As the nation enters the 1980s, soil and water conservation is moving into the center of the policy arena. The effectiveness of present policies seems to have plateaued. They are broadly recognized as not meeting present problems. In 1977, soil erosion exceeded 5 tons per acre per year on 23.3 percent of the nation’s 406.3 million acres of cropland (Miller, 1970). Report upon report concludes that soil losses are serious enough to reduce agricultural production in the future. Other important soil and water conservation-related problems include nonpoint-source pollution and water quality and quantity issues.

Most soil and water conservation programs began in the 1930s. Story has it that dust from the Great Plains arrived in Washington, D.C., while Hugh Bennett was testifying for the creation of the Soil Erosion Service. Eastern as well as Western congressmen experienced first-hand the reality of wind erosion as soil particles settled on the nation’s capitol.

Soil erosion from water was also real. Perceptive commentators on the American agricultural scene in the nation’s earliest days decried agricultural practices with incessant loss of soil accompanied by locally