Climate Change, Soil Health and Voluntary Conservation

Since conservation districts were created during the Dust Bowl, our country has committed to address natural resource concerns through voluntary, locally-led conservation. This approach has served us well addressing soil health, water quality, water quantity and wildlife habitat. Although conservation practices that lead to healthier soils provide all the above-mentioned benefits, these practices also lead to greater carbon sequestration within the soil.

Farmers Are Already Experiencing Weather Changes

Landowners are already seeing an increase in the frequency and severity of weather extremes across the country. NACD's Soil Health Champions Network members report they have seen prolonged drought, more intense winds, extreme heat and heavy rains at inopportune times. They also note that the weather has become less dependable than it once was. These 250 Soil Health Champions have already implemented conservation practices across the country to mitigate and adapt to weather changes.

Soil Health Increases Resiliency

Increasing conservation practices, such as those offered with technical assistance from conservation districts and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), can help farmers better adapt to increased weather volatility. Adopting soil health practices can have a multi-fold impact on our land. First, practices increase the resilience of agricultural systems. No-till farming, for example, anchors the soil in place and reduces erosion. It also aids water infiltration, helping avoid increased runoff and reducing flooding downstream. With excess moisture in a no-tilled field, Soil Health Champions report greater ability to get equipment into fields to plant sooner than on tilled acres. No-till retains water better and prevent available water from running off fields. Cover crops also help retain water, increase water infiltration, improve soil microbial activity and can reduce impact of wind erosion.

When incorporated into a systems approach, these practices increase soil organic matter, reduce disturbance, and increase overall soil health and capacity to sequester carbon.

Locally-Led and Voluntary Conservation is the Key

The best way for Congress to address these challenges is to increase investments in NRCS's technical capacity and voluntary conservation programs in the farm bill, such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). These programs, along with the annually appropriated Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) program, help incentivize conservation practices for landowners. In addition, Congress should encourage NRCS to hire enough staff to adequately implement these programs.

These programs are most successful when they are locally led. Conservation districts were created to give local communities buy-in into federal conservation efforts. Conservation districts help set local priorities to ensure that conservation practices are tailored to local conditions. Enacting one-size-fits-all policies are ultimately not as successful for the majority of landowners. Policy efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions must recognize that success depends on buy-in at the local level. Voluntary, incentive-based conservation has a long history of successfully addressing natural resources concerns on private working lands. Continued recognition and investment by Congress in our successful conservation delivery will build on a strong history of working with landowners to improve the health of our nation's natural resources.