

Remarks given by Mark Rey, Undersecretary of Agriculture for Natural Resources and Environment,  
at the Western Stewardship Summit,  
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*Adapted from: A New Chapter in the History of American Conservation by Mark Rey*

Over the last few years of the last century, at least some of the public discourse on environmental policy was often fixed in time and out of proportion to the real progress which has been made in improving the environment over the last three decades.

Because we have, as I indicated at the outset, real reason to be proud of our progress, and optimistic about our future, as well as the future of the environment in other countries who choose our path of individual liberty and economic opportunity.

It is especially vital, I think, to acknowledge and even celebrate these successes in order to continue to inspire and motivate people to find a common understanding to tackle the challenges that lie before us. That's important, in my view, because all of our great challenges and national endeavors, all of them without exception, whether they involve the settlement of the continent, assuring the spread and continuity of freedom, eliminating hunger, or exploring space—all of these have been buoyed and propelled by our native sense of optimism, possibility and shared purpose: the very things that attracted Churchill to America and Americans. Over the long run, our efforts to protect the environment—or in the service of any part of that cause—cannot continue to succeed, in my view, if they do not reflect that sense of optimism and shared purpose.

In 1939, as he was helping to write the second chapter in America's conservation experience, Aldo Leopold eloquently wrote that "conversation is the positive exercise of skill and insight, and not merely the negative exercise of abstinence or caution." Nothing in the ensuing seven decades has changed the essential truth of Leopold's observation.

To the contrary, over the last three decades we have written an important chapter in America's conservation experience. As a point of departure, I started my college career in the fall of 1970—just a few short months after the first Earth Day, April 22, 1970. Compared to then, we live today in a very different world, and fortunately, enjoy a very different environment than that which existed in 1970. EPA's most recent air quality trends report delivered the extremely positive news that, over the past 30 years, air pollution from six major air pollutants of concern has decreased by 48%, even as our economy has grown by 164% over the same time period, our population by 39%, and our energy consumption by 42%.

Our citizens enjoy one of the safest and cleanest water supplies in the world. Over the past three decades, we have more than doubled the number of American citizens who benefit from advanced modern waste water treatment.

As we celebrate the 36<sup>th</sup> anniversary of President Nixon's signing of the 1972 Clean Water Act, we have dramatically improved the quality of our waters and the health of our aquatic systems.

In 2005, we achieved a long-sought goal—reversing the loss of wetlands acreage and showing for the first time a net increase in wetlands. We have cleaned up 900 priority superfund sites, and accelerated

the cleanup of our most contaminated federal facilities. And through successive acts of several congresses, however otherwise divided they might have been, we have created a federal lands national wilderness system that both far exceeds the ambitions of the first proponents of the creation of such a system over 50 years ago, and that stands today as the envy of the world.

Over the past several years the Forest Service has played an important role in this record of progress. We are capitalizing on new techniques to address new challenges that we face today and that we will continue to face in the future.

Consider that in the area of reducing fire risk, fuels treatment on an annual basis has quadrupled since the late 1990's. From 2001 through 2007, the federal land management agencies combined have treated 24.6 million acres at risk to catastrophic fire. That's an area slightly larger than the size of the state of Ohio.

Stewardship contracting is being designed on a long-term, landscape scale with working relationships shifting from patronage to partnership, and new manufacturing infrastructure being created to generate biomass energy and other products from low-value wood fiber. The commercial timber sales program has stabilized and is increasing slowly as we attempt to maintain existing manufacturing infrastructure as a means of helping reduce land stewardship costs. We have brought forest planning up-to-date by modernizing processes for consultation, project planning and environmental and implementation monitoring.

We have used the Secure Rural School's legislated Resource Advisory Committees and the Healthy Forest Restoration Act's community fire planning process to engage and empower local stakeholders to move collaborative projects and plans forward. And there has been a material effect of increased value on the ground as a consequence of that level of cooperation. Consider that in 2007 we burned in excess of 9.5 million acres, a modern-day record for acres burned, but as compared to 2002 and 2003 where we lost 2,000 and 3,000 primary structures respectively, in 2007 we lost less than 400 primary homes and much of that as a result of fuels treatment work driven by community-based fire plans that were done in the wildland-urban interface. Related to the fire system, through the Incident Command System, we have translated longstanding expertise in wildland fire management into a capacity for assisting emergency response to disasters of all kinds, taking the lead in responding to the recovery efforts after 9/11, the Columbia shuttle recovery, and hurricane Katrina, Rita, Gustav and Ike.

So, with those as examples, I would submit that the last quarter century has produced an important investment in establishing both a national consensus as well as a regulatory framework for protecting the environment. A great deal of good was accomplished, and our air and water are cleaner, our landscapes are, with a few exceptions, healthier. Our decision-making processes are more rigorous, thorough, empirical, and transparent. At the same time, they are also more expensive, time-consuming, and, in some cases, less accessible.

In the course of that quarter century, we have had some setbacks. In fact, some of the time-honored and successful decision-making tools were inadvertently cast aside. The Forest Service's reliance in the 1950s and '60s on local advisory committees was impeded and arrested by the enactment of the Federal Advisory Committee Act and we are only now getting back to using those kinds of local consensus and advisory groups with some facility.

While we have made some progress of a substantial nature, the greater emphasis on process has had a collateral affect of facilitating the growth of adversarial activities and behaviors. An administrative record has too often taken the place of a conversation and we may have in some areas reached a point of diminishing returns.

That summarizes where we are today and brings me to the future. Fortunately we are in the midst of an important and welcome developing trend that will affect the future of conservation work generally—and the Forest Service specifically—and that is the rise of cooperative conservation. In August of 2004, the President issued an Executive Order on cooperative conservation directing all of the federal agencies and department who work in the environmental and natural resources areas to look for ways to involve publics and stakeholders in a more cooperative or collaborative fashion in their decision-making and in their programs. That Executive Order was followed by a White House Conference on Cooperative Conservation during the last days of August 2005 in St. Louis. That conference was the first White House conference on conservation or natural resources in over 40 years since the 1964 conference on the beautification of America that was hosted at the White House by then First Lady, Lady Bird Johnson.

The conference in August of 2005 in St. Louis featured a number of locally-led projects involving collaborative conservation efforts on publicly and privately owned lands and waters. At that conference in St. Louis, it was noted more than once—and I believe I agree—that we are beginning a fourth chapter in the history of the American conservation experience. The first chapter, at least in the way I am keeping score, was written by Teddy Roosevelt at the turn of the last century in the formation of the modern conservation movement. The second chapter was written by his relative Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal progressives responding in part to the depression of the 1093s. The third chapter, the one that we have just concluded, is the chapter that was written in the 1960s and 1970s by the contemporary environmental movement and the creation of a national environmental framework. This then becomes the beginning of the fourth chapter.

It was also said in St. Louis, an again I agree, that cooperative conservation may be a more effective means and provide new tools to address environmental restoration concerns as compared to existing programs that concerned themselves primarily with environmental protection. And by that, what I mean and what some of the people who propounded the same proposition mean, is that permitting a new manufacturing facility is a different function, requiring different processes and different tools, than dealing with a long-abandoned mine on federal land that still is creating negative environmental consequences. Similarly, recovering a species is a different task, requiring different tools, than listing it for the regulatory protection of its remaining individuals.

The mechanisms tat we're talking about here, the mechanisms of cooperative conservation, work to enhance, not replace, the existing regulatory framework for environmental protection. That framework is, still by and large, needed. We're still going to permit new facilities in the future. We're still going to need the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination Permit System and similar environmental structures. So while they may not be dated, we're not talking about replacing them, we're talking about enhancing them with new tools, new mechanisms, and new techniques.

These mechanisms have been evident for awhile through the locally-led efforts that we tried to feature last year in St. Louis. And now what I think we are seeing is a perfect illustration of democratic principle that if the people are clear enough about where they want to go, their leaders will eventually take them there. These approaches are becoming institutionalized and nationalized. You see some indications of that in some of the recent statutes that Congress has enacted, such as the Secure Rural School's legislation's reliance on resource advisory committees. The same cooperative conservation emphasis was evident in the Quincy Library legislation, the 2002 Farm Bill's conservation title programs, the stewardship contracting legislation, and the Healthy Forest Restoration Act's emphasis on community-based fire plans.

New initiatives are, I believe, going to expand this movement. For instance, the 2008 Farm Bill maintained or expanded many of the cooperative approaches to private lands conservation to address high priority environmental goals that the 2002 bill had previously either expanded or initiated, depending on the programs in question.

These new initiatives are going to create new mechanisms for engagement and make a difference in how business is being done on the ground as cooperative conservation advances. As cooperative conservation is beginning to evolve into that fourth chapter in the history of the American conservation experience, it brings back to life the observation that Winston Churchill made about us as citizens. Churchill, who was born of an American mother, was a keen student of American behavior during his life and he said memorably that Americans can always be counted on to do the right thing after they have tried everything else. So, the emphasis on cooperation is to help develop new restoration tools to address both chronic and emerging issues, but more broadly, it is in my judgment, fundamental to continuing environmental progress and returning to an essential national consensus about how we chart our environmental future.