

# **A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE SOIL CONSERVATION BOARD MOVEMENT IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

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"Any policy for soil conservation vitally affects farmers, and the need exists to associate the farming community more closely with the development of (soil conservation) policy and its administration".

These perceptive words were written by Bob Herriot, the "Father" of soil conservation in South Australia just 40 years ago. He was explaining the December 1945 amendments to the Soil Conservation Act which made provision for the proclamation of soil conservation districts and the appointment of soil conservation boards across the State "wherever the farmers of an area decide that they want one". He wrote that the legislation was passed enthusiastically "on the voices" without a single division in either house - surely a reflection of public concern about soil erosion after the droughts and environmental disasters of the early 1940s.

Herriot had visited the USA in 1945 and there saw soil conservation districts in action. He considered that they were the driving force behind the soil conservation plan for that country, and he returned with the expectation that "the desire to form soil conservation districts would be spontaneous, and that based on American experience, development would be somewhat slow at first, followed by a mushroom growth when farmers realized the advantages to be gained through organisation".

At the beginning soil conservation districts could be constituted in two ways - firstly by a petition from at least 60% of the owners or occupiers of land in a given area - secondly areas already proclaimed under the Sand Drift Act could be proclaimed as soil conservation districts without any need for a petition. This was how the first district, the Murray Mallee, was proclaimed on May 29th, 1947.

Herriot claimed that the new legislation marked the beginning of a movement which he believed would spread rapidly to other parts of the State. He went even further to claim that it initiated a "grand scale experiment designed to bring the theme of conservation right home to South Australians, and what was more, place the initiative for soil conservation with the people who really counted - the farmers".

Reading the early reports, one can begin to grasp the bases of Herriot's philosophy behind soil conservation boards:

- (1) no soil conservation plan could be implemented unless it had the complete support of the farming community because any such plan would require first and foremost the adoption of changed farming methods.
- (2) because farmers would have to operate the plan, the initiative should be in the hands of farmers if they were willing to accept the responsibility.
- (3) farmers should run their own affairs, and the soil conservation professionals should encourage them to do so - unless this happened direction from some outside body was inevitable.
- (4) the Government should seek the advice of the soil conservation boards on matters of policy,
- (5) boards would not act as policemen or dictate to farmers but would only sit in judgment when a dispute arose between neighbours over erosion problems - ie be an arbitrator when the need arose, in fact be a "peace-maker" according to Herriot.

With these broad policies in place, the Government adopted the following strategies:

- (a) the boundaries of soil conservation districts would follow natural features such as watersheds.
- (b) because some districts would be very large, provision would be

made for the appointment of local committees, subordinate to the Boards, but with legal status and responsibilities.

- (c) complete coverage of the agricultural areas with 13 districts would be sought.
- (d) Board members would be chosen for their special aptitude to carry out the work.

We will keep these policies and strategies in mind as we review the history of the board movement. I have chosen the Murray Mallee Board as our example, although an essentially similar story could be told for the Murray Plains, Upper Eyre Peninsula and Yorke Peninsula Boards, all established in the late 1940s, and the West Broughton Board established in 1953.

As mentioned earlier the Murray Mallee District was proclaimed in May 1947 by a simple administrative decision. It is interesting to note that the original district comprised two separate areas-the District Councils of Loxton, Browns Well and East Murray, and portion of Mannum and Mobilong (now Murray Bridge).

Subsequently in 1947 the district councils of Karoonda and the part of Marne, east of the river, were added following a successful petition. In 1951 most of the District Council of Meningie, and in 1954 most of the District Council of Waikerie were added. In 1970 a petition to include the hundreds of Paringa, Murtho and Cadell was unsuccessful.

The first Board was appointed on 12/3/1948, and the first Board meeting was held on 15/4/1948. Mr Herriot attended and gave an inspirational address. He said that the duties of the Board were:-

- (1) to see that farmers protected their soil resource "enthusiastically"
- (2) to keep farmers up to date with information
- (3) to protect farmers from the bad farming practices of their neighbours

He said that consultation and co-operation rather than legislative action was the best means of achieving their goals. Despite Herriot<sup>1</sup>'s belief that cooperation and consultation would be the key to success, the Board in fact put its faith in

coercion for many years. This can be attributed to the enormity of the problem facing the Board in terms of the area drifting. The morale of the Mallee farmers was low, production was poor, and few people had the resources to adopt better farming practices. In addition there was little suitable technical information available with which to develop an extension program.

In a letter all landholders in its district in July 1948, the Board spelt its duties out, including an explanation of its role in hearing applications for soil conservation orders. The letter included a statement which offended many landholders. It said that farmers should remember that each seasons following program would play an important part in the amount of drift in the district during the ensuing 12 months. Therefore (farmers) should discuss their following program frankly with their neighbours to ensure that their interests, and those of public utilities, were safeguarded. Farmers were invited to give consideration to conservation matters which affected the welfare of their neighbours and themselves.

This letter was largely misunderstood and in fact quite unjustified resentment of "Government interference" was shown by farmers and local government.

It is interesting to note that the Upper Eyre Peninsula Board seriously considered circulating a similar letter, but apparently had second thoughts after hearing about the Murray Mallee Board's experience.

In the Soil Conservation Act, the duties of a Board are set out somewhat differently

- to foster local interest in soil conservation
- to collect information as to soil erosion and soil conservation in its district
- to make any investigations required by the Minister of Agriculture or the Advisory Committee on Soil Conservation
- to make reports or recommendations to the Minister or the Advisory Committee on soil erosion and soil conservation
- to make orders under the Act

Let us now examine how the Murray Mallee Board has addressed itself to these duties:

### **To foster local interest in soil conservation**

In 1962 the Board decided to mount an intensive program to promote improved soil fertility - through the increased use of superphosphate, the introduction of improved annual legumes and better land use and management.

The program ran through most of 1963 and included talks to most local government bodies, articles in the local press and radio, 16 separate demonstration plots featuring medics, lucerne, sand drift control and weed control, displays at three regional bureau conferences, a booklet circulated to all 1,600 farmers in its district "Sand into Soil", and six field days with an aggregate attendance of more than 300.

This program helped create a new environment of pride and confidence in the Mallee, and soil conservation staff were inundated with requests for land management, subdivision and watering plans.

The Board is continuing to foster local interest in soil conservation through its close involvement in the management of group conservation projects, especially the currently completed Chesson-Mindarie Scheme where it set the guidelines, established the levels of cost sharing, approved individual applications for assistance and reviewed the progress of the participants.

For many years before funding for Group Conservation Schemes began, the Board had sought funds to buy a bulldozer for leveling blown out sand dunes — it must have though all its Christmases had come at once in 1982 with the introduction of the Chesson Mindarie project funded by the Expanded Soil Conservation Program.

### **To collect information about soil erosion in its district**

In 1949 the Minister of Agriculture asked the Board to locate, investigate and provide appropriate reports on all badly drifting farms in its district. The Board took this matter seriously, seeking information from local government and other

sources. By 1952 members had inspected 51 properties on which comprehensive reports were made and a combined report issued.

During the 1960s and 1970s the situation was kept under review and the Board has seen a significant reduction in the number of properties listed until today there are only three or four causing concern. This gratifying result can be largely attributed to the Board's activities in promoting sound land management.

The remaining problem farms are in fact problem farmers - the Board has shown that it is the management of the individuals which counts in the long run - and it would dearly like to see these three or four individuals retired from farming.

Legislative action is the final solution and the Board has taken this step, somewhat reluctantly, even to the extent of compulsory acquisition.

### **To make any investigations required by the Minister or the Advisory Committee**

This is partly covered by the activity I have just discussed. More recently the Boards were asked by the Advisory Committee to identify priorities for soil conservation in their district.

The Murray Mallee Board has done this, and together with the priorities identified by the other Boards, the Regions and the Division of Plant Services, these have been combined to provide a State list of priorities. These are used by the Advisory Committee and the Soil Conservation Priorities Committee in assessing proposals for funding from the Expanded and National Soil Conservation Programs.

In this way Boards are able to influence the allocation of funds.

### **To make reports and recommendations to the Minister or the Advisory Committee on soil erosion and soil conservation**

From its inception the Board sought to provide the legislative means to prevent irresponsible cultivation which it saw as the main cause of soil erosion. This was highlighted in the 1948 letter referred to earlier.

In 1949 the Board wanted all landholders to give their neighbours one months notice of their intention to break up any land. The following year it sought the

inclusion of a clause compelling erosion control in all property leases.

Subsequently on numerous occasions in the 1950s it sought legislative control of fallowing, culminating in a deputation of the Minister of Agriculture in 1955.

This was unsuccessful, and another deputation was planned. The Board was certainly persistent!

Finally in 1957, the Chairman, Errol Rollbusch, attended a meeting of the Advisory Committee, and made a strong case for amending the Act.

This proved to be the turning point, and the Committee began the lengthy process of amending the Act. Finally in 1960 section 6j was added. It reads "a person shall not by cultivation, burning off or stock grazing on any land create on that land conditions as a result of which sand drifts from that land to any other land and detriment or damage to such other land or any other land is caused" Penalty \$200.

To date there has not been a charge or prosecution under this section -it seems that the Board has achieved its objective in other ways.

### **To make orders under the Act**

The Murray Mallee Board has had more experience in this area than any other Board, which is not surprising. The Board has acquitted itself in this difficult area with firmness and tact when hearing applications for soil conservation orders. I speak from experience as I was present at two hearings in 1978. It is interesting to note that there have been no applications since 1978, and that these last two were related to absentee owners.

I said earlier that I chose the Murray Mallee board only as an example, and essentially similar stories could have been told about the other senior boards. We now have three new Boards, Hummocks, Lower Eyre Peninsula and Lower North, which have yet to make a name for themselves, but with the illustrious examples above before them, I have no doubt that they will succeed.

In fairness to the other senior Boards I will comment on some highlights of their activities.

The West Broughton Board pioneered the subsidized group catchment approach to soil conservation in South Australia through the highly successful Pisant Creek Scheme, and most of you will have seen the video.

Other schemes were running at the same time, but Pisant Creek was the only truly integrated catchment, and it is an achievement of which the Board can justly be proud.

Another outstanding initiative of the Board was its decision to make a private study tour of New South Wales in 1981. The Chairman, Doug Henderson, was one of three of Board members who attended the Tamworth National Soil Conservation Conference, and he was so impressed with what he saw that he persuaded four of his Board members to join him in a week long study tour at their own expense.

The Murray Plains Board pioneered the concept of interboard visits when it went to the Murray Mallee for a joint meeting in 1954, beginning a long era of technical exchanges between Boards. This activity has unfortunately declined in recent years because of lack of funds, but the Yorke Peninsula Board visited the Upper Eyre Peninsula Board in November 1983 to study the reclamation and treatment of salt affected land.

This is an activity which I believe should be strongly promoted again, especially for the benefit of the newer Boards.

The Upper Eyre Peninsula Board has always closely involved its local committees in its activities, and I believe that this is one of its great strengths. Local committee members opinions are treated with careful consideration. The local committees have proved to be ideal training grounds for new Board members.

To the newer Boards I suggest that you make the establishment of local committees a high priority.

The Yorke Peninsula Board had the distinction of organizing and coordinating the first group catchment project in South Australia back in the early 1950s. In the Petersville watershed covering some 4 000 ha, 14 of the 16 landholder co-operated in the project.

This project was unsubsidized and its success was due to the enthusiasm and support of the Board. Recently the Board territory was enlarged by some 500%, so in effect it is a new Board, and has the job of carving out a new identity and community acceptance for itself.

In conclusion I want to make some provocative remarks as this is probably the last time I will get a chance at a forum like this.

Firstly I have had a 35 year association with the Board movement since I attended a meeting with the Murray Plains Board in 1952. I have greatly enjoyed this association and have made some great friendships along the way. I remember some of the outstanding chairman such as Jim O'Shaughnessy, George Cant and Reo Humphry. I was secretary of three Boards, and shared in their achievements and frustrations.

As secretary of the Advisory Committee for the past 10 years I have been able to maintain a close association with all the Boards, and have seen Board coverage of the State double in that time. My vision is to see all the agricultural areas of the State covered by the end of the decade - so there's a challenge to the Committee and the Boards.

I believe that the Boards must take more initiative in the land management arena in their districts - Board members have to be the pace setters - all Board members should be setting examples to their neighbours.

Why didn't one of our 54 Board members win the Soil Conservation Farmer of the Year Competition which will be announced tonight-was it because they were too modest, and didn't enter the competition, or was it simply because they weren't the best?

Secondly - some Boards seem to be reluctant to get involved in decision making, resource allocation and management? One or two Boards have proved that they can do this effectively, and I believe that all Boards have the capability if not the desire to get involved.

Let me remind you of what Bob Herriot said 40 years ago "Farmers should run their own affairs and the professionals should encourage them to do so. Unless this happens direction from some outside body is inevitable".

Nothing has changed - if anything there is an even greater probability that this could happen - that the community at large will demand greater accountability of us as stewards of the land. There is a growing community awareness of the land degradation situation. I remind you of Dr Brian Roberts' talk on land ethics to this forum last year. What have the Boards done about it?

Thirdly - there also seems to be a feeling that Boards can do their own thing, that they are autonomous. However Boards are creatures of the Advisory Committee - they owe their existence to the Committee - the Districts are proclaimed on the recommendation of the Committee and all Board members are appointed on the nomination of the Committee. In addition Boards are funded by the Government, and are accountable to it.

Nevertheless the ball is in the Board's courts - rather than being reactive only when called upon the Committee, Boards can take the initiative. I am sure that the Committee would welcome proposals and suggestions from Boards-surely there are issues which the Boards feel strongly about, so let the Committee hear about them.

Fourthly - there has been some concern expressed about the increased time commitment required of Board members over the past 12 months. I acknowledge that this has happened, but it is a reflection of the higher profile taken by the Committee - perhaps the Boards have been let off too lightly in the past.

I know that most Board members are busy people - that's the reason you were selected, because you get things done.

To me it's a matter of priorities - obviously making a living from farming is your first priority but after that I put it to you, that there is no better cause to work for than soil conservation. Whether stewardship of the land is considered from the ethical, ecological or spiritual point of view, soil conservation is probably the single most important issue that you as individuals can influence today.

And finally - I believe that the time for female membership of the Committee and the Boards is long overdue. By their nature women have a great concern for the environment, and we have much to learn from them. I had hoped to see at least one Board grasp the nettle before I relinquished my long association with

Boards. I was pleased to find on my study tour to Western Australia last April that there are women on the District Committees, the equivalent of our Boards.

So I throw out a challenge to the Boards to get women involved in soil conservation. Start off by getting them on local committees there they will get the experience and knowledge to equip them for Board membership.

Mr. Chairman - the Soil Conservation Board movement in South Australia has a great record - it is a tribute to the foresight of Bob Herriot. Greater opportunities lie ahead. As the land comes under increasing pressure because of the economic downturn, the protection of our limited soil resources becomes increasingly important. Soil Boards can be right there where the action is.

What a challenge - and what a reward - the satisfaction of knowing that you helped save our most important natural resource - the soil.