

Agricultural Outlook Forum 2004
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Session: This Land Is Your Land: Will the U.S. Embrace the Landcare
Movement?

Landcare: "A Farmer's Perspective"

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THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND-THE LANDCARE MOVEMENT
USDA Agricultural Outlook Forum – 2004

Thank you Larry for the kind introduction.

It is a pleasure and privilege to be on this panel and participate in this forum. My assignment is to provide a farmers perspective on what we learned in Australia and what Landcare could do for farmers in the U.S. I will also emphasize how Landcare could raise our conservation ethic. My compliments to whoever picked the title for this session, *This Land is Your Land*, words from the great song that we all love and words that fit Landcare and what it will bring to America.

I was a member of the team, along with others on this panel, that Deputy Secretary James Moseley sent to Australia last June (2003).

The purpose was to attend the International Landcare Conference in Darwin, Australia and to study Landcare and how we could use Landcare to **add** to our conservation efforts. There were representatives in attendance from all over the world.

So what did we learn? What do the “Aussies” and many other countries have with Landcare that we do not have and maybe of greater importance, what Landcare could do for **all** of us on this planet if we give Landcare our leadership.

First, Landcare is a name that works! From taxi drivers to national leaders it “*resonates*”. Our first surprise occurred when leaving the airport toward our hotel our taxi driver gave us a sales pitch on Landcare. I defy you to find a taxi in New York City or Los Angeles that has ever heard of “soil”, let alone soil conservation. In Australia they measure something like 85% name recognition for the term Landcare. That is right up there with “Coke” and “Pepsi”. I am told the best that U.S. agricultural has achieved with any name recognition is 70% with the phrase “the other white meat”. Those of us in conservation have tried stewardship, sustainability, total resource management, core 4, etc. and I will wager we have never reached even 10% of our population and this number is probably less than 5%. So we found Landcare had **meaning** and **credibility** from the housewife recycling to complex watershed management.

Second, Landcare bridges the gap between: production and environment, browns and greens, conservation groups and farm or commodity groups and with the agencies Landcare should be common to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of the Interior and the Forest Service. The Aussies made the point that it must be a middle of the road approach. For us (the U.S.), Landcare could expand the middle ground that represents most producers as well as the public. It will add to and expand our locally led, grass-roots approach. To quote Deputy Secretary Moseley, “Landcare may well be the missing piece of our conservation puzzle”.

Third, the Aussies have developed a recognized brand, “*Landcare*” and “*the caring hands logo*”. It is an ethics brand not an eco or organic brand. It is a good behavior

brand, not a product quality brand. It is the voluntary first step toward environmental certification. It is not lawyer proof, but a non-regulatory way to show responsibility. For us producers it may well be a way to differentiate our production.

In Australia, this logo is licensed to corporate sponsors that help fund Landcare, especially the “Marketing of Conservation”. Many of these sponsors are U.S. corporations, corporations that may be looking for ways to identify with conservation and the environment in the U.S.

Fourth and most important of all, I learned how Landcare is fostering and raising their conservation ethic, not only in Australia but in all of the countries that were represented at the conference. They were very envious of the public funding for the numerous conservation programs we have here in the U.S. Frankly, I was envious of the conservation ethic and the passion they were achieving with very little funding.

I had to ask myself if we have become spoiled and complacent. Do we wait for cost share before we put practices on the land? I am sure we lead the world in conservation funding and practices applied. But practices and structures may not last, be destroyed or for sure must be maintained, whereas a change of behavior or an “instilled” conservation ethic lasts for generations. It is like the well known parable, give me a fish, feed me for a day, but teach me to fish, feed me for a lifetime.

Landcare helps instill that conservation ethic at the producer and community level in addition to promoting and marketing conservation at a national level. Many in this conference had the same advantage as I, a good SCS District Conservationist and dedicated local leaders that instilled a passion for conservation. They taught us the simple basics: leave it better than you found it, walk the water off – don’t let it run, learn as much as you can about your soil, it is your responsibility to take care of it and it will return many fold. I am afraid we have progressed to where we look to others or to government to solve our problems and the Landcare participants from around the world really brought us Yankees back to the basics.

We also visited many farms. It was impressive! Their soil and water technology is equal to or exceeds ours. No till or direct seeding is the standard. Australia, Argentina, Brazil and Canada, all of our major competitor’s, exceed the U.S. in the percent of crop areas which are direct seeded. They are also more aware of the soil quality, carbon sequestration and other long-term benefits of direct seeding in addition to the obvious soil-labor-machine cost savings in the short-term

They teased and challenged me saying, “You Americans do not need to no-till to be efficient, you get big commodity payments”, while in our countries we must no-till and use the best technology and efficiency to compete and survive. Which begs the question for us, are we using public tax money to stay competitive in the world, while not using the best technology to protect our environment and cut our costs?

Let me close with my conservation ethic which I have developed throughout my career and solidified while I was your Chief of SCS.

I believe it is the responsibility, yes the moral duty, for every producer and landowner to use the best technology available to protect the environment while economically producing food and fiber.

That is all we can ask of ourselves, our neighbors and our clients. It is what we owe our land and our people and I would hope Landcare will help us fulfill these responsibilities. The Aussies call it their triple bottom line. Their practices and methods must be environmentally sound, socially acceptable and economically viable. They believe this will avoid costly regulations and I agree.

Landcare should and could be worldwide. It gives the U.S. an opportunity to accept leadership in the environmental arena, both domestically and internationally. With worldwide WTO pressures, the green movement, a hungry third world, etc., the time may be right for Landcare as an international movement. The U.S. is the key and yes, it will be good for us producers.

Thank you and I look forward to questions and discussion.

Bill Richards