



National Association of Conservation Districts

April 13, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
S-230, U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
S-221, U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
H-232, U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
H-204, U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Leader McConnell, Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi and Leader McCarthy,

On behalf of the nearly 3,000 conservation districts across the country and the 17,000 men and women who serve on their governing boards, NACD thanks you for your attention to the COVID-19 crisis and your work to assist workers and local economies. Our nation's agriculture sector is rising to the challenge of feeding our nation during this crisis, and Congress' past and future investments in conservation are crucial to ensuring producers can do their job while also protecting our natural resources. NACD urges Congress to provide for programs that will aid public entities to withstand the financial instability currently taking place. As we turn our focus to ensuring our nation recovers, Congress should also provide funding and policies that not only deliver conservation on the ground, but that also deliver critically needed societal benefits to rural and urban communities through conservation infrastructure and economic stimulus.

Expand FFCRA and CARES Act Relief to State and Local Governments

The second relief package passed by Congress, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA), included relief for small employers that provides a dollar-for-dollar reimbursement through a refundable tax credit for paid sick and family leave costs required under the law. Additionally, the Paycheck Protection Program included within the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) was created to allow small employers to pay their workers rather than let them go.

Despite Congress' intent to help smaller employers who may be struggling through the current economic crisis, small public-sector entities, such as the 3,000 local conservation districts across the country, are not eligible for this relief and are facing the possibility of laying off employees at a time when local economies can least afford it. **NACD requests future packages include relief for state and local entities such as conservation districts either through the extension of relief provided in the FFCRA and CARES Act to state and local government entities or through other policies to support these critical community entities.**

Streamlined USDA Hiring

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) was authorized at the beginning of FY 2020 to fill an estimated 1,700-person staffing shortfall and was given limited direct hiring authority to accelerate hiring of employees to serve customers across the country. Although some progress has been made, **NACD requests that the USDA be authorized to substantially increase the amount of direct hiring authority available to NRCS**, so that the agency can help fill vacancies in local USDA Service Centers, both aiding local economies and providing needed customer service in this difficult time to our nation's farmers and landowners.



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Conservation Technical Assistance Flexibility

NRCS receives part of its funding from discretionary dollars appropriated each year to the Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) program. This program provides for activities including conservation planning, farm bill program implementation and partnership agreements and is flexible enough to allow NRCS to target assistance and work toward the greatest conservation needs on the ground. This program promotes the soil health and water quality practices that ensure our nation's food system is safe, abundant and available during today's challenging times.

CTA is also an economic engine on the ground that provides jobs and improves our nation's natural resources while mitigating future natural disasters such as flooding and wildfire prevention. The CTA program is flexible enough in statute to meet a wide array of needs associated with the current crisis within the agriculture community and supports a diverse partnership of conservation delivery at the federal, state and local level. **NACD requests an additional \$75 million for the CTA program in any stimulus package to meet these needs.**

Critical Infrastructure Investment: Watershed Operations and Watershed Rehabilitation

The Watershed Operations and Flood Prevention and Watershed Rehabilitation programs authorize NRCS to work with local sponsors to plan and install watershed protection and improvement projects. These infrastructure projects aid in flood prevention, water quality and water quantity protection, agricultural water management, fish and wildlife habitat protection, and public recreation development. Every year, this system protects over 47 million Americans and saves an estimated \$2 billion through flood damage prevention.

Additional funding for these projects in a COVID-19 infrastructure package would not only provide much-needed funds to construct new and repair existing structures but would also provide a needed economic boost in rural communities during this time. **NACD requests that a future infrastructure package include substantial investments in these programs and for these funds, a temporary waiver of the local cost sharing requirement to ensure these additional funds can be quickly delivered on the ground.**

Critical Infrastructure Investment: Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) 319 Nonpoint Source Grants

EPA 319 grants fund critically important infrastructure projects to address water quality at the local level. These grants are awarded to states and fund projects run by local sponsors. In many areas, the program is significantly oversubscribed, and additional funding could be put to work immediately. In other areas, the matching funding requirements can be too stringent for otherwise impactful projects.

Additional funding for this program in a COVID-19 infrastructure package would improve water quality while generating economic activity and creating jobs in communities across the country. **NACD requests that a future infrastructure package include substantial investments in 319 Nonpoint Source Grants and for these funds, a temporary waiver of the match requirement to ensure these additional funds can be used quickly and effectively.**

We appreciate your consideration of these requests as you work to see our country through these difficult times.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tim Palmer".

Tim Palmer
NACD President