



National Association of Conservation Districts

September 15, 2017

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
United States Department of Agriculture
Washington, DC 20510

RE: Effects of USDA staffing plan on Customer Service and Conservation Technical Assistance

Dear Secretary Perdue,

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. Conservation districts work with millions of cooperating landowners and operators to help them conserve and protect land and water resources across all private lands and many public lands in the United States. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is our primary partner in providing conservation technical assistance to America's farmers, ranchers, and foresters.

We are writing today to offer our comments on limitations to NRCS' staffing and its impacts on customer service to rural American landowners. NRCS helps landowners become better stewards of their natural resources by assisting them with resource assessment, conservation planning and practice design, and monitoring of conservation practices. Providing superior customer service is one of USDA's goals you have discussed in recent speeches. To provide quality customer service, NRCS must have adequate field-based employees located in the USDA Service Centers and conservation district offices across America.

Many states have a great number of vacant field-based staff positions due to retirements or attrition, and the recent hiring freeze implemented at the beginning of this year held up opportunities to fill these openings. The lack of staff at the field level is greatly impacting landowner's ability to develop and implement conservation plans and program practices. Although there are opportunities for the private sector to provide technical assistance



National Association of Conservation Districts

through Technical Service Providers (TSPs) by working with landowners to create Conservation Activity Plans (CAPs), TSPs cannot serve as a replacement for NRCS staff. Because the need for adequately staffed field offices is great, TSPs can only serve to complement NRCS field staff when working with landowners across the county.

It is our understanding that there is currently, and will continue to be, a staffing ceiling for NRCS in Fiscal Year (FY) 2018, and while we understand the department is looking to reduce federal staff numbers of all the agencies, we ask you to please consider the needs of customers nationwide. The unique work and conservation efforts that are done by NRCS field staff on a daily basis within USDA Service Centers and conservation district offices are all about serving our nation's farmers, ranchers, and forest land owners.

Our purpose is not to build a federal bureaucracy, but to have adequate staff to provide the necessary customer service to rural Americans. As strong advocates for conservation, NACD encourages the department to ensure adequate NRCS staff are in place to accomplish the conservation work that supports this nation's ability to produce food, fuel, and fiber, as well as protects our valuable soil and water resources and invests in rural economies.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Brent Van Dyke".

Brent Van Dyke, President