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The County Conservation Program in Iowa

J. HAROLD ENNIS¹

Abstract. This is a brief review of the county conservation program, a new trend in Iowa conservation. The early legal history is traced, and major provisions of the Iowa law are identified. An itemized list indicates the chief uses of newly acquired land by the 62 county boards. Illustrations are given to suggest the relatively unexplored educational and scientific possibilities of this new trend. This applies particularly to botany, archeology, and "nature education."

This is an attempt to summarize briefly the history, program, and potential of a relatively new conservation movement in Iowa. Obviously in this brief time it is possible only to sketch some of the essential details. But it is the hope of the writer that knowledge of this movement to the members of the Iowa Academy of Science and to others may lead to greater realization of the objectives and potentials set forth in the new law.

HISTORY

The political scientist, as well as the casual observer, has long been aware of the growing centralization of government in the United States in the twentieth century. State, and particularly local, governmental units have been declining in authority and power at the expense of the larger units. In a very small measure the new county conservation program represents a reversal of this major trend. Under this new program, the *County*, rather than the State, the region, or the nation, becomes the central unit for control.

This new movement in Iowa came about for several reasons. For one thing, State legislators were overwhelmed by many requests for State appropriations to be used for local projects. Many legislators sought wisely to avoid the evaluation of purely local projects to be constructed with State funds. A second reason had been mounting criticism of the functioning of the Iowa State Conservation Commission. Other factors too were present.

At any rate, prior to 1955, there had been much discussion both in and out of the Iowa State legislature concerning the development of a more effective conservation program. It may be unfair to single out the names of individuals and organizations for mention, because so many had shown interest and gave

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of their time in study and action toward this new program. It is still recalled that the Scott County Izaak Walton League showed great interest in the matter, and legislators, such as Mr. Conway Morris, Dallas Center, Iowa, gave leadership to the movement.

Actually the first proposed bill, which eventually led to the new Iowa law, was written about 1940. Some ideas were borrowed from the Wisconsin County Park Law and the Illinois Forest Preserve District Law, both of which originated about 1910. The new Iowa Law was to have a broader basis than either of these two. One other State, Indiana, working on the same problem, borrowed the proposed Iowa Law while writing their own. The Indiana Law was passed in 1955, the same year that Iowa finally passed theirs.

The original bill creating the County Conservation Board set-up was House File 547. It was introduced in 1955 at the 56th General Assembly by the Conservation, Drainage and Flood Control Committee, whose chairman was Mr. Morris. The bill was read for the first time on April 4, 1955, and referred to the sifting committee.

The actual steps toward passage were as follows: H. F. 547 was offered as an amendment to H. F. 591 on April 28, 1955, by Mr. Morris, and was adopted by a vote of 48 to 22 (the latter bill was actually an appropriation bill for the State Conservation Commission); a motion was made to reconsider the vote and it passed 43 to 31; Mr. Morris then moved the adoption of the amendment by roll call; the amendment was readopted 60 to 34. H. F. 591 as amended was then moved for passage by Mr. Patrick, Chairman of the Appropriations Committee, and carried 91 to 2. This ended the House action.

H. F. 591 in the State Senate was read a first and second time and referred to the Appropriation Committee on April 28, 1955. It passed the Senate April 29th by a vote of 45 to 1. A motion to reconsider the vote carried and an amendment changing the amount of the appropriation also carried on April 29th. The measure passed the Senate on the last day of that session, April 29, 1955.

THE LAW AND ITS PURPOSES

The purposes of the law (56GA, Ch. 12) . . . "are to create a county conservation board and to authorize counties to acquire, develop, maintain and make available to the inhabitants of the county, public parks, preserves, parkways, playgrounds, recreational centers, county forests, wildlife and other conservation areas, and to promote and preserve the health and general welfare of the people, to encourage and preserve the orderly development and conservation of natural resources, and to cultivate good citizenship by providing adequate programs of public recreation."

The voters of each county are to determine whether a county conservation board will be established. The first step is to present a petition of two hundred voters' names to the county board of supervisors. The latter then . . . "shall submit to the people of the county at the next primary or general election the question whether a county conservation board shall be created . . ." If a majority of voters approve the measure, the board of supervisors must appoint five residents of "demonstrated interest in conservation matters" to serve as a conservation board. The terms are 5 years, in a "staggered" arrangement to maintain a continuity of experience, and the members serve without pay except for actual expenses.

The powers and duties of these county conservation boards are exceedingly broad. A portion of the law states that the boards are

" . . . authorized and empowered . . . to acquire in the name of the county by gift, purchase, lease, agreement or otherwise in fee or with conditions, suitable real estate within or without the territorial limits of the county areas of land and water for public parks, preserves, parkways, playgrounds, recreation centers, forests, wildlife and other conservation purposes . . . In acquiring or accepting land, due consideration shall be given to its scenic, historic, archeologic, recreational or other special features . . ."

In order to make possible the acquisition of lands and other properties to be used for these various purposes, gifts may be accepted and taxes may be levied. The law states that the county board of supervisors may appropriate money from the general fund of the county for conservation purposes. It may also levy an annual tax of not less than one-fourth mill or more than one mill on the dollar of the assessed valuation of all real and personal property subject to taxation within the county. The county treasurer is to pay such taxes into a separate and distinct fund known as the county conservation fund. In these ways, funds are made available for the use of the county conservation boards.

One limiting feature of the law, both controlling and advisory in nature, is the requirement that county conservation boards must file with and obtain approval from the State Conservation Commission of all proposed acquisitions of land and all general development plans. To this end the State Conservation Commission created a special post, which is presided over by Mr. Wilbur A. Rush, Director of County Conservation Activities. He thus serves as a liaison officer between the State and the various county boards.

RECENT EXPERIENCE AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

As a result of elections in 1956, sixteen Conservation Boards were formed the first year. The first three approved appear to be Buchanan, Howard, and Mitchell counties.

To date (March 27, 1962), sixty-two counties have taken advantage of this enabling legislation and have set up county conservation boards. The approximate one-third of Iowa counties which do not have such boards are scattered largely in southern, western, and north-western parts of the State.

It is to be expected that the more populous counties would have a larger tax base for their tax levy, and their needs differ from county to county. As a result, the county conservation programs vary greatly. The four counties with the largest land ownership are:

Black Hawk	1,626 acres
Polk	1,512 acres
Linn	1,375 acres
Scott	1,327.5 acres

Thus these four counties own approximately 5,800 acres of land. The total land holdings of the 62 Boards is roughly 13,000 acres. The four counties own almost half as much as all the other counties.

The break-down in land usage is very interesting. From the best available data the following categories and projects are as follows:

Parks	103
River Access	78
Game Management areas	24
(Some open to hunting, others not)	
Roadside Parks	22
Historical Areas	9
Headquarters Areas	8
Cooperative School Projects	7
(Outdoor classrooms for natural science study)	
Forest Areas	5
Preserves	3

Actually many of these categories are multi-purpose, and are designed to serve large numbers of people. Nearly all river access areas have picnic facilities. Most of the historical areas also have picnic facilities. The other extreme of single-purpose areas includes such categories as preserves, or lands to be held inviolate for botanical or biological purposes.

It will be noted from what has been said that the chief activities of these county conservation boards center in parks, picnic areas, and closely related public recreation. Those purposes will undoubtedly continue to be of major importance. However, other types of conservation measures may be closer to the interests of the Iowa Academy of Science. For example, older members of the Academy may recall an article on "Antiquities" by a former member, Dr. Charles R. Keyes, in which he urged the public acquisition of 10 mound groups. (See *Proceedings*, vol. 52: 39-

40). These mound groups were in addition to those that were included in the Effigy Mounds National Monument. Some County conservation boards might well secure these rare items before they all are destroyed.

The writer called the attention of Dr. Marshall McKusick, State Archeologist, to some of the possibilities of the new county conservation boards. Dr. McKusick secured the cooperation of County Boards in Webster and Humboldt counties for important research. While land was not purchased for permanent acquisition, over three thousand dollars of county funds were used on these research projects.

A few months ago Mr. Sutherland Dows, Sr., of Cedar Rapids, made a splendid gift to Linn County of 150 acres to follow the "Preserve" principle. The Offer and Acceptance Agreement states "This tract is to be kept inviolate as a botanical and biological Preserve for its beauty, (and) its potential as a wildlife preserve . . ." It is tentatively planned that an attempt will be made to seed a few acres of tillable land to native prairie grasses and plants. Experiments of this nature should be of concern to biologists.

Another illustration may be in order. Arrangements are now being completed by the writer, a member of the Linn County Conservation Board, relative to the gift of 20 acres of land from the Rock Island Railroad for a botanical preserve. This remnant of sand prairie contains rare plants which justify close conservation control. Some of these botanical items from the Rock Island Preserve have already been reported in a paper before the Iowa Academy of Science by Dr. Robert Drexler of Coe College.

Many other kinds of conservation activities of a scientific nature may be suggested by other members of the Iowa Academy of Science. Biological, geological, archeological, and other types of scientific surveys may reveal the necessity of using in new ways this new county conservation movement. Its potentials are indeed great.