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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
BEFORE THE
HOUSE TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT
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Ms. Chairwoman, thank you for the opportunity to appear today to discuss conservation activities in the Great Lakes Basin. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) mainly contributes to Great Lakes water quality improvement by helping private landowners meet their conservation goals, using a site-specific, locally-led process. USDA, however, is also a partner in a number of broader efforts unique to the Great Lakes Basin.

Great Lakes Interagency Task Force

Since we last testified about the Great Lakes before this Subcommittee in 2004, USDA was named a member of the Great Lakes Interagency Task Force. This Task Force was formed in 2004 by Executive Order and is led by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The Regional Working Group's Work Plan includes action items for Federal agencies to help protect and restore the Great Lakes. Two USDA agencies, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the U.S. Forest Service, are currently assisting with its implementation. We also work closely with the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration.

Great Lakes Provision of the 2002 Farm Bill

The Great Lakes Basin Program for Soil Erosion and Sediment Control was initiated in 1991 and codified with specific legislative language in the 2002 Farm Bill. The Great Lakes Program is coordinated by the Great Lakes Commission, in partnership with USDA, EPA, and the Army Corps of Engineers. Under the Program, Federal and State partners provide funding to the Commission for protecting and improving Great Lakes water quality by controlling soil erosion and sedimentation.

USDA and the Great Lakes Basin Program

As one of the principal Great Lakes Basin Program partners, NRCS has responsibility for providing on-farm technical assistance to farmers for the application of erosion control practices to reduce erosion and delivery of associated nutrients and pesticides within the Basin. In addition to its work through Farm Bill conservation programs, NRCS has supported the Great Lakes Basin Program through its Conservation Technical Assistance Program (CTAP). Under CTAP, NRCS provides technical assistance supported by science-based technology and tools to help people conserve, maintain, and improve their

natural resources. A recent history of CTAP support for the Basin Program is in the table below:

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|----------------|--------------------|
| <u>FY 2002</u> | <u>\$1,250,000</u> |
| <u>FY 2003</u> | <u>\$2,500,000</u> |
| <u>FY 2004</u> | <u>\$3,000,000</u> |
| <u>FY 2005</u> | <u>\$2,500,000</u> |
| <u>FY 2006</u> | <u>\$2,500,000</u> |

In addition to supporting land conservation treatment methods, the Great Lakes Basin Program provides regional information and education to developers, contractors, homeowners and to the public.

Farm Bill Programs

Over 5 years ago, Congress passed the 2002 Farm Bill, which included an unprecedented commitment to natural resource conservation on private lands. The bill provided an increase of more than \$17 billion in conservation programs funding. The legislation addressed a broad range of emerging conservation challenges faced by farmers and ranchers, including soil erosion, wetlands and grasslands conservation, wildlife habitat improvement, and farm and ranchland protection. The 2002 Farm Bill provides private landowners with the opportunity to participate in a variety of voluntary assistance programs, including cost-share, land rental and retirement, stewardship and technical assistance programs. The Farm Bill placed a strong emphasis on the conservation of working lands, ensuring that lands remain both healthy and productive.

NRCS has several programs that have a direct impact on Great Lakes water quality: the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), Conservation Technical Assistance Program, Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations Program, and the Great Lakes Basin Program. Through these programs, in FY 2006 NRCS obligated an estimated \$87 million in financial and technical assistance to landowners within the Great Lakes Basin to assist with agricultural non-point source pollution reduction and wetland restoration. Since FY 2006, NRCS programs have created, restored or improved over 20,000 wetland acres within the Great Lakes Basin.

NRCS Program Activities

Following are a number of examples of NRCS program activities in the Great Lakes Basin:

- *NRCS and Lake Erie Partners Implement 10-year Water Quality Improvement Project*
Long-term water quality monitoring by USDA and its partners shows that the Maumee River is the largest single contributor of non-point source pollution in the Western Lake Erie Basin. The high sediment load in the Maumee is due to the size of the watershed and the high percentage of the watershed that is in intensively cultivated cropland.

The Maumee River has the largest drainage area of any of the Great Lakes tributaries, draining more than 4.2 million acres in Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan. It provides water to metropolitan Toledo, Ohio, and Fort Wayne, Indiana. A partnership of USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Agricultural Research Service, and the U.S. Geological Survey and Heidelberg College has identified conservation tillage and buffers, nutrient and manure management planning, wetland restoration, and controlled drainage as conservation practices that can reduce the amount of nutrients that enter Lake Erie through the Maumee River.

NRCS is carrying out resource assessments along the Blanchard River, one of the Maumee River's major contributing streams, which will aid the development of watershed management plans that will include the conservation practices listed above. These assessments will be completed in fiscal year 2008 and will guide the implementation of Farm Bill conservation programs along the river for 10 years.

- *NRCS Grant Funds Conservation Outreach to Great Lakes Basin Absentee Landowners*
In February 2007, NRCS awarded a \$541,000 Conservation Innovation Grant (a competitive grants component of EQIP) to the Missouri and Mississippi Divide Resource Conservation and Development Council (RC&D) for a project to encourage absentee landowners to use filter strips and other conservation practices on their agricultural land. The 3-year project seeks to reduce the amount of nutrient and sediment flowing in three pilot regions in the Great Lakes Basin. The project also aims to improve the ability of basin conservation organizations to market conservation practices to absentee landowners, with the long-term goal of establishing a national conservation center for absentee landowners.
- *Special Water Quality Project in Western Lake Erie Watersheds*
In FY 2007, Ohio NRCS implemented an EQIP water quality project in select western Lake Erie watersheds. The project included an incentive for producers to develop a water-quality based conservation plan and a nutrient management plan that exceeded minimum conservation levels. Over \$2 million in financial assistance was provided to producers under this special project.
- *Integrated Pest Management Along Lake Erie (PA)*
Pennsylvania NRCS is partnering with Pennsylvania Cooperative Extension to implement an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) program through EQIP with grape producers operating within a mile of the Lake Erie shoreline. The program, designed to reduce pesticide runoff to Lake Erie, has attracted a significant amount of producer interest, with \$850,000 requested so far for FY 2008.

New Farm Bill

In January 2007, USDA released its Farm Bill proposals, based on more than 50 public listening sessions we held around the country. The proposals strengthen USDA's

commitment to conservation by increasing conservation funding by \$7.8 billion over 10 years. The proposals also include recommendations for streamlining programs, increasing outreach to beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, and supporting the development of market-based approaches to conservation. Perhaps of particular interest to stakeholders in the Great Lakes Basin, USDA proposed creation of a Regional Water Enhancement Program.

Regional Water Enhancement Program

In its proposals for the Farm Bill currently under development, USDA included a new program (within the existing EQIP) called the Regional Water Enhancement Program (RWEPP). This program, which USDA recommends funding at \$1.75 billion over 10 years, would improve water quality and water conservation on working lands on a regional scale.

The RWEPP would address an important missing component in the Federal government's conservation assistance—watershed-based, coordinated water quality and water conservation projects. The cooperative approach to water quality improvements in the Great Lakes Basin is an example of the type of coordinated action that would be encouraged under RWEPP.

Key elements of USDA's RWEPP proposal include:

- A focus on one or two key water quantity/quality objectives per project area.
- Use of multiple conservation tools (including farmland management practices, easement purchases, and ecosystem restoration assistance) to enable partners and landowners the flexibility to achieve improved water quantity/quality goals.
- Performance incentives to encourage high producer participation rates in project areas and achieve cooperative conservation outcomes.
- Targeted funding to farmers and ranchers for work on agricultural landscapes, including crop, pasture, grazing, and orchard lands, and non-industrial private forestlands.
- Interim performance targets that must be achieved to ensure timely results and retain eligibility for renewed funding.

Assessing Our Gains

While we have excellent information about how our resources are distributed with respect to contract and project data, it is challenging for any natural resource agency to fully quantify the resource outcomes for those programs. The Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) was initiated in 2003 by NRCS to estimate the effects of conservation practices currently in place on the landscape. The objective of this effort is to provide decision-makers with a scientific accounting of environmental benefits achieved through conservation programs. This initiative involves not only NRCS, but also the Agricultural Research Service, the Cooperative State, Research, Education and Extension Service, other Federal and State agencies, and scientists at several land grant universities. Research and assessment efforts are currently underway.

As part of CEAP, a regional assessment for the Great Lakes Basin is being carried out to determine the extent to which current conservation practices are reducing pollutant loads from cropland in the Basin. The assessment will also include estimates of the remaining need for conservation practices and will provide estimates of further load reductions that are possible.

Specifically, the assessment will include estimates of reductions in sediment, nutrients, and pesticides both at the field level and in-stream to assess reductions in loads delivered to the Great Lakes. In addition to the regional assessment, a CEAP watershed study is underway for the Rock Creek watershed in Ohio, which drains into Lake Erie. Led by scientists from Heidelberg College, this case study is evaluating historical water quality monitoring data to evaluate the extent to which soil erosion control practices and nutrient management practices have reduced the delivery of agricultural pollutants into Lake Erie. Using models, the researchers will also simulate alternative conservation management approaches to determine what additional gains can be made using conservation programs. The Great Lakes regional assessment and the Rock Creek special study are scheduled for completion in 2009.

Ms. Chairwoman, we know that USDA is making important contributions to water quality improvements in the Great Lakes, through the actions of private landowners on the ground. We look forward to continuing our close cooperation with stakeholders at all levels as we coordinate our conservation activities and measure the results. I thank Members of the Subcommittee again for the opportunity to appear here today, and would be pleased to respond to any questions that Members of the Subcommittee might have.