds were frozen and utilized to fight forest fires. The EQIP program (Environmental Quality Improvement Program), which was the largest cost-share program for conservation practices in the 2002 Farm Bill, began to be used by some more progressive state conservationists in helping to fund forestry programs. Yet, in this crisis situation, less than 2% of the EQIP program funds were utilized for forestry.

Because of the inequitable distribution of conservation funds for forestry, a strong grass roots program of family forest owners and The American Tree Farm System led to the 2008 Farm Bill Coalition, which resulted in a strong lobbying effort to improve funding for non-industrial, private forestry owners. Some of us were asked to testify before the Agriculture Committee of the U.S. Congress. Many members of the Tree Farm System made visits to our political leadership in Washington to discuss the need for more equitable funding for forestry in the 2008 Farm Bill.

The Farm Bill, which was developed, written, and passed by the U.S. Congress over a two-year period, was a huge success for family forest owners. For the first time, language was added to clarify that non-industrial, private forestland is eligible for EQIP funding and expands the definition of a

conservation practice to include forest management. It further named the state forester and owners of non-industrial, private forestland to be members of the State Technical Committee, which oversees the administration of EQIP funding at the state level. Throughout the 2008 Farm Bill's conservation, energy, and forestry titles, there are opportunities for family forest owners to enroll in new and improved programs that offer technical and financial assistance for forest management.

Quickly, leadership from the NRCS and the Division of Forest Resources have jointly developed long-term objectives and cost-share practices for the utilization of EQIP funding allocated for forestry in North Carolina. The Farm Bill Coalition (a group working at the national level that influenced the 2008 Farm Bill and composed of forestland owners and friends of forestry) is establishing a series of workshops, webinars, and outreach materials to educate resource professionals and forestland owners on what programs are eligible within the Farm Bill for forestry.

Both NRCS and the Division of Forest Resources are to be commended for their leadership in implementing the forestry programs in the new 2008 Farm Bill. The Tree Farm Program thanks all the agencies in North Carolina and nationally that have participated in this evolutionary process.

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