



National Association of Conservation Districts

June 19, 2020

To the Senate Democrats' Special Committee on the Climate Crisis,

The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) represents America's 3,000 locally-led conservation districts, working with millions of landowners and operators to help them manage and protect land and water resources on private and public lands. Established under state law, conservation districts share a single mission: to work cooperatively with federal, state and other local resource management agencies and private sector interest groups to provide technical, financial and other assistance to help landowners and operators apply conservation to the landscape.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide input to this Special Committee on this important topic. Below, we respond directly to several of the questions posed in the Committee's request. Overall, NACD believes that any natural resource concern should be approached by looking for locally-led solutions that are voluntary and incentive-based. Congress should build on existing conservation programs at USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) when seeking to help landowners adapt to weather extremes. In addition, Congress should push NRCS to hire enough staff to adequately implement these programs. Our comments below reflect that belief.

1. What challenges do you face from weather extremes? What would it take for your community to be prepared for more severe storms, droughts, wildfires and flooding? What additional tools would be valuable as you work to plan for future weather extremes and to ensure your community is prepared to make it through disaster events?

Landowners are already seeing an increase in the frequency and severity of weather extremes across the country. Members of NACD's Soil Health Champions Network report that they have seen prolonged droughts, more intense winds, extreme heat and heavy rains at inopportune times. They also note the weather has been less dependable than it once was.

Increasing conservation practices, such as those offered with technical assistance from conservation districts and NRCS, can help farmers better adapt. Adopting soil health practices can have beneficial impacts on a farm coping with weather extremes. First, the practices increase the resilience of the agricultural system. No-till farming, for example, anchors the soil in place and reduces erosion. It also aids water infiltration, helping to avoid increased runoff and reducing flooding downstream. With excess moisture in a no-till field, a farmer can still get their equipment into the field and plant sooner than on tilled acres. When there is too little water, no-till acres retain water better and prevent what water is present from running off the farm, increasing well water levels. Cover crops also help retain water and can reduce wind erosion as well, which dries fields.

Even with conservation practices in place, a farm is still not immune from the worst storm events. However, our Soil Health Champions report a second impact of soil health practice adoption. Many soil health practices, like no-till farming, actually decrease the cost of production for the farmer. When a farmer spends less money per acre on inputs, profitability is higher even when crop yields are down, giving them more financial stability to implement additional conservation practices on their land.



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NRCS also administers with local partners the Watershed Operations and Watershed Rehabilitation programs, which fund the building and rehabilitation of small watershed dams throughout the country. These smaller dams are limited to watersheds of under 250,000 acres, and during heavy rainfall events, can slow the flow of water across the landscape, limiting flooding damage downstream. NRCS estimated that these structures saved \$20 million in damages during a heavy rain event in Oklahoma in 2018, where up to 17 inches of rain fell in one day. Every year, this system protects over 47 million Americans from flooding and saves an estimated \$2 billion through flood damage prevention. As heavy rain events become more common, these structures will continue to serve an even greater role. These programs have historically received both mandatory and discretionary funding from Congress and NACD strongly supports increasing this funding to mitigate the damage that can occur with extreme rainfall events.

With varying weather patterns increasing some agricultural operations' reliance on irrigation, and with aquifers at concerning levels in heavily irrigated acres, NRCS programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) help producers become more efficient with their irrigation infrastructure. Recent data from the National Agriculture Statistics Service (NASS) shows that between 2013 and 2018, while irrigated acres across the country increased slightly, actual acre-feet of water applied through irrigation fell by 6 percent.¹ The 2018 Farm Bill directed additional authority to EQIP so that more irrigation infrastructure can receive efficiency improvements. This will allow operations to continue to be successful while being better stewards of limited water resources.

Our nation's forests also have a tremendous ability to sequester carbon, and if managed properly, prevent the emission of greenhouse gasses. Simply through their natural cycles, forests pull CO₂ from the air and store it, both in the plant as well as transferring it into the soils. Better management of our public forests will help this natural cycle. Although the changing climate has created conditions that have led to longer fire seasons, a lack of management of our nation's forests, while also suppressing smaller fires, has led to forest fires in recent years that burn hotter and longer, killing off many more trees than before. Historically, smaller forest fires have accomplished this management by removing smaller vegetation, leaving larger trees living, thus reducing the fuel available to future fires.

Removing smaller vegetation and dead trees contributes to a healthy forest while also reducing the risk of larger forest fires. Stewardship Contracting through the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management allows parties other than the two agencies on the land to perform management activities. However, an improvement to these contracts could be to extend the current 10-year cap, which might encourage greater participation in Stewardship Contracting, thus increasing the acres of public forests that are subject to regular management.

3. Are there existing tools for farmers, ranchers and communities such as those at the U.S. Department of Agriculture in their Natural Resources Conservation Service or Farm Service Agency that would help your area be more resilient? Are there ways those tools could be expanded or changed to address the challenges land managers face in keeping our working lands and agricultural operations productive and profitable in the face of changes in local and large-scale weather patterns and growing conditions?

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https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Online_Resources/Farm_and_Ranch_Irrigation_Survey/fis.pdf



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Conservation districts were created to give local communities buy-in into federal conservation efforts and help set local priorities to ensure that conservation practices are tailored to local conditions. Enacting one-size-fits-all policies will not ultimately work for the majority of landowners. Efforts by this Committee to reduce greenhouse gas emissions must recognize that without buy-in at the local level, no program, regardless of size, will be successful. Voluntary, incentive-based conservation has a long history of successfully addressing natural resources concerns on private working lands and is an existing tool that producers know and trust. The Committee should seek to build on this history of success, rather than supplant it with other programs or policies.

Conservation programs and cost-share rely on NRCS field staff available to provide technical assistance to landowners, but hiring at NRCS has not kept pace with the need. There are now approximately 760 fewer people working at NRCS than there were in 2013. Even when the USDA authorizes hiring staff at NRCS, the hiring process is slow and does not keep pace with attrition at the agency. By NRCS's own calculations, as of the beginning of the current fiscal year, they are more than 1,000 employees below their staffing cap, and some states have as few as 72 percent of the staff they need. NACD is particularly concerned about these trends, since the President's Budget continues to propose dropping employment at NRCS by 300-400 positions each year, even after accounting for employment changes driven by the new Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) mission area's Business Center.

5. What technical assistance is most important for agricultural producers in your region? Who is best suited to deliver technical assistance? What additional tools or resources would make it possible to best tailor and deploy these strategies in your area?

NACD feels that technical assistance and conservation planning is of the utmost importance to improving our nation's adoption of conservation across the nation. The conservation delivery partnership between conservation districts, state conservation agencies and NRCS, which has existed for decades and is trusted by landowners across the country, is best suited to deliver technical assistance. While there are certainly regions of the country and types of agricultural production that could benefit from NGO or private sources of technical assistance, this locally-led conservation delivery partnership was created for the express purpose of building trust between farmers and experts. Conservation districts create Local Work Groups, which serve as a local sounding boards, for which natural resource concerns NRCS needs to focus on. This dialogue creates the trust that federal programs will serve local needs, not one-size-fits-all requirements from Washington, D.C.

Continuing to emphasize the importance of local decision making and local input in agency decisions will help ensure that producers continue to have trust in the conservation delivery system. Additional funding for technical assistance through the discretionary Conservation Technical Assistance program and mandatory farm bill conservation programs will also help deliver additional conservation on the ground. However, as stated above, if NRCS does not have the staffing capacity to go out to a producer's land and review that specific operation's needs, then we will not see conservation adoption at the levels we all desire.



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Thank you again for the opportunity to provide input as you develop recommendations and for your commitment to voluntary, locally-led conservation.

Sincerely,

Tim Palmer
President
National Association of Conservation Districts