

Soil Authority chief speaks out

By JOHN PARRY

IT'S "too early" to know if farmers would lose out under the recent moves to absorb the Soil Conservation Authority under the umbrella of the Land Protection Service.

This is the opinion of the retiring chairman of the Victorian Soil Conservation Authority, Alec Mitchell.

The SCA, the quiet achiever of statutory authorities, was abolished last year as part of the State Government's rationalisation of departments serving rural Victoria.

Field staff have been transferred to 18 regional divisions of the Land Protection Service under the umbrella of the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands.

Mr Mitchell says in the interim, resources to soil conservation are down, but it's a question of what comes out of the new department.

"They'll still get support from regional offices but resources available will be a question of priorities determined by regional managers — whether its forestry, lands or any number of the aspects of conservation."

One of the SCAs major achievements has been its land use determination studies which have steered a clear path through the wide range of conflicting issues on land use.

"In multi-use areas the pressures on land use are enormous."

"I think it is essential that they continue and remain divorced from the political arena. But just how they will be handled under the new department is another question."

His response to the lower profile given to soil conservation in Victoria at a time when all other States are boosting support and the Federal Government is committed to the National Soil Conservation Program is simply that the State has an obligation under the national program to maintain funding in real terms at current levels.

The fundamental problem is in the erosion of the rural political base. "The clear message for soil conservationists is to convince city and urban people that some of their money needs to be spent on protecting the production capacity of agricultural lands."

Search

"Economists generally have little interest in land degradation or soil loss except where the solutions are economically attractive."

"Where we get techniques that are easily demonstrated as cost effective, such as laser levelling, minimum tillage, landholders readily adopt them."

"But in the search for long



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— ALEC MITCHELL

term solutions to problems like dyland and irrigation salinity, problems that have developed over a long time, the conventional cost-benefit analysis often does not work. "It is here the support of governments and the community in general is needed to develop and fund long-range policies."

ON the positive side he says the national soil conservation program is off to a good start.

"It kicked off with \$1 million, followed by \$4 million last year and hopefully it will be at least that much this year."

"The recent decision of the Australian Agricultural Council to go ahead with the Australian Soil Conservation Council is a major achievement as it gives soil conservation the recognition at federal level it has lacked up until now."

Mr Mitchell regards the total catchment approach to soil conservation as the authority's major achievement.

Closely allied has been the involvement of landholders through district advisory committees.

"This farmer involvement kept the authority on a practical, down to earth footing."

He said the catchment approach really started with Eppalock in the early 1960s.

Mr Mitchell says there is no doubt that the authority has done its job well. "But the task is incomplete."

The major goal remains

the restoration and management of catchments in hydrological balance from the top of the watershed to its outlet at sea level.

"We have major problems still to tackle, for example close to Melbourne, the Yarra and the Manlymrong Rivers dump 600,000 tonnes of silt into Port Phillip Bay every year."

"And the Melton Reservoir which supplies the Werribee irrigation district has lost 25-30 per cent of its capacity through siltation."

"A lot of the problems were caused in the early days, but the restoration program the authority has started needs to be continued and accelerated."

"On salinity problems of the greater Murray Valley, the hydrological problems are well understood, he says."

The big discussion point is where do you dispose of saline ground water?

"I think it is critical to look at the feasibility of piping a slurry to the sea."

Fears

"Technically it is feasible but it is a matter of cost and how much the community is prepared to pay."

"In all of this discussion on soil conservation the key issue is that land remains productive in perpetuity provided you don't allow it to blow away, wash away or become saline."

"Turning to farmers fears that productive land will continue to be hived off for parks and reserves, Mr Mitchell believes the expansionary

phase of national parks is over.

It happened over a period when environmental, political and community opinion favored it."

"I would think that the rate of expansion would be very much less in future because the parks have to a large extent been set aside."

"My view is that it is better to leave land which has a whole range of options in a flexible form of land use so that decisions could be made in future."

He says the concept of a land bank, or uncommitted land, is sound because it is presumptuous of a current generation to be allocating land for all purposes for all

'Join new body' plea to farmers

FARMERS are being urged to join the newly formed Soil Conservation Association of Victoria.

The association, born out of a deep concern by the staff of the disbanded Soil Conservation Authority that soil conservation was losing its political and community base, aims to encourage the wide use and conservation of soil.

Foundation chairman of the association is the retiring chairman of the SCA, Alec Mitchell.

"We will aim to increase government and community awareness of the critical need for protecting soil and water resources for future generations."

"This will be done by improving communications between urban and rural communities, by encouraging development and implementation of long range policies, encouraging research, reviewing land use policies and activities and providing a forum through which members can share practical experiences in soil conservation and erosion control."

"Proposal is also being considered that we form the Soil and Water Conservation Association of Australia," Mr Mitchell said.

Funds from the now defunct Soil Conservation Authority Staff Association (SCASA) will be transferred to the new association.

People from all over Victoria are being invited to join the association. Membership is \$10 and information is available from the secretary, Suite 302, Clunies Ross House, 191 Royal Parade, Parkville.

time. "It might be that in some areas now set aside as parks may have to be reassessed if that is the need of the community at the time."

That of course assumes a change to a more practical conservation approach.

"It's my impression that there is a change coming into conservation groups."

Recognising that there are two distinct groups — the producer conservationists and the preserver conservationist — I think there is room for both.

"Hopefully it will get back

to an approach like the Australian Conservation Foundation used to reflect, before it became preservationist and politically oriented."

"We need to stress the point that good land management is good conservation."

"It's just unfortunate for the country as a whole that a city-urban population can get very emotional about such things as the seal population in Greenland, but it is very hard to get them emotive about soil and soil loss," Mr Mitchell said.

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