



National Association of Conservation Districts

August 2, 2018

The Honorable K. Michael Conaway
United States House of Representatives
Chairman, House Committee on Agriculture
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Pat Roberts
United States Senate
Chairman, Senate Committee on
Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Collin Peterson
United States House of Representatives
Ranking Member, House Committee on
Agriculture
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
United States Senate
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on
Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Chairmen Conaway and Roberts and Ranking Members Peterson and Stabenow:

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. 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.

Congress has a great opportunity to craft a final farm bill that will continue to support our nation's farmers, ranchers and private-forest landowners while supporting the locally-led, voluntary conservation model that they know and trust.

Funding for the Conservation Title

Every dollar cut from conservation programs in the farm bill leads directly to fewer conservation practices implemented on the ground. Conservation Title spending already saw a 10 percent cut in the 2014 farm bill and now is not the time make further cuts. NACD was pleased to see the Senate farm bill maintain the Conservation Title baseline. NACD would also like to see working lands program funding prioritized, as these programs allow farmers and ranchers the ability to manage natural resource concerns while still feeding and clothing the nation.

NACD supports maintaining Conservation Title funding. We strongly encourage the conference committee to include level funding for the Conservation Title and prioritize funding for working lands programs.



National Association of Conservation Districts

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

Conservation districts have successfully partnered with the federal government since the creation of RCPP and support its reauthorization; however, NACD and our members have serious concerns with the changes to the program included in the Senate's version. The Senate bill evolves the program far past its intended purpose and represents a fundamental shift in the way taxpayer dollars are spent on conservation.

Most concerning is the policy change that would divert up to 30 percent of RCPP funds to a new grant pilot program, giving farm bill dollars to private partners rather than leveraging what taxpayers can provide with what partners can provide. Under this grant program, producers themselves would no longer be guaranteed to receive funding assistance, instead diverting those dollars to private organizations to do conservation work; work that can only "indirectly benefit agricultural producers."

There are many benefits to having producers visit their Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) service center as currently required, and producers have known and trusted this conservation delivery system for decades.

This grant program is combined with a redistribution of the funding pools, so that 60 percent of program funds are required to be used in Critical Conservation Areas (CCA). This change would unfairly discriminate against entire regions of the country that are not located in CCAs, such as New England and large swaths of Western states. **NACD opposes the Senate's proposed RCPP grant program and changes to funding pools and requests that the funding pool be left in its current arrangement.**

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

EQIP is the critical workhorse of the conservation title, often serving as the gateway to voluntary conservation for producers, with an intended purpose of helping producers comply with, or altogether avoid, the need for regulation by voluntarily protecting natural resource concerns. The House and Senate farm bills take dramatically different courses when reauthorizing the program. The House makes a major reform by taking the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and rolling many of its components into EQIP. The original cost-share component of the new EQIP contains improvements, such as allowing acequias access to EQIP contracts and eliminating the 60 percent livestock set-aside, to allow more local decision-making in how EQIP dollars are disbursed. The House also leaves the wildlife set-aside at its current 5 percent level to ensure that increased requirements are not imposed on the local level.

The Senate farm bill leaves EQIP and CSP as separate programs and reduces the livestock set-aside to 50 percent while also allowing Acequias to be eligible. However, the legislation increases bureaucratic top-down requirements on EQIP by increasing the wildlife set-aside to 10 percent, implementing a new soil health demonstration pilot project at \$15 million annually and increasing the beginning and socially-disadvantaged set-asides to a total of 30 percent of all EQIP dollars. Along this track, the House requires 10 percent of all conservation funding, regardless of program, to be dedicated to source water protection. While each of these changes



National Association of Conservation Districts

on its own can be positive, and each concern being addressed is important, all new initiatives or set-asides erode the local decision-making process led by conservation districts. NACD believes strongly that local input must be preserved to decide which resource concerns should be prioritized using program dollars rather than further requirements from the federal level.

Perhaps most concerning in the Senate farm bill is a requirement that priority be given to applications that utilize the “most effective practices” to address natural resource concerns. Farm bill programs have been intentionally designed to give producers control over the practices they implement. Requiring NRCS to decide which practices are the “most effective” may lead to producers not committing to or feeling ownership of the predetermined practice and ultimately not continuing the practice once the contract ends. **NACD supports the local decision-making process led by conservation districts and strongly encourages conferees to limit special initiatives and set asides in EQIP and include Acequias as eligible entities within EQIP.**

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

While the House does not keep the CSP program in its current form, a new stewardship contract is created under EQIP. This new type of contract mirrors the existing CSP by providing payments to producers to manage, maintain and improve stewardship practices and will take into account the level and extent of the practice, and the extent to which such a payment would ensure long-term implementation of the practice. Conferees must ensure that if a merging of the programs were to occur that the new stewardship contract under EQIP is funded at the current split between EQIP and CSP. There are key differences between current CSP and the stewardship contract created in the House version, first and foremost of which is the relieving of the requirement that a producer’s entire operation be enrolled to be eligible. This is an important reform which increases flexibility while freeing up those acres for additional producers.

The Senate farm bill keeps the two programs separate and makes small reforms to the program, such as a change in the way applications are ranked, and creates new incentives to promote cover crops and resource crop rotations. The legislation also redefines “stewardship threshold” to include more defined criteria. It should be the goal of conferees to simplify CSP as much as possible because changing the definition of stewardship threshold could bring unneeded complications to the program.

NACD supports keeping the two programs separate to be certain that producers continue to have access to both a cost-share contract like EQIP and a stewardship contract currently provided by CSP and requests that the elimination of the whole farm requirement be included in the final legislation.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

NACD was pleased to see increases in the CRP acreage cap in both the House and Senate version. NACD’s priority was that any funding needed to increase the acreage cap not come at the expense of other programs within the title, and we were pleased that this did not occur in either version.



National Association of Conservation Districts

NACD is also pleased to see both chambers allow additional flexibility for producers to graze CRP acreage, specifically the House's inclusion of Congresswoman Vicky Hartzler's H.R. 4298, which would authorize grazing as an approved mid-contract management practice without a reduction in rental rates. Grazing can have positive natural resource benefits when conducted under a conservation plan.

NACD supports a final bill that increases CRP acreage while protecting the working lands programs and allows for increased grazing flexibility on CRP acreage like the reforms made in H.R. 4298.

NACD also supports the following provisions:

- The House provision of \$500 million in mandatory funding for the important watershed infrastructure programs at NRCS: PL-566 and the Small Watershed Rehab Program.
- The House provision of \$100 million for a new Feral Swine and Eradication and Control Pilot Project to address the natural resource concerns created by these destructive animals.
- The Senate provision clarifying that approved NRCS conservation practices are considered "good farming practices" for the purposes of the crop insurance program and the provision clarifying that if a producer terminates a cover crop if the termination follows approved guidelines, it will not affect the insurability of the subsequent insured crop. These two provisions help improve the link between crop insurance and voluntary conservation and give producers the certainty they need.
- The Senate provision that allows certain landowners to use alternative certification to prove control over agricultural land in order to obtain a farm number and access conservation programs. Currently, many producers are denied a farm number and therefore conservation program assistance because of documentation, and NACD encourages this language be included in the conference report.
- NACD appreciates both the House and Senate farm bills addressing the problems with SAM/DUNS requirements for producers in both NRCS and FSA led conservation programs.

We thank you for your commitment to locally-led, voluntary conservation and we look forward to working with you as the conference committee begins the process of negotiating a final farm bill.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brent Van Dyke".

Brent Van Dyke
President, NACD

Cc: Members of the Conference Committee for the Agriculture and Nutrition Act of 2018