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House Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry

“Supporting Careers in Conservation: Workforce Training, Education, and Job Opportunities”

Chair Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and members of the Subcommittee – thank you for the opportunity to join you today to discuss the challenges currently facing the conservation workforce and opportunities to address and overcome these issues.

My name is Michael Crowder and I serve as the President of the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD). I have been the General Manager of the Barker Ranch in eastern Washington State for 22 years since graduating from Purdue University with a master’s degree in wildlife science and a bachelor’s degree in natural resources and environmental science. I have been a partner of my third-generation family farm in Indiana since 2002, and I also own farmland and conservation easements in Illinois.

I have spent my entire career working on conservation, agriculture, and wildlife science issues. On the Barker Ranch, we work very closely with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) on wetland conservation easements and restoring wildlife habitat, as well as other practices such as prescriptive grazing, riparian fencing, irrigation water management, and many more. I served as an Adjunct Professor at Washington State University Tri-Cities for eight years and taught classes in wildlife science, ecology, and wetland restoration at both graduate and undergraduate levels. On Barker Ranch, I am very proud of our summer internship program that is receiving national attention for training and providing real world experience for young men and women in wetland and waterfowl habitat management. This year, we have six summer interns from five different colleges from across the nation. I am honored to serve as the President of NACD, and I am especially proud of the many years I have dedicated to working with conservation districts at the local, state, tribal, and national levels.

NACD represents America’s 3,000 conservation districts and the 17,000 men and women who serve on their governing boards, as well as their respective state and territory associations. Conservation districts are local units of government established under state law to carry out natural resource management programs at the local level. Districts work closely with federal and state conservation agencies to help millions of cooperating landowners and operators protect land and water resources across the United States. NACD’s mission is to promote voluntary conservation and the responsible management of natural resources on all lands by supporting locally led conservation districts and their associations through grassroots advocacy, education, and partnerships. We do this in close coordination with our national partners at NRCS, the National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA), the National Conservation

District Employees Association (NCDEA), and the National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils (NARC&DC).

I sincerely appreciate the Subcommittee's leadership in championing voluntary, locally led conservation to improve our country's soil, forests, air, and water, and to mitigate the increasingly harmful effects of climate change.

Producers across the nation are on the front lines of ensuring global food security and protecting our country's land, water, and other natural resources for future generations. Conservation districts play a critical role in achieving this goal by providing producers with technical assistance, resources, and tools to implement effective conservation practices on their lands. Conservation district professionals are trusted advisors within their local communities and play a key role in educating producers, facilitating the conservation planning process, and working with producers to design and implement the most effective conservation systems for their operations. These proven conservation practices – such as cover cropping, nutrient management, and forest stand improvement – can increase production, enhance resilience, and improve biodiversity, land, and water quality in communities across the country.

Conservation districts are relied upon by USDA to administer conservation programs and to help people in their local communities implement conservation practices. Due to the pandemic, the last two years have been particularly difficult for many conservation professionals. In response to the challenges presented by COVID-19, our conservation workforce adopted innovative approaches to reach producers and support conservation in their communities.

Our communities and conservation professionals are also experiencing an increasing number of devastating extreme weather events across the country, including hurricanes, tornados, droughts, wildfires, and floods. Conservation districts, in collaboration with federal and local partners, have played a key role in helping communities respond to these disasters and build resilience against future extreme weather.

The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resource Conservation (NRCS) staff, in coordination with partners such as conservation districts, implement critical USDA working lands conservation programs, like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). These programs provide resources that allow farmers, foresters, and ranchers to conserve land and water, protect water quality, and improve soil health. NRCS employees often work hand-in-hand with conservation district staff to inform producers about conservation opportunities, develop conservation plans, and ultimately help landowners implement effective conservation practices.

As producers face growing environmental challenges and uncertain markets, these conservation programs are increasingly utilized to bolster resilience, support the economic viability of family farms, and implement climate-smart conservation practices. Unfortunately, across the United States, only about one-third of EQIP and CSP applications are approved each year because of limited funding.

As producer demand for conservation grows, resources and staff for our federal and local conservation workforces are often stretched thin. Over the past decade, USDA and their conservation partners have struggled to keep staffing levels on pace with attrition. Although NRCS has made progress by adding 3,000 workers over the past two years, there remain critical staff shortages at NRCS. This capacity issue has a very real impact on the administration of conservation programs, conservation planning, and producers' access to technical assistance, as well as staff morale.

Conservation staffing concerns also extend beyond NRCS. Other state, local, and private conservation professionals, including conservation districts, often struggle to reach and maintain adequate staffing levels. A 2021 Soil and Water Conservation Society poll of 1,715 public and private conservation practitioners found that 90 percent of respondents reported that a lack of conservation practitioners negatively impacts conservation momentum. Seventy-eight percent agreed that a lack of field staff reduces an organizations' capacity to get conservation on the ground.

USDA's Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 budget proposal requests a \$41 million increase to secure 535 new NRCS staffers. The budget proposal also requests more than \$1 billion for NRCS' Conservation Operations, which would allow NRCS to hire additional staff, ensure that staff are adequately trained, and provide conservation technical assistance to more producers across the country. It is critical that Congress passes an FY 2023 spending bill that increases funding for NRCS to hire and onboard additional employees. It is also important that USDA is provided with the direct hire authority needed to maintain adequate staffing levels.

NACD has asked Congress to include at least \$1.2 billion for NRCS' Conservation Operations. An increase in funding for NRCS' Conservation Operation will allow USDA to hire additional staff to more effectively administer oversubscribed farm bill conservation programs and provide producers with additional support. This funding also helps key partners, such as conservation districts, get more conservation on the ground. Districts conduct substantial outreach and educate cooperating producers on the benefits of conservation and help them access Farm Bill programs. They also walk the land with producers to provide the personalized technical assistance needed to develop conservation plans, and design and implement practices.

However, funding alone will not resolve all the challenges facing our conservation workforce. As conservation professionals increasingly retire from or leave their positions, there is growing concern that the United States is not cultivating the next generation of this workforce at the scale required to meet our conservation goals.

We need to inspire, educate, and provide more opportunities for the next generation to enter the conservation workforce. From elementary school to college – we need young people to understand the importance of conservation and provide them with the requisite tools and pathways to secure conservation careers.

NACD is already taking action to bolster the conservation workforce pipeline.

Each year, more than 25,000 high school students from across the United States, Canada, and China participate in Envirothon, which includes a competition to find creative solutions to complex environmental and natural resource issues. NACD works closely with the National Conservation Foundation to manage the Envirothon program, which provide students with hands-on outdoor field experiences, opportunities to engage with their local communities, education in environmental disciplines, and information to pursue conservation careers. The Envirothon also facilitates direct engagement between students and environmental and natural resource professionals, which helps students understand career opportunities. NACD is excited for the 2022 Envirothon competition in July, which will be hosted by the Ohio Federation of Soil and Water Conservation Districts in Oxford, Ohio.

For the past several years, NACD has partnered with Agriculture Future of America; Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences; NRCS; and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to raise awareness among college students about careers in conservation. Along with our partners, we have hosted career workshops for undergraduate students showcasing careers in conservation, agriculture, and natural resources management. Up to 50 college students are invited to participate in these workshops, which focus on professional development and allow students to engage with professionals from conservation districts, state conservation agencies, private companies, and federal resource management partners like NRCS and the USFS. NACD was pleased to welcome a new class of 50 students to this year's AFA-NACD Sustainability Institute, which was held February 13 to 15.

NACD strongly supports paid student internship programs – at both NRCS and conservation districts – to supplement relevant coursework. Retirement drives attrition in the conservation workforce, which will require training and hiring a significant number of younger people to address. We cannot recruit and onboard recent graduates quickly enough. While both NRCS and districts provide substantial on-the-job training, we have seen that students with real-world experience better understand producers' needs and are more productive from the start. We must bolster the student recruitment pipeline in order to effectively build capacity and deliver high quality service and technical assistance.

NACD is also working closely with NRCS to develop an education program to prepare underrepresented high school and college students' for NRCS conservation careers. The program will promote NRCS and conservation districts as employers of choice for diverse populations and develop future leaders in agriculture and conservation. We are excited to continue working with NRCS and stakeholders to develop this initiative. NACD also works to support NRCS' Pathways Programs, which offer internships, development opportunities, and fellowships to inspire and prepare the next generation of conservation leaders.

Although NACD has taken steps to address this growing issue, we recognize that there is much more left to do. Inspiring young children to become passionate about conservation, providing additional education opportunities, introducing students to conservation careers, bolstering training programs, and increasing compensation for conservation professionals are just some of the things we need to make progress on if we are going to tackle this challenge.

Many of the other witnesses testifying today are taking big steps to prepare the next generation of conservation workers, and I look forward to working with them and members of this Subcommittee to support those efforts. The future of our country's land and natural resources are depending on us.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this hearing, and I appreciate the opportunity to submit written testimony.