



New water resources program takes shape as Congress passes two laws to encourage conservation projects

VIRTUALLY OVERLOOKED in Congress' mad dash for adjournment were two new laws aimed at controlling and conserving the Nation's precious water resources. One, the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act, provides for partnerships among local, State, and Federal groups to promote conservation practices where rain falls—at the upstream part of the watershed. The other new law amends the 1937 Water Facilities Act by making loans for conservation projects available to Eastern and Southern farmers. Formerly these loans were restricted to 17 Western states.

President Eisenhower says these two laws, coupled with soil conservation provisions of the new tax revision law, "give important new strength to our national efforts to conserve the vital water and soil resources of the United States."

Passage of these laws marks the beginning of a new all-embracing conservation program. The emphasis will be on integrated operations that take in farms and forests, streams and cities. Created to help solve three pressing problems—soil erosion, floods, and drought—the program seeks to take a good look at upstream watershed protection as part of the over-all water resource policy.

The Watershed Protection Act also for the first time spells out a broad program of government assistance, both technical and financial, to local, small-scale watershed groups. According to the Administration plan, the local watershed groups must assume the responsibility for initiating, carrying out, and sharing the costs of watershed protection. The smaller projects will supplement larger interstate or basin-wide projects undertaken by the Federal Government downstream.

The new watershed program is in line with the objectives laid down by President Eisenhower when he established a

cabinet-level committee on water policy a few months ago. At that time he said that if the United States is to continue to advance agriculturally and industrially, the best use must be made of every drop of water. He also expressed the hope that his Administration would furnish effective leadership in establishing national water policies.

Both Congress and the Administration have shown little liking for plans that would increase Federal participation in power-reclamation projects any more than necessary. Likewise, in strictly water resource development projects, the Government has called for a much greater degree of local and state "participation and responsibility."

The watershed program fits in with the broad soil conservation plans which have been developed under both Democratic and Republican administrations. Under the Watershed Protection Act, ways of properly using each kind of soil on all the farms in a watershed will be sought. Wherever necessary, soil conservation practices will be supplemented by small detention dams, channel improvements, and disposal facilities.

Limited to 250,000 Acres

The act limits the size of the watershed or subwatershed areas which will be given assistance under the new program to 250,000 acres. In addition, no dam that provides more than 5000 acre-feet of total capacity will be authorized.

Appropriations for the projects come from Congress directly. Local groups will be given help by the Agriculture Department in preparing plans that will be submitted to the lawmakers. USDA will conduct surveys to determine the physical and economic soundness of the proposed project.

Before any Federal funds are provided,

the local groups must show that they have acquired—at no cost to the Government—any land necessary for dams or other improvements. They also must show that they are ready to share installation and operating costs connected with the project. In addition, agreements to carry out recommended soil conservation measures must be obtained from at least 50% of the landowners which benefit from retention reservoirs built with government help.

The President envisions a new era when rural and city interests will join forces to sponsor water conservation programs. Cities, towns, and other urban areas can help to replenish their water supplies by cooperating in these projects, he believes. The watershed and soil program will help lessen the damage caused by drought, he says, and thus it should be of great value in areas that have been hard hit by drought in the past few years.

Loans to Farmers

The companion Water Facilities Act will help provide the money for the rancher or farmer who wants to go ahead with plans to improve his water supply. The Act establishes a program of direct loans for drainage facilities, reforestation, erosion control, or other soil conservation measures. If it is more feasible, the Government will insure loans made by banks or other private agencies which will be used by the farmer for these conservation purposes.

This law was designed to provide funds for farmers and ranchers who frequently need credit for conservation measures. High initial investments sometimes required to establish conservation systems or to convert them into more profitable operations may discourage these projects. These new credit provisions, however, should help to advance soil and water conservation because they are specially geared to conservation needs.

Revision of the internal revenue laws also should encourage conservation projects by farmers. The new tax law allows farmers to treat expenditures for a number of soil conservation measures as current annual expenses. In this way, such expenses can be deducted from farm income when figuring income taxes.

Commenting on the entire water conservation program, Mr. Eisenhower said when he signed the new bills into law:

"To do this work, all levels of government and private endeavor must cooperate. And there will be a call for increased effort in the future. Because our population is growing rapidly, the demands upon the nation's soil and water resources are bound to become heavier in the years ahead. But we do have the resources to match this growth if we manage them wisely."