

## Opinion

# SCC savings not worth final cost

## Guest Editorial

By **PATRICK T. LEHMAN**



**K**ANSAS legislators have a daunting task ahead of them as they convene for the 2009 session. The state budget is in a deep hole that is getting deeper. The governor and lawmakers will seek to find cost savings wherever they can — and they should. We, their constituents, expect nothing less.

As state agencies and programs are examined for potential cost savings, the question becomes this: Can we create a leaner state government and not lose essential services in the bargain? Can we do it without spending a dollar to save a dime?

A case in point is the proposed consolidation of the State Conservation Commission with the Kansas Department of Agriculture. The SCC was statutorily established as a stand-alone agency in 1937. That action followed on the heels

of one of the darkest periods in Kansas history — when the entire Great Plains region suffered a devastating drought. After several years of minimal rain, the area began to experience huge, black dust storms, the most memorable of which occurred on April 14, 1935. That day, known as “Black Sunday,” an estimated 300 million tons of soil blew from the land.

Just as every cloud has a silver lining, out of those dust clouds came a firm commitment to soil conservation. In a letter to the states in February 1937, President Franklin D. Roosevelt said, “The nation that destroys its soil destroys itself.” He urged states to set up soil conservation districts to work with the Soil Conservation Service, which had just been established as part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Kansas responded rapidly; the Kansas Legislature passed a bill that created conservation districts in the state. The bill was signed into law by Gov. Walter Huxman on March 25, 1937. The measure also provided for the creation of a soil conservation committee as an agency of the state whose purpose was to assist in the formation of conservation districts and to coordinate their affairs.



## SCC has been diligent

From its beginnings in 1937, the SCC has treated that responsibility with diligence and the utmost care. It has administered the Conservation District Law and fulfilled duties under the Watershed District Act and other statutorily established programs through long-term, beneficial relationships with local conservation and watershed districts. SCC's 13 staff members are highly trained, competent individuals with a thorough understanding of the needs of the diverse Kansas districts they serve.

In short, it's a system that works — a system that has worked efficiently and effectively for 71 years.

According to the performance audit report presented to the Joint Committee on Legislative Post Audit on Dec. 19, 2008, an estimated \$320,000 in savings could be achieved by merging the SCC with the KDA. The figures on which this estimate is based uses some assumptions that are debatable, but that argument aside, we have to ask the questions posed above: Can we create a leaner state government and not lose essential services in the bargain? Can we do it without spending a dollar to save a dime?

Yes, we can create a leaner state government, and yes, we will lose essential services in the bargain. We'll lose hands-on services to conservation and the watershed districts that are relied on to carry out key conservation practices. The losses are a certainty since the potential cost savings would be achieved through cuts in staff and space. Fewer people would be required to do more, when employees' plates are already full. By necessity, some tasks would be delayed or set aside.

## Savings at what cost?

What will the savings cost us in the long run? Down the road a decade, will we be forced to implement high-cost remedies to fix what didn't need fixing in the first

place? Will dollars currently slated for conservation be diverted to non-conservation programs because lawmakers are faced with a serious budget deficit, just like they are this year?

As the Kansas Legislature deliberates on this proposed consolidation, they must keep in mind the full scope of their actions and what their predecessors deemed to be a key agency of state government — one that has its entire focus on the preservation of Kansas soil, water and other natural resources. Shifting the SCC to the Ag Department means diluting that focus, possibly reducing a commitment that has served Kansas well for seven decades.

The Kansas Association of Conservation Districts urges legislators to take a pass on this consolidation. Maintain the SCC as the specialized, productive agency that it is. The cost of saving money is simply too great.

*Lehman is the executive director of the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts.*

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