



National Association of Conservation Districts

March 19, 2014

The Honorable Mark Pryor
Chairman
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural
Development and FDA
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Roy Blunt
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural
Development and FDA
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman and Ranking Member:

The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) represents America's 3,000 conservation districts and the 17,000 men and women who serve on their governing boards. Conservation districts are local units of government established under state law to carry out natural resource management programs at the local level. Districts work with millions of cooperating landowners and operators to help them manage and protect land and water resources on all private lands and many public lands in the United States.

The Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) program, part of the Conservation Operations (CO) account administered by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) supports critical, voluntary conservation practices to ensure quality water, productive land and other vital environmental benefits. Thousands of landowners will not be able to install conservation measures without this request. We understand the need to address our nation's finances, but with increased pressures on working lands to produce food, feed, fuel and fiber for the world's growing population, discretionary funding for technical assistance is needed now more than ever.

Due to the increasing need for conservation planning and implementation across the country, **NACD respectfully requests approval of the President's 2015 budget of \$815 million as a base for the NRCS Conservation Operations account in the Fiscal Year 2015 Agriculture Appropriations Bill. Should Congress determine that additional funds are available, we support money being devoted to conservation to make up for cuts to discretionary accounts over the last decade.** Maintaining funding will allow for the delivery of critical Farm Bill conservation programs; help ensure the best technical and scientific knowledge is available when designing and implementing conservation plans with landowners; and most importantly, provide for the continued availability of the conservation practices that ensure clean water, healthy soils and other vital benefits on which the public relies each day.

NACD supports leaving the Fiscal Year 2015 funding level for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) at \$1.6 billion as allocated in the Agriculture Act of 2014. EQIP is an important resource to all landowners by helping them receive financial and technical assistance to implement conservation practices, or activities like conservation planning, that address natural resource concerns on their land.

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Additionally, **NACD urges that no funds be spent on the implementation of user fees for conservation technical assistance provided through NRCS.** User fees will discourage producers from implementing critical conservation practices at a time when they have the heavy burden of meeting the demand of a growing population. This will ultimately take a toll on our nation's natural resource base, when as we know, the cost of repair is always greater than the cost of proactive maintenance in the first place. User fees will pose a significant administrative burden for both state and federal NRCS offices; the collection process and paperwork has the potential to cost the federal government more than the revenue these fees would generate.

The Administration's budget proposes no funding for Watershed Rehabilitation. The 2014 Farm Bill provides \$250 million for rehabilitation of aging high hazard flood control dams constructed with the assistance of the NRCS Watershed Program. **The current Watershed Rehabilitation budget message to Congress is to support and preserve the gains made in the 2014 Farm Bill.** The current available Farm Bill funding has NRCS moving forward toward a new level of Watershed Rehabilitation project implementation.

Successful conservation requires a strong public, private partnership; efforts begin at the local level, with technical assistance and funding from federal, state and local governments and the private sector. NRCS is an essential federal partner and resource in helping landowners plan and develop conservation practices on their property. For example, ongoing restoration efforts in the Chesapeake Bay, Great Lakes, Mississippi River Basin and the Trinity River demonstrate locally led conservation efforts with national significance that benefit from technical assistance.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. We look forward to working with you as we continue to serve the nation through natural resource conservation.

Sincerely,



Earl J. Garber
NACD President