



National Association of Conservation Districts

Testimony

Submitted by the National Association of Conservation Districts

United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry

Regarding: "Farmers and Fresh Water: Voluntary Conservation to Protect our Land and Waters."

December 11, 2014

The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony for the record for the December 3, 2014 hearing titled, "Farmers and Fresh Water: Voluntary Conservation to Protect our Land and Waters."

NACD is the nonprofit organization that represents America's 3,000 conservation districts, their state and territory associations, 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 are the local government part of the conservation delivery system and 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 association was founded on the philosophy that conservation decisions should be made at the local level with technical and funding assistance from federal, state and local governments and the private sector. As the national voice for conservation districts, NACD supports voluntary, incentive-based natural resource conservation programs that benefit all citizens.

Voluntary conservation efforts to protect our land and water go hand in hand, particularly related to water quality and soil health. The benefits of improved soil health reach far beyond the farm. In addition to providing farmers with the economic benefit of increased yields, healthy soils lead to higher water quality by allowing for better nutrient cycling and

reducing sediment runoff; a better ability to manage water and reduce flood damage; and an increase in the amount of carbon sequestered in the soil itself.

Due to its increased water-holding capacity, healthy soil is also more resilient against drought and is naturally less prone to disease and pest problems, thereby allowing farmers to optimize their use of crop protectants. And because healthy soil requires fewer petroleum-based products for tillage, it also saves on energy use and costs.

The economic benefits of soil health and improved water quality are not limited to improved yields or increased efficiency. There is growing interest within the regulated community for agricultural-based solutions to environmental regulations. For the first time, within the last year interstate water quality credits have been traded in the Ohio River Basin watershed between regulated point sources and farmers who adopt conservation practices. As opportunities for environmental markets continue to mature, farmers will increasingly have additional economic benefits for voluntarily adopting conservation practices.

In the past several years, NACD and its member conservation districts and associations have been working hard to put a renewed national focus on the benefits of soil health. These efforts include partnering with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) on an integrated campaign to increase the adoption of soil health management practices by America's farmers and private landowners. We anticipate conservation districts providing guidance to determine their local soil health needs and finding ways to best implement a suite of practices aimed at improving soil health. It is important that districts remain the boots on the ground to help solve local natural resource issues. By increasing the health of our soils, the campaign ultimately seeks to produce systemic, landscape-scale improvements in water, air, and wildlife – all while enhancing long-term agricultural productivity and providing the best return on the nation's conservation investment.

NRCS and conservation districts are not alone in this effort – we're seeing an increasing interest from a wide range of stakeholder groups, organizations and businesses that recognize the potential benefits of healthy soil to improved water quality, production, sustainability, profitability and resource protection – all of which are advantageous to their stakeholders. Many of these organizations, in partnership with local conservation districts, are poised to achieve even greater results for water quality and soil health through programs like the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

In summary, to make measurable improvements in water quality and soil health at the landscape level will require a locally-led, voluntary, coordinated effort. Because of their strong relationships with local landowners, as well as their strong reputation as a trusted source of conservation planning and implementation at the local level, conservation districts are well poised to continue to play a leading role in these efforts, in close partnership with local, state and federal partners.