



National Association of Conservation Districts

February 28, 2018

Senator John Hoeven
Chairman
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food
and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Jeff Merkley
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food
and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman and Ranking Member:

The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) represents America's 3,000 conservation districts and the 17,000 locally elected 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.

NACD requests the following funding be included in the FY19 Agriculture Appropriations bill:

- Conservation Operations at \$875 million
- Farm Bill conservation program funding at the mandatory funding level
- Watershed Rehabilitation Program at \$75 million
- Watershed Operations at \$200 million

Due to the increasing need for conservation planning and implementation across the country, **NACD respectfully requests \$875 million for the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Conservation Operations account in the fiscal year 2019 agriculture appropriations bill.** This level of funding will allow for the delivery of critical 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.

The Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) program, funded by the Conservation Operations account, supports critical voluntary conservation work by helping landowners meet their specific natural resource concerns. Despite having a desire to implement the best conservation practices, many landowners don't have the technical or scientific expertise to evaluate their land's unique resource needs and require CTA assistance to help address them. In a time when the world's demand for food, feed, fuel, and fiber is projected to increase more than 70 percent in the next 30 years, discretionary funding for technical assistance is needed now more than ever.

NACD has been very concerned about slow hiring at NRCS, which has shrunk the size of the agency's field staff and compromised the ability of the agency to deliver conservation programs. Despite healthy funding for field staff as a part of the Conservation Operations account, staff vacancies across the country have gone unfilled. In addition to funding the Conservation Operations account for FY19, we urge the Subcommittee to include strong language directing NRCS to hire staff in line with its actual funding, rather than the President's budget.

NACD also supports maintaining all mandatory farm bill conservation program funding for fiscal year 2019 as allocated in the Agriculture Act of 2014. Farm bill conservation programs provide financial and technical assistance to landowners so they may implement conservation practices or develop conservation plans specific to their natural resource



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goals. Continuing to cut these programs through the appropriations process is the wrong choice at a time when the conservation of our nation's natural resources is of the utmost importance.

The Agricultural Act of 2014 made a historic commitment to maintaining and repairing the infrastructure associated with the nation's many watersheds through the Watershed Rehabilitation Program. Over the past 70 years, conservation districts across the country have stepped up to sponsor these projects, which often require significant financial resources and long-term technical assistance. Today, many of these structures are decades past their original designed lifespan. **Therefore, NACD requests \$75 million for the Watershed Rehabilitation Program.**

Equally as important to preserving the nation's water quality and quantity is the Watershed Operations account's discretionary funding. **NACD supports a funding level of \$200 million for the Watershed Operations account.** The Watershed Program generates approximately \$2 billion in collective benefit for rural and urban communities across the country, helping to build a stronger national economy and more secure nation. The Watershed Program represents the prospect for the perfect blend of natural resource protection and the creation of economic opportunity in rural areas.

Successful conservation requires strong public-private partnerships. These 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. The voluntary, locally-led, incentive-based conservation delivery system has proven successful over the last several decades, but only continues to succeed with the investments made by this subcommittee.

NACD thanks you for your consideration of this request and looks forward to working with you as we continue to serve the nation through natural resource conservation.

Sincerely,

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

Brent Van Dyke
NACD President