



National Association of Conservation Districts

Testimony
of
Olin Sims
On behalf of the
National Association of Conservation Districts
Before the
House Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Energy and Research
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Good afternoon, I am Olin Sims, President of the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) and a rancher from McFadden, Wyoming. On my family operation, the Sims Cattle Company in the Rock Creek Valley, we run a 700 cow/calf operation on 22,000 acres of deeded, private, state and federal leases in southern Wyoming. The ranch retains ownership of all calves and feeds to finish in Nebraska.

Across the United States, nearly 3,000 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 members 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 1.5 billion acres of private forest, range and crop land. NACD believes that every acre counts in the adoption of conservation practices. We work with landowners across the country—urban, rural, row crop farmers, ranchers and specialty crop producers in the plains and on the coast--so we know that no one program, practice, or policy will work for everyone. We support voluntary, incentive-based programs that present a range of options, providing both financial and technical assistance to guide landowners in the adoption of conservation practices, improving soil, air and water quality and providing habitat and enhanced land management.

Among other things, conservation districts help:

- implement farm conservation practices to keep soil in the fields and out of waterways;
- conserve and restore wetlands, which purify water and provide habitat for birds, fish and numerous other animals;
- protect groundwater resources;
- plant trees and other land cover to hold soil in place, clean the air, provide cover for wildlife and beautify neighborhoods;

- help developers and homeowners manage the land in an environmentally-sensitive manner;
- reach out to communities and schools to teach the value of natural resources and encourage conservation efforts.

The 2002 Farm Bill impacted producers across the country, but in my area, the conservation programs *are* the farm bill. My access to farm bill programs and assistance has been limited to conservation programs, and I am happy to have had the opportunity to participate in some of the programs offered from this important legislation. We implement environmental stewardship practices such as intensive rotational grazing, integrated weed control, fertilizer application, introducing new varieties of grasses and windrowed hay management for energy savings. I have primarily participated in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) program for cost share practices resulting in improved range conditions documented through a stringent range monitoring program. Several of the practices adopted relate to stockwater pipelines, stock tanks and storage tanks along with cross fencing to develop grazing cells we use in our high intensity - short duration grazing program. I have also utilized the Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) program to assist with the adoption of conservation practices, but the availability of funds for this program has been sporadic.

This past fall our ranch installed two miles of stock water pipeline and tanks that will allow us to alleviate impacts to riparian areas, control invasive species and better manage our rangeland resources to lessen the chance of overgrazing. This was all done working with my local conservation district and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) that provided the technical assistance prior to entering into an EQIP contract that provided the financial support to implement this conservation practice.

We are currently working with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department to use livestock grazing as a land treatment for elk habitat enhancement on a nearby Wildlife Habitat Unit. This project has allowed us to demonstrate the beneficial importance of livestock grazing as a management tool to improve wildlife habitat by incorporating the abilities of private landowners in managing public resources – once again all done using the technical expertise of our local conservation district and the NRCS.

The 2002 Farm Bill authorized increases in conservation funding that by 2007 will 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. This differs from conservation spending prior to 2002, in which the bulk of conservation dollars were directed toward land retirement programs. According to USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS), conservation programs for working lands will rise from less than 15 percent of federal expenditures on agricultural conservation over the past 15 years to about half of the total conservation spending by 2007. The use of the term "working lands" is defined differently by groups. To clarify; NACD defines working lands as those lands in economic production of food, feed or fiber. 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. Conservation districts support the increased emphasis on conservation spending for private working lands and hope these trends continue. While NACD supports maintaining land retirement programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program and Wetlands Reserve Program, keeping our remaining cropland in agricultural production while funding conservation practices on that land should be the primary focus of conservation funding in the 2007 Farm Bill.

A recent ERS report assessing the 2002 Census data reports that of the 2.3 billion acres in the U.S., agriculture land comprises 52% and grassland, pasture & range comprise two thirds of those agricultural lands. Urban and rural residential acreage in the U.S. is increasing with rural residential increasing 29% from 1997 to 2002. Over the same period, cropland decreased by three percent and grassland increased one percent. These numbers demonstrate the continued changing landscape that conservation districts are serving. We see increased pressure on the rural/urban interface as cities and suburbs continue to grow, creating new and different resource challenges and new landowners/managers. As residents move out of the city to rural residential areas, they may not have an understanding of which conservation practices or habitat are appropriate for their land – or even that their management style may be causing an environmental problem. The rural/urban interface, forestry, public lands and grassland management are all areas that have not fully benefited from the 2002 Farm Bill conservation programs.

Conservation programs provide benefits to the landowners and the general public through increased soil quality, air and water quality and improved habitat. Increased adoption of conservation practices through the 2002 Farm Bill Conservation programs resulted in improved nutrient management with decreased nutrient and sediment runoff, increased pesticide management, and increased wildlife habitat benefiting both duck and wild turkey populations. Notable results from the adoption of conservation practices include reduced soil erosion and increasing wetland acres. Last year USDA released soil erosion numbers highlighting a 43 percent decrease in soil erosion on cultivated and non-cultivated cropland between 1982 and 2003. Farm bill conservation programs have also increased the restoration of wetlands across the country and we are now marking net gains in agricultural wetland acres. Conservation programs have also protected farmland from development and protected wetland areas through easement programs.

I am pleased to follow-up on our former President Bill Wilson's testimony before the subcommittee last summer. Since that time, the NACD Board of Directors has taken action, first establishing guiding principles and most recently approving core policy statements on the 2007 conservation title. The comments I provide to you today are based on these recommendations, approved by our board of directors, which includes one member from every state and the U.S. territories. I would like to remind the Committee members that our role is unique in that districts assist in conservation program delivery. Our members work with landowners, federal and state agencies to deliver programs and technical assistance and to guide local decision-making. Local conservation district boards are comprised of locally elected or appointed members of the community – farmers, ranchers, and those outside agriculture that are committed to improving

conservation practice adoption, education and outreach in their community. We listen to our customers regarding program implementation and frequently, like in my case, we are also the customers.

NACD's recommendations focus on a priority for working lands conservation programs. We believe there should be consolidation and streamlining of programs to ease program delivery, making them easier for producers to understand and apply for, and easier for field staff to administer. Complicated paperwork and program overlap cause needless administrative time for both producers and technically-trained staff. Our goal is to have technical personnel spend more time in the field and less time on administrative functions. All working agricultural lands should be eligible for these programs – including non-industrial private forest land, fruits and vegetables, livestock, row crop and small production lands that may border urban areas.

To this end, we recommend two working lands conservation programs, a modified EQIP and a streamlined Conservation Security Program (CSP). NACD recommends combining the programmatic functions of the cost-share programs of the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, the Forest Land Enhancement Program, the Agricultural Management Assistance program and the working lands elements of the Grassland Reserve Program into the existing EQIP program. EQIP is a priority program for NACD and we believe that localized priorities and practices should be identified by the local work groups and addressed by the state technical committees supporting the locally-led process that is the foundation of conservation districts across the country. The EQIP program has been very successful and demand for the program remains strong with more applications than can be funded.

The existing CSP program should be modified into a top-level conservation program for the “best of the best” in natural resource protection on their operation. This upper-level program should have clearly defined criteria so producers can plan ahead, and know what the requirements are to participate. Our recommendations include making CSP a two-tier program that is available nationwide. Under the current administration of the program, producers have not been able to plan for participation because they don't know if their watershed will be selected for participation.

NACD supports maintaining the two land retirement programs—CRP and WRP. The CRP program administration should continue to focus on special initiatives, continuous signups and Conservation Reserve Enhancement Programs (CREPs). CREPs have been very successful in leveraging state dollars, creating an official program partnership between the state and federal government for protection of specific local natural resources.

The WRP program has been successful in restoring wetlands, resulting in improved water quality and wildlife habitat. Recent changes in program administration have altered easement prices offered to landowners. NACD supports returning to the administration of the program to utilize the agricultural value in establishing the easement purchase price.

For easement programs, we support retaining the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program and including elements of the Healthy Forests Reserve Program. The FRLPP has been very successful in the Northeast and we need to continue to ensure that this program works in other parts of the country, includes forest lands and works in coordination with state programs. In Pennsylvania, for example, some concerns have arisen regarding the duplication of planning requirements for the state program and the federal program – each with differing conservation planning requirements. Programs should not duplicate requirements on staff time, or landowner/operator time to participate, but should work together to leverage federal, state and local commitment to conservation priorities. While these issues might be addressed through program administration, legislative changes may also be necessary to ensure program coordination. We must ensure that this program works in every state.

NACD also supports reauthorization of the Watershed Rehabilitation Program, the Great Lakes Basin Program for Sediment and Erosion Control and continued authorization of the Resource Conservation and Development Councils.

Again, our goal is not to lose important elements of each of these programs in the protection of natural resources, but to streamline the program delivery. Not all programs work in all areas of the country, and we must retain a variety of program options to meet landowner and operator needs. But we must also do this in a manner that is not overly burdensome on field staff. Detailed knowledge of multiple programs takes time and effort. Annual changes to programs make them even more difficult to administer, and to relay or educate producers on the availability and application requirements. CSP has had the most problems in this area of ever changing availability. Most all conservation programs are oversubscribed with more applications than available funding. It is important to recognize any efficiencies to increase conservation practice adoption and environmental benefits, leverage state and local resources, and retain federal resources dedicated to conservation.

USDA conservation program implementation utilizes local work groups to assist in targeting funds and programs to address local resource needs and priorities. Local work groups convened by conservation districts and comprised of federal, state, county, tribal and local government representatives, coordinate local program delivery. Participants could include FSA county committee members, cooperative extension agents and state/local/tribal officials. The work groups establish program delivery priorities and can make recommendations on eligible conservation practices, cost share levels and payment rates. The local work group is also utilized to aid in the implementation of several conservation programs. This local prioritization is critical to the implementation of voluntary conservation programs and the use of the local work groups must continue during the implementation of the 2007 Farm Bill conservation programs.

State technical committees are also critical to the locally-led conservation program delivery. Specific conservation practices for production or land management specific to a state should be addressed through the State technical committee, however it requires participation. The programs can be tailored to specific state and local needs, if the interested parties participate in the system.

Conservation financial assistance provided through the Farm Bill programs is an important component in achieving agricultural sustainability both economically and environmentally. But Mr. Chairman, let me assure you that every time you hear NACD members talk about the Farm Bill we will talk about conservation technical assistance. Technical assistance allows NRCS offices 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 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 established, 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 operations and help them design strategies to address resource needs of their individual agricultural operation. Through these discussions, a comprehensive conservation plan can be developed and then financial assistance programs 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.

Conservation technical assistance has been a key component in working with livestock producers to understand the Environmental Protection Agency’s AFO/CAFO regulations. District staff and NRCS personnel helped conduct workshops and demonstration projects so producers could see first-hand the changes that needed to be made to avoid enforcement actions under the Clean Water Act. Some producers went on to seek EQIP assistance to make these changes, some producers just needed to know what was required and made the improvements on their own based on the technical advice they received.

Conservation technical assistance is also used to assist local watershed planning groups to address impaired water bodies – working to provide these groups with the technical information they need to determine locally how best to address water quality issues. Technical assistance is necessary to help producers install and maintain complex conservation practices on the landscape. The technical assistance provided from NRCS field staff, along with the resources conservation districts and state conservation agencies provide, is critical to the success of conservation in the United States. The bottom line is that producers need quality technical assistance to maximize the effectiveness of the financial assistance they receive. Even without financial help, many producers still rely on technical help to ensure that they are putting quality practices on the land. It is the combination of the two that makes America’s conservation delivery system efficient and effective. Conservation technical assistance, a discretionary funding program, assists in conservation program delivery by allowing field staff to work with producers up until the time they commit to a Farm Bill conservation program.

In 2004, Congress passed legislation to ensure that each conservation program provides technical assistance for implementation of the specific program. This legislation specifically corrected the technical assistance funding problems associated with CRP and WRP and was very important to fully implementing these programs. Availability of technical assistance is a limiting factor in program delivery. Without adequate funding, knowledgeable staff and committed local partners,

the full benefits of conservation programs and practice adoption cannot be realized. In the 2007 Farm Bill, conservation financial assistance programs must continue to support technical assistance funding through each of the programs.

NACD was pleased with the overall funding commitment provided and conservation program options available in the 2002 Farm Bill, but is concerned with alterations to the funding of the programs since the passage of the 2002 bill. Program authorization levels have been repeatedly reduced through the appropriations process, administrative program limitations, and budget reconciliation. We agree that during times of increasing budget deficits, all programs are subject to reductions. But we must also stress that alteration of programs from their original design in the 2002 Farm Bill impacts the intended results of conservation programs. I would also like to mention the devastating disasters that impacted much of the southern United States from Florida to Texas through repeated hurricanes, as well as other parts of the country that suffered from natural disasters. Although we may not personally feel the impact that agricultural producers felt in those areas, we know that federal assistance is critical to their recovery. Frequently, federal assistance comes from redirecting existing program funding and staff, and several states have felt the shift of conservation resources. These funding and personnel shifts made at the national level further complicate program delivery. NACD hopes that a better system can be developed to provide emergency aid and disaster assistance without redirection of these resources. Adoption of conservation practices have also mitigated some disaster impacts, such as drought, where conservation tillage and highly erodible land removed from production have increased soil moisture and ensured that soil remains in place, and not blowing across the country.

Conservation districts work to identify local resource concerns, and help prioritize the funding and focus of projects to have the greatest conservation and environmental benefit for both landowners and the public in local communities. Actions span the gamut from improving water quality to protecting pollinator species in order to help producers across the country protect natural resources. Everyone benefits from cleaner water, air and improved wildlife habitat and water management. We seek to coordinate the efforts of local, state and federal government programs and educate landowners and the public about the opportunities and benefits of Farm Bill conservation programs. But more can always be done. Conservation districts across the country have a strong conservation ethic and are committed to making these programs successful on our farms, in our communities and for our environment.

The 2002 Farm Bill was a hallmark for conservation in this country and we hope the 2007 Farm Bill will maintain this commitment to conservation. While it heralded a tremendous leap forward, there are still many who remain untouched by its potential. Conservation districts believe that every acre counts from a conservation perspective and that the Farm Bill needs to bring its conservation benefits to all producers and all agricultural lands. It doesn't matter whether it's EQIP or CSP, WRP or CRP, on-the-ground results are what counts and making sure we have the vehicles to get those results in 2007 will be the principal measure of our success.