



# **National Association of Conservation Districts**

Testimony of

Steve Robinson

On behalf of the

National Association of Conservation Districts

Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Energy, and Research

House Committee on Agriculture

Hearing to Review the Administration and Delivery of Conservation Programs

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Good Morning. I am Steve Robinson, a producer and President of the National Association of Conservation Districts. I own and operate a 900 acre corn, soybean and wheat family farm in Marysville, Ohio, and have served as a district supervisor for the Union County Soil and Water Conservation District since 1988. I also manage Robinson Excavating, Inc., a family-owned excavation business specializing in ponds, waterways, rock chutes and wetlands. I am pleased to be here today on behalf of the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) to discuss conservation program administration and delivery.

Across the United States, nearly 3,000 conservation districts are helping local people conserve land, water, forests, wildlife and related natural resources. We share a single mission: to coordinate assistance from all available sources – public and private, local, state and federal – in an effort to develop locally-driven solutions to natural resource concerns. More than 17,000 officials serve in elected or appointed positions on conservation districts' governing boards. Working directly with more than 2.3 million cooperating land managers and local communities nationwide, our efforts touch more than 1.6 billion acres of private land. We support voluntary, incentive-based programs that provide a range of options, providing both financial and technical assistance to guide landowners in the adoption of conservation practices, improving soil, air and water quality, providing habitat and enhanced land.

Established under state law, conservation districts are local units of state government charged with carrying out programs to protect and manage natural resources at the local level. To assist in federal conservation programs implementation, our members work with the U.S. Department of

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Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Farm Service Agency (FSA), as well as other federal agencies and state and county programs.

Among other things, conservation districts help:

- implement farm conservation practices to keep soil and nutrients in the fields;
- conserve and restore wetlands, which purify water and provide habitat for birds, fish and numerous other animals;
- protect groundwater resources;
- plant trees and other land cover to hold soil in place, clean the air, provide cover for wildlife and beautify neighborhoods;
- assist local communities with stormwater management, reducing runoff and keeping sediment out of streams and lakes;
- help developers and homeowners manage their land in an environmentally-sensitive manner; and
- reach out to communities and schools to teach the value of natural resources and encourage conservation efforts.

As a producer, I have had the opportunity to utilize Farm Bill programs and assistance. Conservation practices on my farm include nine water and sediment control structures, three waterways with rock chutes, surface drainage, a wooded wetland, filter strips and use of no-tillage and strip tillage on corn. In addition to these conservation practices, I have 200 acres enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP).

For many of the conservation activities on my land, such as the multiple Water and Sediment Control Basins I installed throughout my farm, I have not received any financial assistance. However, the technical assistance provided by NRCS has provided me with the necessary information and tools to install these important conservation measures based on good science.

As an excavator, I have seen first-hand how technical assistance helps farmers install conservation practices that reduce soil erosion and improve water quality. My work gives me the opportunity to see the results of technical assistance from the conservation plan to the completed on-the-ground project.

In many ways, Farm Bill conservation programs and policies help keep me on the farm. While I get some support from commodity programs, the conservation tools—both technical and financial— have helped me and other producers avoid regulation and allowed me to continue farming in an ever-changing environment.

Technical assistance is the backbone of federal conservation programs, enabling local NRCS field staff and districts to work with landowners and state and local agencies to address local resource concerns. Technical assistance is utilized to work with landowners on all elements of conservation plans, from design and layout to implementation. It is designed to help landowners understand the need for and benefits of conservation practices and to outline necessary steps or actions for farm bill conservation program participation. Technical assistance is also utilized for conservation practice evaluation and maintenance. Once a conservation system is established, it must be maintained to ensure continued benefits.

Funding for technical assistance allows NRCS, conservation district employees and technical service providers (TSPs) to meet face-to-face with landowners on their operations, and help them design strategies to address specific resource needs. Through these discussions, a comprehensive conservation plan can be developed and financial assistance programs such as EQIP or other programs can be utilized to help meet the goals of the conservation plans. We are pleased to see a new emphasis by NRCS to streamline procedures, use newer technologies, and encourage more technical assistance delivered on the farm or ranch.

NACD's top priority is to encourage landowners to adopt conservation practices that provide countless public benefits of clean air, clean water, healthy soils and wildlife habitat. We are pleased with the overall commitment provided for conservation programs in the 2008 Farm Bill.

Technical assistance delivery is the most critical element to conservation program participation and conservation practice adoption. However, as I talk with district officials across the country, the consistent message is that there is not enough technical assistance funding to meet landowners' needs and demands.

For example, Maryland Soil Conservation Districts have identified a shortfall of 96 staff needed to meet the increased workload resulting from the Chesapeake Bay Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL). These positions are critical to the adoption and implementation of conservation efforts that will help achieve improved water quality in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Across the country, landowners are seeking information on how to best manage their land. Demand continues to increase for additional technical assistance to help interested landowners develop appropriate conservation plans and practices regardless of the size of the tract of land, land use type, or use of financial assistance. Many landowners are ineligible for conservation programs, while others find the application process complicated, time consuming, and sometimes prohibitive to participation. It is important to reach all lands in a watershed to achieve local and national goals for the area.

Insufficient technical assistance is the main barrier to conservation practice adoption. While we recognize there has been an increased investment in conservation programs, this has come without a correlating increase in staff needed to deliver additional assistance. More technical dollars are needed as program funding increases. Increasing technical assistance is necessary to realize the full return on our conservation investment.

In addition to more boots on the ground, paperwork burdens continue to be a concern. Improved efficiencies and asset allocation need to be achieved to allow technical personnel more time in the field. Streamlining applications, reducing paperwork requirements and increasing computer program compatibility could ease the burdens on field office staff while also benefiting producers during the application process.

We support NRCS Chief White's conservation delivery streamlining initiative to reduce duplication of data entry, simplify conservation delivery, and streamline business processes to

achieve greater efficiency and allow field staff to spend more time in the field with customers delivering conservation assistance.

The bottom line is that we support full funding for NRCS to deliver farm bill conservation programs and meet the growing demand and need for technical assistance in concert with conservation districts, TSPs and other partners. In this rather complex environment, we should examine all potential improvements to effective, efficient conservation technical assistance delivery. We would like to see a full accounting of staffing and technology needs required to fully implement farm bill conservation provisions and accomplish our national and local conservation goals. We seek the most direct and efficient structure for conservation program delivery and for that reason we support the current structure of consolidated conservation delivery within NRCS. We will measure all ideas by these standards.

NACD has formed a farm bill task force to in part examine technical assistance requirements and we will look closely at the question of how to improve technical assistance delivery to farmers and ranchers. As you begin the work of writing the 2012 Farm Bill, we hope to work closely with the Committee to address this issue and ensure that there is an appropriate funding mechanism for technical assistance delivery.

Conservation districts are uniquely positioned to work with NRCS, TSPs and others to expand technical assistance capacity. As we broaden and strengthen the traditional conservation partnership, these local advocates are already leveraging federal funding to accelerate conservation application on the ground.

Conservation districts have technical staff capable of providing quality technical assistance and are well-equipped to receive and utilize any new federal funds for technical assistance to assist local producers and program participants to put conservation practices on the landscape.

Another growing issue as land continues to be fragmented and urban and suburban areas continue to encroach on rural lands is that of small acreage landowners. There is little to no technical assistance available for this quickly growing group. Small acreage landowners frequently are not eligible for federal assistance programs, or rank low due to the scale of their operation. As consumers seek more locally-grown foods, it is imperative that these small acreage farmers receive conservation technical assistance to meet their natural resource concerns. Conservation districts have identified small acreage resource issues through their locally led conservation efforts, but assistance remains limited.

With the growing threat of regulations, such as EPA's new pesticide permitting requirements under the Clean Water Act and the establishment of TMDLs in the Chesapeake Bay and other watersheds, private landowners will have an even tougher time navigating an already difficult maze of permits, regulations and bureaucracy. Landowners will be left with the enforcement and the financial burden of compliance without guidance or technology to do so.

Technical assistance is an essential ingredient to help these landowners navigate through the complex maze of federal bureaucracy. Because they are known and trusted by local farmers and ranchers, conservation districts are frequently the liaison between the landowner and federal and

state agencies. Districts and NRCS professionals can help these producers implement best management practices and mitigate regulatory burdens.

The public expects clean air, clean water, healthy soils and abundant wildlife habitat. As a nation we need to be fully committed to providing the necessary tools and assistance to landowners to achieve these essential public goals. This investment—along with appropriate conservation incentives—will allow landowners to implement conservation strategies and make the necessary changes to the landscape to accomplish these vital goals.

The technical assistance provided by NRCS field staff, along with the resources provided by conservation districts and state conservation agencies, is critical to the success of conservation in the United States. The bottom line is that producers need quality technical assistance to maximize the effectiveness of the financial assistance they receive. Even without financial help, many producers still rely on technical help to ensure that they are putting quality practices on the land. It is the combination of the two that makes America's conservation delivery system efficient and effective.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of conservation districts across the country.