



National Association of Conservation Districts

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Testimony of Mr. Gary Blair

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Senate Agriculture Committee

“Perspectives from the Field, Part 4: Conservation”

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and members of the Committee. Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the impact of locally led conservation on individual landowners, local communities, and American agriculture and forestry.

My name is Gary Blair. I serve as the President of National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), as well as the board of the Carroll County Soil and Water Conservation District which represents my home community of Carrollton, MS. I formerly served as the president of the Mississippi Association of Conservation Districts and Mississippi Forestry Association. Along with my wife, Johnna, I am a managing member of Blair Legacy Tree Farm and retired from Southern AgCredit following 36 years of service to agriculture in Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana and Texas. My son, Jonathan, and I are proud graduates of Mississippi State University.

NACD represents the 3,000 conservation districts in every state and 7 territories, their associations, and 17,000 locally elected or appointed governing board members. Conservation districts are local units of government established under state law. They were first established in 1937 as the local, on-the-ground partner to the Soil Conservation Service (now the NRCS). Today, there are nearly 3,000 conservation districts across the U.S. and its territories, each governed by a locally elected or appointed board.

Voluntary, Locally-Led, Incentive Based Conservation

America’s conservation delivery system has always put farmers, ranchers, and forest stewards first. Since the 1930s, we have recognized that effective conservation must be voluntary, incentive-based, economical, and engage the landowners and community members who best understand their unique natural resource concerns and economic needs.

There is no “one size fits all” solution to conservation, nor can programs be top down or mandatory. Local leadership, local priorities, and local decision making are at the heart of America’s working lands conservation delivery system. Conservation districts help ensure that conservation programs remain locally led and that solutions are tailored to address the unique environmental challenges and economic realities faced by individual communities.

America’s producers are land stewards at heart. They want to leave their land better than they found it for the next generation but can’t accomplish this alone. Producers need access to timely



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and high-quality technical assistance, as well as programs like EQIP and CSP that help them invest in the health and productivity of their lands.

Approximately 60% of our nation's lands are in private ownership and 39% is classified as farmland. Achieving landscape scale conservation goals – whether cultivating productive agricultural lands, enhancing soil health, supporting wildlife habitat and biodiversity, improving air or water quality – requires the voluntary cooperation of the millions of farmers, ranchers, and forest stewards who manage these lands every day.

I can't overstate the level of service and capacity needed to conduct effective producer outreach, education, and technical assistance needed to ensure the health and productivity of our nation's lands. A core strength of our conservation delivery system is the partnership between federal, state and local governments. NRCS and conservation districts are often collocated in local offices, which strengthens the local partnership and makes it more convenient for producers to understand and access federal, state, and local conservation resources.

NRCS and conservation districts work directly with landowners to assess resource concerns, develop conservation plans, and implement practices tailored to the unique needs of each operation. This hands-on support allows producers to access not only financial assistance, but also trusted, science-based advice from professionals who understand both federal programs and local conditions.

We are often asked how the conservation partnership can continue to enhance customer service and strengthen technical assistance. If you asked our conservation districts, they could share hundreds of best practices. But what's most important to remember is that there are no shortcuts when it comes to working with producers. Success depends on building trust, delivering strong technical expertise, and helping producers explore a range of solutions tailored to their land. In the end, our work is as much about cultivating relationships as it is about providing the highest quality technical assistance.

Approximately 88% of farms are small to medium size operations. The majority of these producers require secondary jobs and sources of income to sustain their passion for working the land. About 30% are new farmers. Working with these producers takes time. Providing technical assistance and helping them access funding for conservation practices isn't a transaction, it's a journey. Producers know we are there to work with them through the conservation planning process, monitor outcomes, and help them adjust management practices and systems as their needs or environment changes.

Technical assistance is the foundation of our conservation delivery system, while Farm Bill conservation programs are critical to help producers implement conservation practices. TA funding provides for effective conservation planning, successful delivery of conservation programs throughout the U.S and its territories, as well as the development of a robust conservation workforce through training and partnerships.



Conservation Workforce & Resources

During President Trump's previous administration, Secretary Purdue undertook a data driven effort to assess the appropriate servicing locations for USDA offices and the staffing levels necessary to meet the customer and natural resource needs. Through this analysis, optimal office locations were identified and NRCS was granted a staffing level of 11,000 employees with most of those to be on the frontlines of producer service.

This determination was data driven, based on conservation needs and strategic points for service delivery outlined in the 2018 Farm Bill conservation title. Those same programs are in existence today and continuing at their 2023 funding level, the highest annual funding level in the bill.

NACD was pleased to see increased staffing levels in field offices and bright, talented staff working alongside conservation district employees across the country. Today, however, we are concerned about the reported separation of approximately 2,400 NRCS employees and the possibility of future staff reductions at NRCS through early retirements, voluntary separation incentives, and reductions-in-force.

Conservation districts are already observing the loss of institutional knowledge and minimal succession planning impacting the quality and timeliness of technical assistance to producers at a time when demand for assistance is at an all-time high. Certainly, there have been staff reductions in the past to align agencies with each administration's priorities and goals. NACD supports efforts that will improve and create a more efficient government, while continuing to meet producers' needs. However, it has been our consistent position that NRCS's FY2020 on-board staffing levels were insufficient to meet the demands for conservation planning and implementation of Farm Bill programs.

We are deeply concerned about a return to those on-board staffing levels. Today, NRCS has an even higher workload associated with the administration of Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funding. NACD's top Farm Bill priority is to ensure those funds are integrated into Farm Bill conservation programs.

Although reduced staffing levels are a serious concern, I would emphasize that NACD has been highly supportive of NRCS's data driven approach to assessing workload and producer needs to inform staffing levels and office locations. Since she's been on board, Chief Aubrey Bettencourt has shown strong leadership. We are pleased with the level of collaboration with the Chief and her staff, as well as coordination on workforce needs as we support NRCS partners through this time of transition.

The core partners of the conservation delivery system – which includes NRCS, NACD, National Association of Conservation District Employees (NCDEA), National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA), and National Association of Resource Conservation & Development Councils (NARC&DC) – are standing by to provide the support needed to continue to meet producer needs and service levels. Our core conservation delivery system is a unique partnership that aligns federal, state, and local conservation resources. Each partner –



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from NRCS, local conservation districts, and their state associations and agencies – contributes expertise and financial resources to support producers across the country.

For example, NACD has worked in partnership with NRCS to administer its Technical Assistance Grant program since 2018. This program has provided approximately \$16M each year to conservation districts, state and territory associations, and local entities like resource conservation development councils (RC&Ds). Funding is used to hire local staff in priority geographies that demonstrate the greatest staffing needs. Since 2018, grant funded positions have provided technical assistance to producers in 56 states and territories. They have benefited their communities in many ways, including the design of conservation practices benefitting 6.75M acres and support enrolling over 107,750 producers in EQIP and CSP. Grantees have contributed over \$23 million in match using state and local resources.

Farm Bill & Inflation Reduction Act Funding

Voluntary, incentive based, and locally led Farm Bill conservation programs have long been cost-effective tools for helping landowners improve the health and productivity of their lands. At a time when producers are facing extreme challenges from the farm economy and weather impacts, conservation helps increase the resilience of their lands and has economic benefits for individual producers.

In partnership with the Soil Health Institute and NRCS, NACD assessed 30 farms and the economics of soil health management systems across a range of crop types, soil types, geographies, weather patterns and more. In addition to improving soil health and increasing on-farm resilience and efficiency, implementation of conservation systems:

- Increased net farm income by an average of \$65/acre
- Increased yield for 42% of farms growing corn, 32% of farms growing soybeans, and 35% of farms growing other crops
- Reduced input costs

Demand for conservation is high and Farm Bill programs have been consistently oversubscribed. Even with Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funding, program demand exceeds available funding. In FY2024, for example, NRCS received nearly 163,000 EQIP and CSP applications requesting \$8.7 billion; they were able to fund approximately 60,000 applications valued at \$3.7 billion. IRA funding allowed NRCS to fund 80% more than they would've otherwise been able to, but still only 43% of requests.

Financial assistance offered through conservation programs is an investment in producers' lands, as well as benefiting the local communities with the results (reduced erosion, cleaner water, etc.) of implementing conservation systems and practices. NACD's top Farm Bill priority is to integrate the IRA investments into the Farm Bill conservation programs without any sideboards. We strongly urge Congress to negotiate a bipartisan Farm Bill this year. NACD has been highly



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supportive of the House markup released last year and encourages Congress to re-visit and build on that language.

In March 2025, NACD issued a survey to our members to understand the impacts of executive actions on local communities. We received nearly 500 responses, including from every state. One of the top concerns is the potential erosion of trust in the conservation delivery system as a result of funding freezes and payments. We know that Secretary Rollins understands this and puts “Farmers First.” We were pleased to see USDA honor existing contracts and obligations with producers and expedite the release of payments. The recent release of IRA payments, for grants or cooperative agreements, with partners, such as conservation districts, has also improved our ability to re-hire or retain local staffing and programs.

Getting funding to local communities to apply conservation to the landscape remains a mutual priority. NACD hopes to see the pause on new obligations lifted, particularly for new IRA funded contracts with producers, as well as Congressional language that retains IRA funding in the conservation title.

We’re nearing the end of spring and producers are developing long-term plans and budgets for their operations. Producers need certainty. The time to act is now. In Arkansas, for example, one conservation district reported \$1.2M in preapproved contracts covering 1,400 acres that are on hold. Another conservation district in Arkansas reported poultry producers being behind on the implementation of several practices, such as cross-fencing for rotational grazing, livestock water needs such as pipelines, tanks, water wells, and ponds, and forest stand improvement/tree site prep activities.

Closing

My family’s tree farm includes many practices using technical assistance from NRCS including terraces, overflow pipes and tile drainage along with planting of pine seedlings using funds from EQIP. These practices could not have been installed without the assistance of NRCS and USDA. My farm also has a watershed lake that was built using the technical and engineering provided by NRCS. These practices provide reduced or no soil erosion and clear water that leaves my farm and ends up in the Mississippi River and the Gulf of America.

I, along with my fellow farmers, ranchers, and forest stewards, rely on flexible conservation programs that allow us to address our unique natural resource concerns and the technical and financial support of NRCS and conservation districts. America’s farmers, ranchers, and forest stewards are ready and eager to participate in conservation programs. They simply need certainty and tools to get it done.

Maintaining strong investments in Farm Bill conservation programs and technical assistance, supporting an efficient and technically skilled conservation workforce, and ensuring local presence in communities across the country allows us to deliver on our mutual commitment to delivering results for producers, taxpayers, and the land. Thank you for your time and continued support of locally led conservation.