

LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY FOR:**March 8, 1999**

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HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS HEARING - On Wednesday, February 24, the House Appropriations Agriculture Subcommittee held a hearing on the Administration's FY'2000 Budget proposal relating to NRCS and Conservation programs. Witnesses included USDA Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, Jim Lyons; NRCS Chief, Pearlie Reed, and NRCS Budget Director, Anne Dubey. Mr. Lyons covered the highlights of the FY'2000 budget submission, including work on animal agriculture issues, global climate change, and Farm Bill implementation. He underscored the importance of NRCS field staff in meeting the mission of conservation and emphasized the need to support the delivery system and Conservation Partnership. Chief Reed addressed the demands that are placed upon NRCS and described workload issues that affect field staff. Questions from the Subcommittee covered a broad range of topics. Chairman Joe Skeen (R-NM) asked about the Chief's philosophy on conservation. Chief Reed replied by stating his belief that conservation is as important as education, healthcare, and national defense. He also said that every acre of land and every bucket of water must be used wisely. Marcy Kaptur (D-OH) asked that additional maps that explain priority conservation issues be developed. Jo Ann Emerson (R-MO) praised NRCS work in the field and raised concerns over how the agency could meet expected workload associated with the animal agriculture issues. Other questions from the Subcommittee included a broad range of topics including farmland protection, wetlands policy, the American Heritage Rivers program, and the issue of aging watershed dams.

SENATE APPROPRIATIONS HEARINGS -

The Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, and Related Agencies (Chairman Thad Cochran, R-Miss.) conducted a hearing on Tuesday March 2, on programs of direct assistance to farmers, in response to the economic and financial situation in agriculture. Witnesses for the hearing were USDA Chief Economist, Keith Collins; Under Secretary for Farm and Foreign Agriculture Services, Gus Schumacher; and Dennis Kaplan from the USDA Office of Budget and Policy Analysis. Most issues and questions covered in the hearing dealt with commodity programs, and farm loan issues. Some questions arose regarding the state of the macro economy and world outlook in agricultural prices. Also, questions were directed to the witnesses regarding the size of farms and integration in the agriculture industry. Some questions were raised by Chairman Cochran for response from NRCS Chief Pearlie Reed. Mr. Cochran asked about the cap on CCC technical assistance transfers, which affect implementation of CRP and WRP. The Chief replied that available funds to pay NRCS from the CCC will be exhausted on or about May 15, 1999. Cochran also asked about the situation of the aging watershed infrastructure, and inquired as to whether a pilot rehabilitation project could be established in Mississippi. The Chairman also asked for examples of how NRCS programs help farmers economically. The Chief cited the Debt for Nature program, the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), and also EQIP.

SENATE EMERGENCY SUPPLEMENTAL MARKUP - On Thursday, March 4, the Senate Appropriations Committee marked up proposed legislation for providing emergency supplemental appropriations for Fiscal Year 1999. Included in the package is \$100 million for the Emergency Watershed Program (EWP) and \$30 million for the Emergency Conservation Program (ECP). The legislation could go to the Senate floor for consideration as early as March 9. Reportedly, Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) will propose a floor amendment to the bill which would exempt conservation programs from the cap placed on CCC technical assistance transfers. The House may also mark up a supplemental bill as early as March 9.

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