

## **Associate Administrator speaks at NACD Meeting**

Good morning everyone! I'm pleased to be here representing USDA's Farm Service Agency to talk about our shared commitment to conservation. Our new Administrator, Teresa Lasseter, sends her warm regards to everyone here.

I'm certainly happy to see a lot of familiar faces. I've known Krysta and her husband Charles for years. And since I've been a Minnesota producer all my life, I've always worked closely with conservation districts and know many NACD members.

For NACD, it's an especially festive occasion this year. Your sixtieth birthday! Congratulations! That's older than many of us here today, I'm thankful to say.

Sixty years of outstanding service for America! Sixty years of providing a collective, national voice for local conservation districts. And sixty years of working with USDA on conservation legislation and implementation.

At the Farm Service Agency, we're celebrating a birthday of our own. Our Conservation Reserve Program turns 20 this year. And how far we've come together over 20 years!

With 36 million acres enrolled and annual outlays of \$2 billion, FSA's Conservation Reserve Program is now America's largest conservation program on private lands. This is thanks to the conservation ethic of America's farmers and ranchers, and to our partners, including NACD and every conservation district.

CRP has certainly evolved in size and importance. But the program's roots, just like NACD's, stemmed from challenging times in farming.

The 1930s Dust Bowl was an ecological nightmare. But through this crisis, we began to understand the importance of protecting the soil that offers so much in return. In the 1940s, NACD united local and national experts to help farmers implement practices to keep soil in the fields.

FSA's Conservation Reserve Program was cut from the same cloth. This time, it was the 1980s. Intensive farming techniques generated soil loss rates of 3 billion tons per year.

USDA and others led the charge to make working farmland conservation a national priority. The sharpest tool in USDA's conservation toolbox has become CRP.

And how far we've evolved in 20 years! Back in 1986, CRP's goals were simple -- to address soil erosion and reduce surplus commodity production through a series of general signups.

As CRP's success and popularity grew, we upped the ante. We wanted to accomplish more than conserving soil. We added the goals of water, air, and wildlife habitat improvement to CRP's roster.

To meet these goals, we initiated the Environmental Benefits Index to rank land offered by the benefits we can achieve.

Each time we hold a general signup, FSA refocuses CRP. The refinements are certainly paying off!

America's conservation program now prevents 450 million tons of soil from eroding each year. This is a dramatic turn-around from a mere 25 years ago.

CRP has also restored 1.8 million acres of wetlands. And 2 million more ducks survive each year because of the natural shelter CRP provides.

To safeguard the most fragile acres, we've added a number of specific CRP initiatives. Through continuous signup, for instance, farmers can enroll land that needs immediate protection, without waiting for a general signup.

Other initiatives are working to increase bobwhite quail numbers, restore wetlands, and plant trees to sequester greenhouse gases.

One of CRP's most successful initiatives is the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. We now have 34 of these federal-state partnerships that target defined regions.

One recent CREP partnership is safeguarding drinking water supplies for 250,000 Minnesotans by restoring acreage in groundwater areas. Another CREP is protecting 30,000 acres in the Florida Everglades.

Twenty years ago, FSA held its first general signup, enrolling 753,000 acres to fulfill a single goal. Today, with 36 million acres enrolled, CRP is achieving multiple environmental and societal benefits.

Every American is reaping the rewards of soil retention, fresher air, cleaner water, and an abundant, safe food supply.

We want to ensure that these benefits continue without interruption. But we were actually faced with this possibility, as next year, 16 million CRP acres are scheduled to expire. Between 2007 and 2010, 28 million acres would have expired.

But this issue caught the attention of the highest level of government. Thanks to the collaboration of NACD and our other partners, President Bush visited the Katzenmeyer Family Farm in my home state of Minnesota to address the matter.

He announced that FSA is offering certain CRP participants the chance to extend or re-enroll those expiring contracts.

Today, we set the signup date. Eligible CRP participants can begin the process to extend or re-enroll starting today, January 31.

This action will preserve farmers' ability to protect America's most sensitive working lands. It will help make our lakes even cleaner and provide better habitat for thousands of wildlife species.

You see, FSA doesn't take full responsibility for CRP's successes. The program depends on America's farmers and ranchers and the value they place on voluntary land stewardship.

We also rely on NACD and many other partners, including USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. Over the years, technical assistance from conservation districts and NRCS has helped us write conservation plans and advise farmers on implementation.

These technical assistance needs have steadily increased as we have expanded CRP. Workload demand will reach a critical mass as FSA begins re-enrolling and extending expiring contracts.

NACD has stepped in to help. Last September, NACD, FSA, and NRCS signed a cooperative agreement for NACD to report on the status of CRP technical assistance needs.

NACD is now identifying and will soon report on options to address CRP technical assistance workload. We expect the final plan to be flexible. It will include roles for other federal agencies like NRCS, plus state agencies, conservation districts, nonprofit groups, and private sector providers.

NACD provides expert guidance on these national CRP policies. But FSA also counts on NACD at the grassroots level. Together we shape CRP practices that best fit local needs for our nation's benefit.

The ongoing health of our country's natural resources depends on concerned citizens like those in NACD.

Being a farmer myself, I understand the value of NACD's staunch commitment to conservation as farming races forward to meet changing public needs in a complex world.

You see, my dad and son are both enrolled in CRP. While my dad is just happy he no longer has gullies on his fields, my son uses his GPS map to pinpoint specific improvements.

Technological advances like GPS enhance our farms' productivity and health. But for all the changes, the

message is still the same:

Living a legacy, leaving a legacy. This astute proverb is, of course, the theme of this year's NACD meeting.

Since NACD and CRP are cut from the same cloth, woven from the same desire to preserve our beautiful country, I think NACD's theme is also a perfect fit for CRP.

Let's see how much more we can achieve by our next synchronized milestones. When NACD is 70 and CRP is 30, let's set an anniversary date.

Let's see how much more we can get done working together; conserving together, and enhancing the natural and enriching qualities of this great nation -- together.

Thank you for allowing me to share my thoughts on behalf of FSA. We're looking forward to more and more involvement with the National Association of Conservation Districts, the trendsetter in conservation!



Associate Administrator Michael Yost speaks at the National Association of Conservation Districts 60th annual meeting, Jan. 31, 2006, Houston, TX

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