

Testimony of Mr. Brent Van Dyke

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Good morning, Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Lujan Grisham and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning on Conservation Programs in the 2014 Farm Bill.

I am Brent Van Dyke, First Vice President of the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), and a retired Agriculture Education teacher and FFA advisor. I am a life-long resident of New Mexico, where my wife and I farm irrigated alfalfa and coastal Bermuda hay in Lea County and run a commercial and registered cattle operation in Southeastern New Mexico. I have worked with USAID for more than 15 years on projects in Eastern Europe and Eurasia.

NACD represents America's 3,000 conservation districts and the 17,000 men and women who serve on their governing boards, as well as their respective state and territory associations. Conservation districts are local units of government established under state law to carry out natural resource management programs at the local level. They serve as the local component of the federal, state and local government and private sector conservation delivery system in this country. Conservation districts work with cooperating landowners and operators in all fifty states as well as the U.S. territories to help manage and protect land and water resources on private working 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 partners in federal, state and local governments and the private sector. As the national voice for all conservation districts, NACD supports voluntary, incentive-based natural resource conservation programs that benefit all citizens.

Our nation's farmers and landowners deserve to have long-term certainty to effectively and efficiently manage their land, resources and businesses for the years ahead. Locally-led conservation is critical for America's long-term environmental and economic stability. Not only do Farm Bill conservation programs play a key role in supporting clean air, clean water and productive soils, they also help producers avoid unnecessary regulation and promote our nation's food security and sustainability.

NACD appreciates the leadership of this subcommittee in crafting a successful conservation title in the 2014 Farm Bill. We worked closely with the Committee throughout the process of developing the bill and strongly supported its final passage. Since that time we have remained focused on successful program implementation to ensure programs work effectively for landowners, and we thank USDA for moving programs forward with an efficient and aggressive implementation process.

I would like to briefly touch on some of our specific priority areas for Farm Bill implementation, starting with the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). In the inaugural year of RCPP, conservation districts were one of the most highly represented entities among the selected proposals. More than 200 conservation districts are directly involved in over 100 projects selected for state, national or Critical Conservation Area RCPP funding. We also recognize that many additional districts will be involved as partners as projects are implemented within their jurisdiction.

It is no surprise that districts are so heavily represented in these projects. After all, locally-led partnerships are what we are all about. Districts have a strong history of engaging with a variety of stakeholders at the local level to enact meaningful conservation on the landscape.

RCPP is about empowering local project sponsors in designing and delivering solutions that benefit natural resources where they live and work. As trusted and respected sources for conservation planning and assistance at the local level, conservation districts are well positioned to be leaders in these projects. We appreciate USDA's commitment to this locally-led approach to natural resource conservation.

Through its flexible, public-private partnership approach, RCPP is empowering partners to come together to deliver practical and effective solutions to address local communities' specific resource concerns. By leveraging federal and private dollars, all stakeholders are closely invested in the project resulting in a stronger return on our combined conservation investment. In addition, RCPP's ability to utilize other program funds such as EQIP, CSP and ACEP not only increases the overall effectiveness of the program, it will help states to fully utilize all of their allocated funding.

It has always been our philosophy that "every acre counts." RCPP allows us to reach beyond the traditional scope of partners and projects. The program expands our opportunities to reach a higher level of commitment to conservation delivery on the working landscape in America.

In New Mexico, RCPP is allowing us to forge new partnerships with other federal agencies and allowing ranches with Forest Service and/or BLM permits to do landscape scale management and improvements on the entire operation. The checkerboard ownership has made this kind of watershed project impossible in the past. Last month I had the pleasure of joining NRCS Chief Jason Weller at an RCPP event near Espanola, New Mexico where we toured the oldest acequias in the nation—a traditional water management system dating back to Spanish colonial times. The program has helped fund acequias and other critical irrigation systems through the RCPP. This is just one example of a successful project being implemented at the local level, thanks to this new program.

I want to thank NRCS for its leadership in implementing this new and innovative program, and for considering our comments and feedback on ways to continue to grow and improve RCPP. We are pleased with the positive direction and look forward to even greater conservation district involvement.

Local soil and water conservation districts also remain key partners with NRCS to efficiently and effectively enroll landowners in two key programs that enable landowners to best manage natural resources on their land: the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

CSP has been invaluable in New Mexico, helping to keep ranchers on the land despite the extreme drought conditions. Allowing the enrollment of CRP land into CSP, in the last year of its contract, and allowing the transfer of land from CSP to CRP, ACEP or other Federal or State program that offers greater natural resource protection is also extremely important. These adjustments will help ensure that producers keep their working lands enrolled in programs that benefit the natural resource base, while emphasizing the most effective programs offered. Rolling open enrollment is also important for CSP to remain an option for producers at all times throughout the year. This convenience helps prevent backlog and increases the efficiency of the program.

EQIP remains the foundation of voluntary conservation programs for agriculture and forest producers on private lands. Local soil and water conservation districts are poised to help landowners enroll in and implement EQIP practices on the landscape. NACD advocated for streamlining of conservation programs as one of our top priorities for the 2014 Farm Bill and we are happy to see it materializing as EQIP is being implemented as a versatile working lands program that improves natural resources for farmers, ranchers and wildlife.

NACD also supports the policy of relinking conservation compliance to crop insurance premium subsidies as included in the 2014 Farm Bill. Conservation districts will play an important role in compliance, especially with helping provide technical assistance to producers. As the statute correctly provided, flexibility is critical for producers who are subject to compliance for the first time, including beginning and socially disadvantaged producers, as well as for specialty crop growers. NACD and our partners continue to work to ensure this provision is implemented in a manner that safeguards natural resources while maintaining critical safety net supports for eligible producers.

The 2014 Farm Bill made a historic commitment to maintaining and repairing the infrastructure associated with the nation's thousands of small watershed structures. Some of these structures are decades past their original designed lifespan. The small watershed program benefits to rural and urban communities across the country add up to stronger infrastructure, better water management and natural disaster mitigation. In addition, the program represents opportunity for both natural resource protection and the creation of economic opportunity and jobs in rural America.

In addition to securing healthy natural resources, investing in watershed structures provides invaluable benefits to community operations and infrastructure. Recent weather events in Texas and Oklahoma highlight the need for reinvigorated funding for the small watershed program, which continues to be a priority for NACD in fiscal year 2016 (FY16) Appropriations.

Increasing funds for Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) remains a top priority for conservation districts in FY16 Agriculture Appropriation funding. Districts are uniquely

positioned to work with NRCS, Technical Service Providers and other partners to expand CTA capacity to get more conservation on the ground. In New Mexico, CTA has been expanded thanks to a partnership that matches federal funding with state funding.

CTA is designed to help landowners take the critical first step of understanding the need for and benefits of conservation practices and to create solid conservation plans which outline necessary steps or actions to address solutions, including Farm Bill conservation program participation. CTA is utilized by landowners for all elements of conservation planning—from design and layout to implementation.

With ever increasing demand for Farm Bill conservation programs, it is essential that CTA funding sees a correlating increase in capacity in order to maximize landowner participation and realize a full return on conservation investments. Technical assistance is the backbone of federal conservation programs, enabling local NRCS field staff and districts to assist landowners as well as state and local agencies to address local resource concerns.

In addition, NACD supports maintaining all mandatory conservation program funding for FY16 as allocated in the 2014 Farm Bill. We remain steadfastly opposed to changes in mandatory program spending, also known as CHIMPS, to Farm Bill Conservation Programs during the appropriations process. NACD signed a letter along with 130 other organizations opposed to such cuts.

At a time when farmers and ranchers are facing increased pressure to produce food and fiber for a growing population, it is extremely important they have full access to the tools and resources needed to implement conservation practices on their land. Further cuts to vital conservation program funding will hinder the implementation of voluntary, locally-led conservation on the ground, putting our land and natural resources at risk for the future. This is especially true as economic and regulatory pressures continue to increase on the landscape. Conservation funding helps incentivize landowners and producers to voluntarily implement best management practices at the local level, while mitigating the threat of burdensome top-down regulation.

Before I close, I want to thank the Chairman and Ranking Member for sponsoring the concurrent resolution H. Con. Res. 30, which recognizes the value of locally-led soil and water conservation and the role of conservation districts within those efforts across the nation. The resolution expresses support for: the designation of the year 2015 as the "International Year of Soils;" the 80th Anniversary of the Soil Conservation Act; and soil conservation through partnerships with the nation's 3,000 locally-led soil and water conservation districts. It also encourages voluntary landowner participation in federal conservation programs. The resolution has wide ranging support from 27 farm, commodity, crop insurance and conservation groups.

The Senate unanimously agreed to the resolution last month, and we look forward to working with you to move it forward here in the House.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the nation's 3,000 conservation districts and their state and territory associations. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.