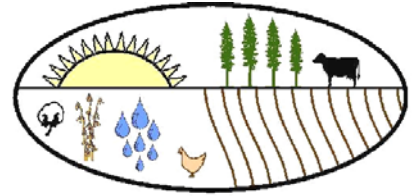




**National Association of Conservation Districts
and
Georgia Association of Conservation District Supervisors**



Testimony
of
Jim Ham
On behalf of the
Georgia Association of Conservation District Supervisors
And the
National Association of Conservation Districts
Before the
Senate Agriculture Committee
Albany, Georgia Field Hearing
June 23, 2006

Good Morning. I am Jim Ham, a middle Georgia farmer, a county commissioner in Monroe County and president of the Georgia Association of Conservation District Supervisors. I am also a charter member of the Two Rivers RC&D Council and serve on the Executive Board.

Across the United States, nearly 3000 conservation districts -- almost one in every county -- are helping local people to conserve land, water, forests, wildlife and related natural resources. We share a single mission: to coordinate assistance from all available sources -- public and private, local, state and federal -- in an effort to develop locally driven solutions to natural resource concerns. More than 17,000 volunteers serve in elected or appointed positions on conservation districts' governing boards. Working directly with more than 2.3 million cooperating land managers nationwide, their efforts touch more than 778 million acres of private land.

Mr. Chairman, I want to personally thank you for holding this hearing today in Albany, and for including conservation issues on the agenda. I fully understand much of today's agenda has been and should be focused on the farm programs in the farm bill. However, I am pleased you and the Committee understand the value and importance of the conservation title.

The conservation title has grown over the last decade to now represent significant funding and meaningful technical assistance to farmers and ranchers across the country. This commitment allows farmers like me to not only protect my soil and water but also be a better neighbor and citizen. The 2002 Farm Bill has also resulted in new participants coming to the conservation "table" and has created new partnerships, both at the local and national level.

I farm in an area that is changing. Our friends from the city are moving out to enjoy our open spaces, fresh air and wildlife. While most do want to live in the country, many are not ready to be neighbors with a chicken farmer. Applying nutrients on my farm land can be a...well a not so pleasant activity some times. My neighbors understand this but are also pleased that I use the latest technologies and best management practices to complete the application process as well other activities such as spraying.

I have an EQIP conservation contract that has allowed me to cross fence pastures to better utilize my grass, fence out ponds and streams to protect water quality, install stream crossings, and renovate heavy use areas to prevent soil erosion and manage animal waste. Row crop producers in Georgia have benefited from such practices as conservation tillage, pest management, and irrigation management plans under the EQIP program, resulting in better management of land and other resources.

The 2007 Farm Bill must include a continued commitment by Congress to provide much needed and much used technical and financial assistance to farmers and ranchers. The conservation title is important to me and other farmers here in Georgia, but also to other areas of the country where the conservation title provides the primary access to the farm bill, as you heard from NACD president-elect Olin Sims, a rancher in Wyoming, last week during your hearing in Washington, D.C.

The districts believe that every acre of conservation counts, including row crop, range, forest or livestock operations, and the growing rural/urban interface. To meet the needs of all areas of agriculture, the committee should consider the impacts of the current regulations that restrict participation in conservation programs. The 2002 bill included new restrictions on participation that restricts applications based on adjusted gross income, regardless of their conservation needs.

According to the 2002 Census, in Georgia, while the number of farms is about the same as 1997, the number of acres in farming has decreased by about 500,000 acres. Changes in land use such as fragmentation due to new friends from the city moving into the country, adds pressure to farms and the services that conservation districts and the NRCS provide them through conservation programs. These new country residents don't have the same history with the land that I and other farmers do, and may require more assistance to understand the proper conservation practices and best management of their land.

The 2002 Farm Bill authorized increases in conservation funding that by 2007 will be double those of the last decade. About two-thirds of the new funds authorized in 2002 target programs emphasizing conservation on working lands that are still used for crop production and grazing, as opposed to conservation spending prior to 2002, in which the bulk of conservation spending was directed toward land retirement programs. We believe that a producer must have an economically viable farming operation to be able to make an investment in conservation practices on their operation. We appreciate the increasing awareness that there needs to be a balance of programs to address both lands that are in active production of food, feed and fiber as well as lands that are retired and protected. Landowners need and use both, and we hope

Congress will continue to recognize that no one program meets the needs of all farmers and ranchers.

In many ways, conservation programs and policies help keep me on the farm. While I get other support from the commodity programs, the conservation tools, both technical and financial, have helped me and many others avoid regulation and allow me to continue farming in an ever changing environment.

Conservation financial assistance provided through the Farm Bill programs is an important component in achieving agricultural sustainability both economically and environmentally. But I must stress the importance of technical assistance. Technical assistance allows NRCS staff at the local level to work with districts, landowners and state and local agencies to address local resource concerns. Technical assistance is utilized to work with landowners on conservation plans from design, layout and implementation, helping landowners understand proper management of highly erodible land and necessary compliance for participation in farm bill commodity programs. Technical assistance is also used for evaluation and maintenance of conservation practices. Once a conservation practice is installed, it must be maintained to ensure we continue to see the benefits of the practice. Funding for technical assistance allows NRCS employees to meet face to face with landowners, visit their operation and help them design strategies to the resources needs of their individual agricultural operation. Through these discussions, a comprehensive conservation plan can be developed and then financial assistance programs if needed such as EQIP, CRP or any other program in the conservation “tool box” can be utilized to help meet the goals of the conservation plans.

To educate producers, develop conservation and nutrient management plans and to implement all of the conservation programs, technical assistance is vitally important. NRCS technical assistance delivered through county offices or technical service providers (TSP), including conservation districts, continues to be in high demand. The TSP initiative must be reviewed and improved to meet the growing need of technical assistance. To comply with state and federal regulations, such as regulations on Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), this assistance must be available to producers across the country.

Technical assistance is necessary to help producers plan, install, and maintain complex conservation practices on the landscape. The technical assistance provided from NRCS field staff, along with resource conservation districts and state conservation agencies, is critical to the success of conservation in the United States. Technical assistance must continue to be a fundamental element of the next farm bill; both as a stand alone program, and built into the delivery of every individual conservation program.

The Committee should also remember federal conservation programs allow local and state conservation groups and governments to multiply the benefits. Program dollars are leveraged many times over. For example, the state of Georgia’s investment in agricultural water metering is being leveraged with federal funds to provide farmers with cost share opportunities to upgrade their irrigation systems, properly schedule application of irrigation water, and construct off-

stream reservoirs to provide supplemental irrigation. We also have an initiative working with state government providing an increased commitment to farm land protection.

EQIP and CRP, the largest portion of the conservation title, have been very successful, and have changed and improved over the course of several farm bills. We are discussing the need for updates or additions to these programs, as well as all of the programs in the conservation title. It is important that when land is being removed from production, as in CRP, that the land is targeted as the most environmentally sensitive land. It is also vital that farms continue to stay in production, and the Farmland Protection Program ensures that farm threatened by development can remain in production. The next farm bill must balance programs focusing on land retirement with working lands programs, such as EQIP. EQIP is very popular in Georgia, and in fiscal year 2005, we received \$18,674,184 for the program, but even with that funding we had 805 project applications totaling \$9,641,270 that could not be funded.

We hope the committee will look into increasing access to EQIP and other programs, evaluate whether consolidation of the numerous conservation programs makes sense, or if streamlining the application processes provides for smoother, more efficient program participation on the ground. We do, however, hope that any streamlining does not result in taking funding away from conservation programs. As you can see in Georgia with the EQIP program alone there is high demand, and we only see that demand for conservation assistance increasing. In Georgia, we hope that a variety of benefits from CRP acres will be taken into consideration during the development of the next Farm Bill. Now we see CRP as monoculture benefiting game birds and not providing a diverse habitat for a wide variety wildlife and declining species including bob white quail and songbirds. We hope that these additional benefits, promoting diverse habitat can be added to the CRP program. We fully support any effort to make the programs more user friendly, easier for producers to understand and more efficient, but they must continue to focus on our conservation gains – cleaner air, water, improved soil quality and wildlife habitat.

Also Mr. Chairman, we hear a lot of talk that the next farm bill will include a strong renewable energy title. We too recognize the needs and benefits of energy production in the US and on our lands, and support renewable fuel development and production for on and off-farm energy. However, we just caution the Committee not to minimize the conservation gains in all programs we have achieved over the last 20-25 years.

We hope the committee will work with sound science and proven technologies for the best use of natural resources. We believe it can be done and is already being done with the production of corn for ethanol and oilseeds for biodiesel; however, we do want to move carefully in the use of CRP lands and others agriculture lands for additional production. We also see potential in Georgia through our forestry resource that could be a valuable resource for cellulosic energy production with available biomass. We support continued research and development on the viability of these renewable resources. We are not calling for the prohibition of more energy production; just want to interject a voice of reason to make sure we not improve one set of factors while hurting another.

And, Mr. Chairman, while conservation farm bill programs have often been championed by your colleagues in the mid west and other parts of the country, I want you to know we in Georgia see you as the next leader in these issues. I know you love the land just like I do and so many of us here. I know you are committed to making sure the conservation title stays strong and vital in the 2007 farm bill, so I thank you in advance.

We all have a great opportunity in the 2007 farm bill to build on the good programs and policies that were advanced in 2002. I pledge to you that the Georgia conservation districts and those across the country want to be a constructive and active player in the development of the 2007 farm bill. We want to work with you to make sure the next conservation title provides meaningful assistance to producers and results the taxpayers can also appreciate and enjoy. In so doing, we believe that programs should balance efforts to achieve soil, water, air, plant and animal/wildlife goals, necessary to address the nation's agricultural natural resource needs.