

**Testimony of Dave White, Chief
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Before the U.S. House Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Conservation, Energy, and Forestry
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss conservation programs administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

The NRCS conservation portfolio contains a broad mix of authorities providing programs for conservation technical assistance, environmental improvement, stewardship, easements, and water resources. These conservation investments, designed by Congress and implemented by USDA, have a proven track record. They are good for farmers, ranchers and private forest landowners and they work for all Americans – helping to secure a high quality environment in concert with food security for our nation and the world.

Last year we celebrated 75 years of service to the Nation’s farmers, ranchers, and other land owners and managers, we looked back at the landmark achievements, and continued to make some history of our own. Before providing the Subcommittee with details about our conservation programs, I would like to share a few of the benefits that these programs delivered through our long, strong partnership with America’s farmers, ranchers, and private forest landowners.

Last year (fiscal year 2010) was a record year in conservation program delivery. Of special note is the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). A nationwide emphasis on wetlands conservation resulted in a record-setting WRP enrollment of nearly 273,000 acres, exceeding the next-highest yearly total by more than 58,000 acres and nearly doubling our average annual enrollment. And while much work remains to be done in completing restoration work associated with these record enrollments, more than 129,000 acres of wetlands were created, restored or enhanced in FY 2010. While acreage numbers are impressive, the more important outcome is that these wetlands are now providing essential habitat for at-risk species, such as the threatened Louisiana Black Bear and the endangered Whooping Crane. The better job we do in assisting in keeping candidate and other at-risk species off the List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife, the greater flexibility our producers have in providing food, feed, and fiber for the Nation and the world.

Voluntary conservation on private lands works! USDA established the Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) in 2003 to develop a scientific understanding and methodology for estimating the environmental effects of conservation practices on agricultural landscapes at national, regional, and watershed scales. CEAP is built on partnerships and working

collaborations involving Federal agencies inside and outside of USDA, land-grant universities, State agencies, and nonprofit organizations.

The first CEAP assessments of the effects of conservation practices on cultivated cropland were released in FY 2010. Two of the planned 14 regional reports, the Upper Mississippi River Basin (UMRB) and the Chesapeake Bay Region CEAP Cropland Reports, quantify the great progress farmers have made in reducing sediment and nutrient losses from cropland, while emphasizing a continuing need for conservation efforts to focus on nutrient management. A few key highlights from the UMRB assessment include:

- Voluntary, incentive-based conservation works. Reduced tillage is used on 95 percent of the cropland - sediment losses are reduced by an estimated 69 percent as compared to a scenario where full conventional tillage is used.
- Nutrient management is the greatest need. Much can be done through expanded adoption of existing practices. About 60 percent of the cropland needs improved nutrient management; Timing, rate and method of application are important factors in managing nutrient application.
- Targeting can greatly enhance program effectiveness. Treating the most critical acres can have 3 to 5 times the effect on sediment and nutrient reduction as compared with treating acres with less serious problems.
- Comprehensive conservation planning is essential. Suites of practices that address multiple resource concerns are more effective than single practices.

In FY 2010, NRCS used landscape-scale initiatives to address priority resource concerns in working landscapes and watersheds nationwide. Two of these initiatives began prior to FY 2010 - the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative, supported by the statutory Chesapeake Bay Watershed Program in the Farm Bill and the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, supported by financial assistance transferred from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Great Lakes Restoration Action Plan. The other initiatives are the Sage-Grouse, the Longleaf Pine, California Bay-Delta, Lesser Prairie-Chicken, Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds, New England Forestry, and the Migratory Bird Habitat. These initiatives reflect a common objective of using targeted conservation assistance in addressing priority natural resource concerns that are broader than a single state and that will help to keep working lands working.

The Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI) is a great example of how landscape-scale conservation delivers broad benefits for agriculture. SGI focused conservation delivery within habitat core areas to help maintain large and intact grazing lands – important for the sage-grouse and for the rancher. NRCS identified practices that can be implemented through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program, the Grassland Reserve Program and the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program to increase and protect grouse habitat and populations on 640,000 acres in 11 western states. In FY 2010, NRCS contracted with 223 ranching operations for a total \$18.5 million in financial assistance to remove sage-grouse threats and help sustain working ranches. As a result, over 180 miles of high-risk fencing near breeding sites were marked or removed, which prevented an estimated 800 to 1,000 mortalities through fence collisions in just the first year.

The SGI also resulted in a landmark agreement that provides regulatory certainty to ranchers who take actions to improve sage-grouse habitat on their land. In early 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) determined sage-grouse to be a “candidate” species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), which means listing is warranted but precluded by higher listing priorities and positive management actions that address threats to the species need to be taken to prevent listing. NRCS and FWS negotiated a first-of-its kind regional agreement that lets landowners know the investments they make today to benefit this declining species and the sustainability of their ranching operation by implementing NRCS conservation practices according to the SGI Conference Report can continue should sage-grouse be listed at a future date.

This new conservation approach prioritizes assistance to ensure that the best conservation practices are implemented in the right landscapes for a positive sage-grouse population-level response. The SGI is a perfect example of how conservation programs can respond to critical natural resource issues by merging science and program delivery, and targeting practices and geography to make a real difference on the landscape for natural resources and for America’s farmers and ranchers.

NRCS Conservation Programs

This testimony provides an overview and status for 15 of NRCS’ conservation programs and authorities:

Environmental Quality Incentives Program

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provides financial and technical assistance on working lands to help producers address environmental challenges. To meet these challenges, EQIP provides incentives for the application of farming and other land use practices that maintain or improve the condition of soil, water, air, and other natural resources. The program assists agricultural and forest land users in identifying natural resource issues and opportunities to improve their agricultural operations and provides technical and financial assistance to address them in an environmentally beneficial and cost-effective manner. EQIP-promoted practices meet a variety of environmental and natural resource challenges.

In FY 2010, EQIP financial assistance obligations by States reached almost \$840 million in 36,500 contracts covering an estimated 13 million acres. In addition to regular EQIP projects, these funds also supported projects in resource based initiatives such as air quality, on-farm energy audits, migratory bird habitat, and the Mississippi River Basin Initiative, and projects that emphasize environmental protection and agricultural production as compatible goals such as organic production and seasonal high tunnels.

In FY 2010, NRCS provided \$37.5 million in financial and technical assistance to 12 States through the national Air Quality Initiative to help producers meet requirements of the Clean Air Act. Through this initiative, NRCS provides assistance to farmers and ranchers to reduce air pollution generated from agricultural operations in areas designated by the U.S. Environmental

Protection Agency as non-attainment areas for ozone and particulate matter. During FY 2010, over 950 contracts supported some 3,800 practices on more than 220,000 acres. In the Central Valley of California alone, we estimate that these air quality projects over the past two years have had the equivalent impact of removing the NOx emissions from 400,000 vehicles from the area's roads each year.

In FY 2010, NRCS worked to provide financial assistance to more than 240 producers for on-farm energy audits by offering the Agricultural Energy Management Plan through EQIP. In partnership with the private sector and other organizations, NRCS is developing technical tools and training to evaluate and reduce agricultural energy consumption through implementation of on-farm energy audit recommendations and to help producers adapt plans and practices for better energy efficiency and on-farm energy production.

The Organic Initiative is a nationwide special initiative within EQIP to provide assistance to organic producers as well as producers in the process of transitioning to organic production. In FY 2010, NRCS obligated nearly \$24 million in financial assistance to treat 148,000 acres in organic production or in transition to organic production. The most often recommended practices include nutrient management, cover crop, pest management, conservation crop rotation, and prescribed grazing.

The FY 2012 President's budget includes \$1.408 billion in mandatory funding for financial and technical assistance for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

Agricultural Water Enhancement Program

The Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP) is a component of EQIP. The purpose of AWEP is to promote improved ground and surface water conservation and water quality by leveraging the Federal government's investment in natural resources conservation with services and resources of other eligible partners. The AWEP program was specifically created to address serious surface and ground water shortages as well as water quality concerns in many agricultural areas. The security of the nation's food supply is dependent upon the continued delivery of clean, reliable irrigation water to farms and ranches.

This is the second year in which AWEP has been implemented and interest from the agricultural sector has remained steady. In FY 2010, NRCS obligated \$60.8 million in 1,489 new contracts to implement conservation practices on nearly 271,000 acres of agricultural land. The ability to leverage funding through partnership agreements has also remained strong. Partners provided approximately \$50.5 million in technical and financial assistance in FY 2010, nearly matching NRCS' AWEP investment. Through AWEP, the agency approved 28 new partner project areas during FY 2010, and continued to provide support for 63 existing project areas approved during FY 2009. Over one-half of the projects approved in FY 2010 are located in the high-priority water quantity concern areas, where conservation practices will be applied to conserve scarce water resources.

The FY 2012 President's budget includes \$60 million in mandatory funding for financial and technical assistance for the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program.

Conservation Innovation Grants

Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) is a component of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) that is intended to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies while leveraging Federal investment in environmental enhancement and protection, in conjunction with agricultural production. CIG provides grants of up to 50 percent of the total project cost on a competitive basis to non-Federal governmental or non-governmental organizations, federally-recognized Indian tribes, or individuals. Applicants must provide non-Federal funding for at least 50 percent of the project cost, of which up to one-half (25 percent of the total project cost) may come from in-kind contributions.

CIG has two major components: National and State:

- (1) The National Component emphasizes projects that have a goal of providing benefits over a large geographic area. These projects may be watershed based, regional, multi-State, or nationwide in scope.
- (2) The State Component provides flexibility to NRCS State Conservationists to target CIG funds to individual producers and smaller organizations that may possess promising innovations, but may not compete well on the larger scale of the national grants competition.

Funding for CIG is announced each year through a funding notice. CIG funds single- or multi-year projects, up to three years in length.

CIG projects have resulted in new technologies and opportunities for producers. A 2005 grant helped to demonstrate that precision feeding of dairy cows could facilitate reductions in the protein (nitrogen) and phosphorus being fed to dairy animals while maintaining or even improving milk production and possibly improving animal health. Based on the findings from these feeding trials, the Pennsylvania State University Cooperative Extension developed the "Dairy Tool" to help farmers identify the greatest opportunities to improve profitability on their farms.

In FY 2010, NRCS received 388 applications requesting more than \$221.8 million. NRCS obligated about \$18 million through 61 agreements representing 43 states and U.S. territories of the Pacific. Grant recipients provide matching funds to CIG bringing the total value of the approved projects to more than \$35 million.

Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program

The Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) provides assistance to improve upland and wetland habitats to benefit priority wildlife species, including threatened, endangered and other at-risk species. Focused efforts on habitat for fish and wildlife also contribute to more sustainable use of resources. By prioritizing specific geographic areas through various efforts at the state level, WHIP is able to target financial and technical assistance funds to benefit habitats for specific declining wildlife species such as the sage grouse. For example, WHIP funds helped

to support a project in Somerset County, Maine, to rebuild a wildlife and nature preserve. Following a dam breach in 2000, the landowner committed to reclaiming the land. The project is improving the forest stand, planting cover crops, installing nesting boxes, among other practices to create open space and nesting, brooding, and rearing habitat for the American woodcock, a species of concern, as well as 50 other important wildlife species.

In FY 2010, NRCS obligated almost \$63 million in financial assistance in more than 4,700 agreements to enroll over one million acres in WHIP. Sixty-eight of these contracts valued at over \$3.7 million are with American Indian and Alaskan Natives participants to benefit habitat for culturally important species. Since the program began in 1998, national enrollment has included almost 37,000 agreements on over 6.5 million acres.

The FY2012 President's budget includes \$73 million in mandatory funding for financial and technical assistance for the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program.

Agricultural Management Assistance

NRCS administers the conservation provisions of the Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) program, which provides financial assistance to agricultural producers to address water management, water quality, and erosion control issues by incorporating conservation into their farming operations. AMA is available in 16 states where participation in the Federal Crop Insurance Program is historically low: Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

With AMA funds, producers may construct or improve water management structures or irrigation structures; plant trees for windbreaks or to improve water quality; and mitigate risk through production diversification or resource conservation practices, including soil erosion control, integrated pest management, or transition to organic farming. AMA may provide producers a first-time opportunity to address natural resource concerns on their lands. For instance, producers that cannot meet Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) irrigated-land criterion may receive AMA assistance to install irrigation.

In FY 2010, \$6 million was obligated into 429 contracts covering 11,102 acres.

The FY 2012 President's budget includes \$2.5 million in mandatory funding for the Agricultural Management Assistance program.

Chesapeake Bay Watershed Program

The Chesapeake Bay Watershed Program (CBWP) helps agricultural producers improve water quality and quantity, and restore, enhance, and preserve soil, air, and related resources in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed through the implementation of conservation practices. These conservation practices reduce soil erosion and nutrient levels in ground and surface water; improve, restore, and enhance wildlife habitat; and help address air quality and related natural resource concerns. CBWP encompasses all tributaries, backwaters, and side channels, including

their watersheds, draining into the Chesapeake Bay. This area includes portions of the states of Delaware, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia.

NRCS implements CBWP through the various natural resources conservation programs authorized by subtitle D, Title XII of the Food Security Act of 1985. In FY 2010, NRCS implemented CBWP through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP).

In FY 2010, nearly 2,900 agricultural producers submitted applications to NRCS to participate in CBWP. NRCS approved more than 950 contracts for more than \$33.5 million of financial assistance to treat an estimated 156,700 acres of high priority agricultural land. The balance of CBWP funds authorized in FY 2010 supported technical assistance for the program.

The FY 2012 President's budget includes \$50 million in mandatory funding for financial and technical assistance for the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Program.

Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative

The Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) enables the use of certain conservation programs along with resources of eligible partners to provide financial and technical assistance to owners and operators of agricultural and nonindustrial private forest lands. CCPI is designed to encourage investment in natural resource conservation by non-Federal sources, foster coordination with other partners, and achieve high-priority natural resource objectives.

Under CCPI, NRCS enters into multi-year agreements with eligible partner organizations. Partners eligible to enter into a CCPI agreement with NRCS include federally recognized Indian Tribes, State and local units of government, farmer cooperatives, producer associations, institutions of higher education, and other non-governmental organizations with a history of working cooperatively with producers to address conservation priorities related to agriculture and nonindustrial private forest land.

In order to receive CCPI financial assistance, owners and operators of agricultural and non-industrial private forest lands must participate within a project area defined in an approved CCPI agreement and enroll in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP); Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), or the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

In FY2010, about \$42.3 million was obligated in 279 contracts with producers to implement conservation practices on nearly 1.2 million acres of agricultural lands. Through CCPI, NRCS approved 51 new partner project areas in FY 2010, and continued to support 110 projects approved during FY2009.

CCPI does not receive specific funding. By statute, funding is limited to no more than 6 percent of available program funds (EQIP, WHIP) or acres (CSP). NRCS manages resources and allocations between all three programs to assure obligations through CCPI will not exceed funding authority.

Conservation Security Program

The Conservation Security Program was a voluntary program that provided financial and technical assistance for the conservation, protection, and improvement of natural resources on tribal and private working lands. It provided payments for producers who practice good stewardship on their agricultural lands and provided incentives for those who wanted to do more. Under the 2008 Farm Bill, NRCS is not authorized to enter into new Conservation Security Program contracts but continues to make payments to producers with five- to ten-year contracts from prior years.

The FY 2012 President's budget includes \$197 million in mandatory funding for the Conservation Security Program.

Conservation Stewardship Program

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) encourages agricultural and forestry producers to adopt new conservation measures and maintain existing conservation activities on their operations. CSP provides opportunities to recognize excellent stewards and deliver valuable new conservation. The program helps producers identify natural resource problems in their operation and provides technical and financial assistance to go beyond existing conservation and deliver new environmental benefits in an environmentally beneficial and cost-effective manner. CSP has helped participants take additional steps in conservation, adopting new efficient technologies and generating additional environmental benefits. A Pennsylvania dairy farm was able to enhance their existing soil improvement efforts based on cover crops, diversions, waterways, and strip cropping to incorporate a simple yet effective cover crop mix enhancement to further their benchmark level of conservation. Their next step was to upgrade to a high residue vertical tillage implement that will increase surface residue and further reduce soil erosion. All of these improvements – increased plant diversity and improved erosion control were made possible through participation in CSP.

CSP is a voluntary program available through a continuous sign-up process, with announced cut-off dates for ranking and funding applications. Applications are evaluated relative to other applications addressing similar priority resource concerns to facilitate a competitive ranking process.

In FY 2010, CSP supported conservation by obligating more than \$320 million in financial assistance funding. These funds will be used to treat 25,164,328 acres leading to more productive working lands, improved water quality and energy efficiency. These are among the many benefits of addressing the natural resource concerns of agricultural and forestry producers.

The FY 2012 President's budget includes \$788 million in mandatory funding for financial and technical assistance for the Conservation Stewardship Program to enroll 12 million acres.

Wetlands Reserve Program

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) provides technical and financial assistance to enable eligible landowners to restore, protect and enhance valuable wetland ecosystems, including associated habitats such as uplands, riparian areas, and forest lands. The goal of WRP is to achieve the greatest wetlands functions and values, along with optimum wildlife habitat, on every acre enrolled in the program. WRP addresses wetland, wildlife habitat, soil, water and related natural resource concerns on private lands in an environmentally beneficial and cost-effective manner. The program achieves solutions to local community issues related to farms, ranches, rural lands, and other areas by establishing easements and long-term agreements on eligible farmlands and by establishing 30-year contracts on Tribal lands. This unique program offers landowners an opportunity to establish, at minimal cost, long-term conservation and wildlife habitat enhancement practices and protection.

During FY 2010, NRCS enrolled a total of 272,762 acres in WRP in 1,414 projects. Of these, the majority were in easements (206,094 acres in 951 permanent easements and 61,935 acres in 30-year easements). Also during FY 2010, NRCS restored and enhanced 129,082 acres of wetlands that are part of WRP easements and contracts in prior years.

The FY 2012 President's budget includes \$785 million in mandatory funding for financial and technical assistance for the Wetlands Reserve Program and NRCS expects to enroll 271,158 acres.

Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program

The Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) protects the Nation's highly productive agricultural lands by providing matching funds to keep productive farm and ranch lands in agricultural uses. Farm and ranch lands enrolled in FRPP are protected from threats of conversion to non-agricultural uses, and remain productive and sustainable sources of food, fiber, and feed for the Nation. Keeping land in agricultural use reduces the amount of urban pollution (nitrogen, phosphorus and sedimentation) from land that would otherwise be converted to lawns and impervious surfaces.

FRPP is helping to achieve landscape scale conservation objectives. In FY 2010, nearly 19,000 acres of historic agricultural land, critical wildlife habitat and iconic views in Sublette County, WY were protected through an FRPP agreement. The Sommers-Grindstone Conservation Project includes four separate conservation easements and public fishing access on nearly five miles of the Green River. The agreement is a partnership among landowners, the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission, the Wyoming Stock Growers Agricultural Land Trust, and an extensive list of public and private funders, including NRCS. The easement will allow the land to remain undeveloped – benefitting cattle and wildlife – and will ensure that the ranch passes to another generation of ranchers. The cattle ranches are comprised of hay meadows, riparian areas, a diversity of trees, sage-brush, high-grass prairie, and wetlands. The conservation easements are held by the Wyoming Stock Growers Agricultural Land Trust, and the ranches remain under the ownership and management of the landowners. Additionally, FRPP supports the President's America's Great Outdoors initiative by preserving the natural landscape features of non-urbanized areas and encouraging the continued agricultural uses of the lands.

In FY 2010, over 170,000 acres were enrolled in FRPP in 35 States. The average size easement enrolled in FY 2010 was 423 acres.

The FY 2012 President's budget includes \$200 million in mandatory funding for financial and technical assistance for the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program.

Grasslands Reserve Program

The Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP) helps landowners and operators restore and protect rangeland, pastureland, and other grassland while maintaining the land's suitability for grazing. Participants voluntarily limit future development and cropping uses of the land while retaining the right to conduct common grazing practices and operations related to the production of forage and seeding.

Limiting development and providing habitat needed by threatened, endangered, and other at-risk species, preserves agricultural heritage and green space, provides for recreational activities and ensures the Nation's ability to produce its own food. For example, five GRP projects in Phillips County, MT have protected nearly 30,000 acres since 2009. These projects are preserving rural ranching operations while protecting critical wildlife habitat for sage-grouse and other grassland birds. More than 80 percent of the acres in the five ranches are prime habitat for sage-grouse.

During FY 2010, the program obligated and committed \$90.3 million of the financial assistance funding allocated to the States and enrolled 335,332 acres in the program. Of the funding provided, approximately 60 percent enrolled GRP easements and 40 percent enrolled rental contracts.

The FY 2012 President's budget includes \$67 million in mandatory funding for financial and technical assistance for the Grasslands Reserve Program to enroll an estimated 203,515 acres.

Healthy Forest Reserve Program

Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP) assists landowners in restoring, enhancing, and protecting forest ecosystems to: 1) promote the recovery of threatened and endangered species; 2) improve biodiversity; and 3) enhance carbon sequestration.

HFRP provides financial assistance for specific conservation actions completed by the landowner. As funds are made available, NRCS solicits project proposals State Conservationists have developed in cooperation with partnering organizations. States selected for funding provide public notice of the availability of funding within the selected area.

During FY 2010, NRCS received 164 applications in the 13 States with approved projects. Fourteen landowners were enrolled, encompassing 5,583 acres, with financial assistance obligations valued over \$6 million.

The FY 2012 President's budget includes \$9.75 million in mandatory funding for the Healthy Forest Reserve Program.

Watershed Rehabilitation Program

The purpose of the Watershed Rehabilitation Program is to extend the service life of dams and bring them into compliance with applicable safety and performance standards or to decommission the dams so that they do not pose a threat to life and property. NRCS may provide technical and financial assistance for the planning, design, and implementation of rehabilitation projects that may include upgrading or removing the dams.

Eleven dam rehabilitations were completed in FY 2010, and there are 23 dam rehabilitation projects currently under construction. There is one dam that is being decommissioned. Additionally, there were 650 ongoing assessments of high hazard dams that provided communities with technical information about the condition of their dams and alternatives for rehabilitation for dams that do not meet Federal dam safety standards.

The FY 2011 Final Continuing Resolution provided for \$18 million in Watershed Rehabilitation funding. The FY 2012 President's budget does not include funding for the Watershed Rehabilitation Program, reflecting the many difficult choices that were made in the budget prioritizing process this year.

Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations Program

The Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations program authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to provide technical and financial assistance to entities of State and local governments and Tribes (project sponsors) for planning and installing watershed projects. The Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program is available nationwide to protect and improve watersheds up to 250,000 acres in size. Currently there are approximately 300 active small watershed projects throughout the country. The Flood Control Act of 1944 is available only in areas authorized by Congress; and these areas cover about 38 million acres in 11 States.

The FY 2011 Final Continuing Resolution did not include funding to carry out the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations program for the remainder of the fiscal year. Further, the FY 2012 President's budget does not include funding for the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations Program, including the Watershed Operations (PL 534) and Small Watersheds (PL 566). NRCS is in the process of conducting an orderly close-out of these programs, ensuring to the maximum extent possible that the highest priority projects are completed with the limited remaining funds.

Resource Conservation and Development

The Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Program objective is to encourage and improve the capability of State and local units of government and non-profit organizations in rural areas to plan, develop, and implement programs for resource conservation and

development. NRCS provided program administration and assistance to RC&D areas and their volunteer non-profit RC&D Councils.

The FY 2011 Final Continuing Resolution did not include funding to carry out the Resource Conservation and Development program for the remainder of the fiscal year. Further, the FY2012 President's budget does not include funding for the Resource Conservation and Development program. NRCS is in the process of conducting an orderly close-out of its RC&D program operations. The elimination of funding, however, does not eliminate RC&D Councils, which may continue to operate and compete for assistance from State, local, and other Federal agencies, private organizations, and foundations to carry out specific projects.

Conclusion

In conclusion, conservation programs play an essential role in the Nation's food security. Conservation helps to make farms and ranches more resilient to risks – whether from pests, disease, floods, or drought – and helps producers adapt to the challenges. Our farmers and ranchers know better than anyone the value of clean water, clear air and healthy soil for agricultural production. They know that land stewardship secures the future, and they have made incredible strides to protect the land they rely on. Through programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Conservation Stewardship Program, NRCS builds partnerships with farmers, ranchers, and forestland owners to make their operations more sustainable. These conservation efforts improve soil fertility and reduce soil erosion, improve fertilizer use and water use efficiency, reduce energy use, and enhance overall productivity.

These investments in private lands conservation are good for farmers, ranchers, and forestland owners—reduced input costs directly help the bottom line, while improved soil and water quality help maintain and even enhance long-term productivity while minimizing regulatory pressures. These same investments in conservation work for all Americans, by contributing to healthy landscapes, healthy communities, and to the food security of our nation and the world.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss the work of NRCS. I am happy to answer any questions from the Subcommittee members.