

Agriculture's Geography of Hope

A Quarter-Century Ago, a Surprising Booklet Emerged from a Government Agency

It would be difficult to imagine a publication like *America's Private Land*, *A Geography of Hope* being produced by a branch of the federal government today. That it was released in 1996 by an agency housed within the United States Department of Agriculture is even more astounding, given the authors' acknowledgement that industrialized, monocultural farming systems have caused significant problems when it comes to the health of our landscape, and changes are needed if we are to head off ecological catastrophe. To top it off, it quotes Aldo Leopold, Wendell Berry, and Wallace Stegner, writers who were never shy about critiquing the philosophy that farmland, and all land for that matter, is there for the taking, and that humans have an innate right to do with it what they will.

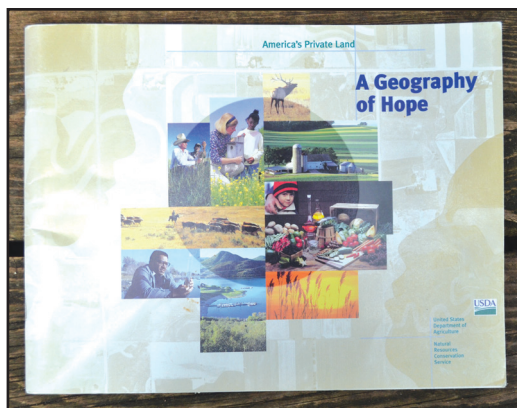
But when the 80-page booklet was published by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), *A Geography of Hope* represented not just a report card on the negative impacts of farming and ranching when it comes to our soil, water, and wildlife — it was also seen as an inspiring argument for the positive role diversified agricultural systems could play in developing a landscape that is ecologically and economically viable. So inspiring, in fact, that when then-Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman read a draft of the document, it brought tears to his eyes.

One of the reasons *A Geography of Hope* was not your typical, dry government document was that it was the brainchild of Paul Johnson, an Iowa farmer and former state legislator who has long promoted the idea that conservation of our natural resources and food production are not mutually exclusive. Before becoming the head of the NRCS in 1994, Johnson studied forestry and farmed near the Upper Iowa River in northeastern Iowa. During his tenure in the Iowa Legislature, he was instrumental in establishing Iowa State University's Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture and the creation of a groundwater protection law that is seen as a national model.

Throughout his career, Johnson has adhered to a core philosophy that if we are to see conservation agriculture become more commonplace, it will require a "social compact" between farmers and the rest of

society. It wasn't just about enforcing certain rules or putting in place specific programs — care of the land had to become seen as the right thing to do, and society had to figure out a way to give farmers the emotional, and economical, support to do that.

He brought that philosophy with him to Washington, D.C. As a dairy and sheep



farmer and someone who had run for office based on his farming background, he had the agricultural credentials. But Johnson was not afraid to wear his environmental colors. In his D.C. office, he displayed a picture of Rachel Carson, the author of the seminal environmental book, *Silent Spring*. "I put her up there and within two days somebody came over and said, 'You should take that picture down,' recalls Johnson. " 'And I said, 'No way, leave it up there.' "

Johnson is a student of conservation history and knows the power of words. In 1994, the "Soil Conservation Service" became the "Natural Resources Conservation Service," a name that Johnson felt better reflected the holistic view agency staff should take when it came to working with landowners. He also pushed staff to look beyond just controlling erosion with specific structures and practices, and to consider the overall health of the soil resource. In many ways, the buzz around soil health that permeates the NRCS and much of agriculture today can trace its roots to Johnson's work two decades ago.

And he played a key role in the creation of the conservation title of the 1996 Farm Bill. Any farmer who has used Environmental Quality Incentives Program funds to put in a rotational grazing system or a season-

extending high tunnel has Johnson to thank.

But *A Geography of Hope* may be his most public legacy. Johnson felt such a publication was needed not only to justify the NRCS's existence as a stand-alone agency (there were threats to make it part of the Farm Service Agency at the time), but to highlight the key role private agricultural lands play in the health of the overall landscape. As the publication points out, half of the United States is in cropland, pasture, or rangeland. That meant (and still means) care of 50% of the country is the hands of less than 2% of its citizens.

Johnson got the title of the publication from Stegner, who had written that the preservation of the nation's last tracts of wildlands represented a "geography of hope."

"Stegner was right... Yet today we understand that narrowly circumscribed areas of natural beauty and protected land alone cannot provide the quality of environment that people need and want," Johnson wrote in the foreword to the booklet. "We must also recognize the needs of America's private land and private landowners for us to truly have a geography of hope."

Through maps, graphics, and writing that veers from the matter-of-fact to downright lyrical, *Geography of Hope* lays out the environmental problems facing private lands that have been exposed to intensive tillage, too many chemical inputs, and overapplication of manure from CAFOs. But then it goes on to, through case studies and big picture examples, describe the potential sustainable farming systems have for correcting these problems. Johnson feels strongly that farming should produce more than food and fiber — it should generate ecological health.

His audience was policymakers (every member of Congress got a copy, as well as then-President Bill Clinton). But Johnson also saw *A Geography of Hope* speaking to the farmers who were in a position to put in place effective conservation practices. After all, he wanted them to be proud of the role they had played, and could play in the future, when it came to land stewardship.

Johnson now lives back on the farm he and his wife Pat own in northeastern Iowa. He's been slowed by a tractor accident, but is still an outspoken proponent of ag conservation. As the 25th anniversary of the publication of *A Geography of Hope* approaches, the *Land Stewardship Letter's* Brian DeVore sat down with Johnson to talk about why developing a social compact between farmers and society in general is more important than ever. Page 5 features excerpts of Johnson's comments.

To read *America's Private Land*, *A Geography of Hope*, see www.landstewardship-project.org/posts/1302. □

Preaching the Gospel of Conservation

Paul Johnson on Social Compacts, Soil Health, & Thanking Farmers

Not a One-Trick Pony

“A *Geography of Hope* made it clear farming is really not single function. It should be multi-functional. A good farm also farms water, wildlife, biodiversity, and carbon. We added sections about the aesthetics of the land, too. If you don’t do all those things, you’re not a good farmer.

“You know, we’ve pushed sustainable agriculture, but I think multi-functional agriculture would have been a better way to put it. We should do it today, we should really have a major effort that says if you’re a good farmer, you don’t just farm corn and soybeans or rice or cotton. First of all, a good farmer has to farm water. Iowa gets 32 inches of precipitation a year and it all falls on farmland. And if farmers aren’t doing a good job, we’re not going to have clear water.

“And we talked about soil conservation in relation to erosion. But if we had called it the ‘Water Conservation Service’ instead of the ‘Soil Conservation Service,’ I think we’d have had more soil conservation. You’ve got to treat your soil right if you’re going to have good water, and you don’t do that the way we’re doing it right now.

“...People need to understand that much of our land is not healthy being farmed the way we are farming it right now. You look at soil — soil health is defined by the many functions of soil. And soil isn’t just keeping the surface from running off, but soil’s a buffer, it’s a filter, it’s a place where there’s a lot of very important life. And soil conservation has got to be all of those things, and not just one. That defines soil health, I think.”

A Conservation Crisis

“Look, we’ve had 10,000 years of agriculture, trying to domesticate land. And in the last 50 years, we have done it. Today, there isn’t a single thing that grows in our corn and soybean fields but corn and soybeans. Iowa has 26 million of our 36 million acres in corn and soybeans, and there is not another living thing allowed to live in it. And even things that we don’t know about in the soil are being destroyed.

“And this is a crisis. Not only that, but in the last 30 years, we’ve decoupled animals from land, we’ve decoupled people from animals. And we’re about to decouple land

from people. Around here, probably a third of our land, at least, is not farmed by the people who own it. Between here and 10 miles north of us we’ve got three farmers farming all the land. And they just have a bunch of big equipment and the owners contract with them and they put in the crops and take out the crops.”

Breaking the Program Fixation

“I think we end up focusing too much on a few government programs and not enough on preaching the gospel of conservation. In all of my speeches, I brought up Aldo Leopold or somebody like that and it got to the point where people were telling me, ‘Paul, you’ve got to start talking about the programs and how much money farmers could get from them.’ And I just couldn’t do that, because we really need to remind farmers of their responsibilities.

“We have this idea of democracy being focused on liberty, but liberty without responsibility is not a healthy way. And we’re always talking about liberty and you have the rights to do these things. But you also have responsibilities. You can’t have a good democracy without that. I don’t think we preach that enough.

“And I think that farmers have been told that conservation is about preventing soil erosion so much, and they

haven’t been challenged to do other things. But when farmers do get into other things, they like ‘em. So, we need to talk about those things. Getting back to functional ideas again in agriculture.”

The Conservation of Hope

“Leopold said it well, I think, when he said, ‘Conservation born out of fear will not get you there, but it should be viewed as a positive act.’ And farmers should stop seeing it as, ‘I’ve got to do this’ and say, ‘Well, I do this.’

“It always bothered me that farmers would be so worried about an endangered species on their farm. They should be proud

of an endangered species. And we should have good programs to help them so they can support that habitat and be proud. We just have to flip it around somehow. We have to work with the farm community, and at the same time we have to work with the public.”

Colorful Carpet

“I think the future of agriculture is going to depend on a social compact between farmers and the public. It’s important that the public understands that the health of the land depends on agriculture and ranching.

Leopold put it well in his essay “The Farmer as a Conservationist.” He wrote that conservation is harmony between people and land. When land does well for the farmer, a farmer does well by the land. They both end up better.

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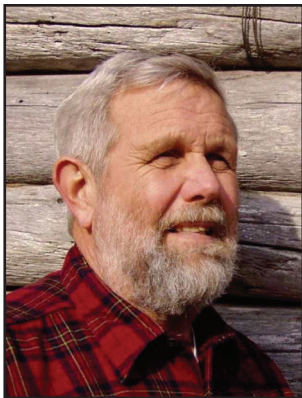
the land around them and even the beauty of the land is dependent on the farmer, and the farmer weaves that carpet on which America stands. Should the farmer just weave a gray carpet or add some color to it as well?”

Thanking Farmers

“And it’s about reminding farmers, and challenging them, and thanking them too. Between here and Des Moines, I’ve taken that trip a hundred times or more, and I’ve watched farmers put in new buffers and other conservation measures. And there’s one farm in particular where I really liked what I saw when I drove by.

“And one day I said, ‘I’m going to stop and say thank you to these people because it’s just beautiful what they’ve done.’ And so I went and it was an older woman working in her garden, and I went to her and I said, ‘I’ve gone by here and I’ve watched you put in these conservation measures, and watched it develop and I want to say thank you.’ And she started to cry. She said, ‘Nobody’s ever done that.’” □

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