



National Association of Conservation Districts

Testimony of the National Association of Conservation Districts
Submitted to the
House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment
January 23, 2008

The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) represents the nation's 3,000 conservation districts, their 16,000 board members and 7,000 employees. Established under state law, conservation districts are local units of state government charged with carrying out programs for the protection and management of natural resources at the local level. Conservation districts work with federal, state, and other local agencies to provide technical assistance landowners and other partners to address natural resource issues.

Whether addressing local resource needs related to water quality, soil erosion, and nutrient management, or providing educational materials and outreach to local communities on proper resource use, the work of conservation districts helps provide cleaner air and water for the communities they serve. Conservation districts in the eight-state Great Lakes Basin have employed multiple strategies utilizing a range of federal, state and local programs to engage landowners and community partners to address water quality issues in the surrounding watershed. This testimony will focus on these efforts by conservation districts, and outline the progress they are making to protect water and soil resources in the Great Lakes Basin.

In **Ohio**, Soil and Water Conservation Districts are engaged in multiple water quality projects affecting streams that drain into Lake Erie.

The Huron County Soil and Water Conservation District has utilized federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) 319 Grants since 1995 to assist landowners in the replacement of nearly 150 failing septic systems, installing filter strips and fencing along streams, and providing cost share for manure handling equipment on livestock operations.

The conservation district and its partners have also utilized farm bill funding, receiving over \$10 million under the 2002 Farm Bill including more than \$2 million for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). They have helped producers develop nutrient management plans to implement 50,000 acres of precision farming, construct 62 Water and Sediment Control Basins, 30 miles of sod waterways and 40 chemical containment facilities to reduce runoff and improve water quality in waterways. The district and its partners have also helped landowners that currently enroll about 7,000 acres in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and 1,200 acres in the Conservation

Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), both of which retire working agricultural lands for a period of time to reduce erosion into streams and improve soil quality.

The Erie County Soil and Water Conservation District, one of Ohio's nine coastal counties, has utilized a variety of federal and state programs to maintain and improve the quality of water draining into Lake Erie.

Between 2005 and 2007, the conservation district helped landowners enroll 10,895 acres under the EQIP program, and 13,860 acres under the Conservation Security Program (CSP). Both programs have helped established a variety of conservation practices that impacts water quality, including pest and nutrient management, secondary containment for agrichemicals, stream fencing, animal waste facilities, prescribed grazing, and Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans (CNMPs).

In 2006, the Erie SWCD partnered with the Friends of Old Woman Creek, applying for and receiving a personnel grant to hire a watershed coordinator for the Firelands Coastal Tributaries Watershed Program. Primarily focused on Old Woman Creek and Pipe Creek in Erie County, the program has brought together 14 supporting partners, governmental, non-profits, educational institutions and private funders to highlight and promote watershed stewardship to local citizens.

Funding for this four year grant program is provided by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR), Division of Soil and Water Conservation and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) through the Ohio Office of Coastal Management. The grant provides \$140,000 over the four year grant cycle with NOAA and ODNR each providing \$70,000 to the program. The most notable effort coming out of the first year of the program is a volunteer monitoring program on the two creeks that is utilizing the expertise of local governmental labs to process and provide valuable data for the program. This data will be utilized in preparing the community-driven watershed action plan for Old Woman Creek in future phases of the project.

Conservation Districts in **Michigan** are also addressing water quality issues in some unique and creative ways. The Calhoun Conservation District is another example of how federal dollars assisted local conservation efforts. Building on successful efforts through Section 319 funds and a unique locally coordinated partnership effort, accelerated financial and technical assistance has been made available to implement EPA approved watershed management plans and Best Management Practices (BMPs). Those management strategies aim to address the following resources: water quality (surface and ground water), species at risk (plants and animals), wildlife habitat (grassland species), and wetlands.

The Rice Creek and Battle Creek River watersheds, both sub-basins to the Kalamazoo river system in southern Michigan, were prioritized by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) through a Partnership and Cooperative Agreement signed by the NRCS State Conservationist, Michigan Department of Environmental Quality and

over 30 units of government, businesses and private sector organizations. The agreement was modeled after Section 2003 of the 2002 Farm Bill, which allows up to 5% of the State's allocation of Farm Bill funding to be used within this priority area. The broader intention of the partnership is to leverage partner funding, streamline the various agencies and conservation programs and avoid duplicated efforts. Since its conception, this partnership effort has received local, state and national recognition and has become a model for other 319 watershed projects. Although \$500,000 in 319 funds were awarded to the District to implement the watershed plans, well over \$3 million in additional funding has been allocated to projects in the watersheds.

Like many efforts, this example demonstrates how 319 dollars provide a great deal more to local conservation than their base allocation.

The Charlevoix Conservation District, in partnership with federal, state and local partners, received and utilized \$216,000 in a Section 319 Grant to implement the Lake Charlevoix Watershed Project. Lake Charlevoix is located on Michigan's western shore and discharges into Lake Michigan. In implementing the project, the district had three primary goals: reduce and prevent nonpoint source pollution to the Lake Charlevoix watershed, conduct information and education programs, and increase community involvement.

An initial assessment of the watershed identified resource concerns, and projects were implemented to address those concerns with a broad audience. Projects included reducing pollution from stormwater runoff and from shoreline properties, addressing long-term strategies to improve road/stream crossings, providing educational materials to the agricultural community on nonpoint source pollution, promoting land stewardship, providing information to improve forest management, and providing youth education.

The Allegan Conservation District has utilized over \$225,000 in a Section 319 Grant with a variety of state and local partners to leverage matching funds in developing a Water Management Plan for the Gun River Watershed, a tributary of the Kalamazoo River which feeds into Lake Michigan.

The conservation district completed a Water Management Plan to assess the resource needs and identify priorities of the Gun River Watershed. The resulting Gun River Watershed Implementation Project has resulted in the installation of BMPs through Farm Bill programs, primarily EQIP, to work with landowners throughout the watershed. BMPs installed include 1000 acres of cover crops, 3000 acres of no-till crops, and 1000 linear feet of stream bank stabilization and buffer strips, all of which result in reductions of sediment and nutrients from the watershed.

The South St. Louis Soil and Water Conservation District in **Minnesota** has worked in partnership with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and the City of Duluth in utilizing EPA 319 Nonpoint Source and

NOAA Coastal Zone Management funding to identify restoration strategies and goals and provide community outreach in their watershed.

As a result of their combined efforts, the partnership has been able to complete restoration efforts and reduce urban runoff in the Miller Creek Watershed, an urban trout stream that runs through the City of Duluth. Numerous projects were implemented to improve water quality including the establishment of riparian buffer, the installation of streambank stabilization and stream habitat structures, a demonstration stormwater practice at Lake Superior College to provide public education on urban stormwater management, and outreach to local businesses and landowners regarding nonpoint BMPs.

The Miller Creek Watershed partnership demonstrates how a coordinated federal, state, and local effort to address natural resource concerns at the local level can improve water quality.

In **Wisconsin**, the Douglas County Land and Water Conservation Department addresses many factors affecting current erosion in the South Shore Lake Superior watershed, such as: a geologically young landscape, land uses of the late 1800's to early 1900's which still impact modern erosion processes, site specific soil characteristics, and current land cover types.

A study was conducted through the Ashland, Bayfield, Douglas, & Iron Counties Land Conservation Department that resulted in a recommendation for a large-scale watershed management approach to reduce erosion along south shore streams and improve watershed health by slowing the flow of runoff from the uplands to waterways. The study identified particular sub-watersheds where spring snowmelt, combined with poor cover type, produces large amounts of water flowing off of the landscape and through stream channels, destabilizing and eroding stream banks. The study found this erosion process can be mitigated by restoring conifers to critical sub-watersheds, particularly the steep slopes, so that spring snowmelt does not occur at once but rather more slowly over a longer time period. This finding led to a workshop where hydrologists and foresters met to share this data and discuss the benefits of a regional effort to restore conifers and limit regeneration of large areas of same-aged aspen cover types. Also, because of this partnership and study, conservation efforts in both funding and staff time are being targeted to those areas of greatest concern.

The Hog Island/Newton Creek site located in the Superior Harbor, within the City of Superior, was one of the first contaminated sites to be remediated by Great Lakes Legacy Act funding. Douglas County has been diligently working with EPA to produce a restoration plan to accompany the remediation effort that includes activities ranging from shallow wetland restoration to educational interpretive trails and signs. This effort has involved many partners, including the City of Superior which manages recreational facilities located on county land nearby. This restoration by Douglas County and EPA will serve as a model for other sites in the Great Lakes to follow.

Douglas County has been one of many partners working towards the citing of a new NERR Freshwater Center in the St. Louis River Estuary, located in the City of Superior, Douglas County. This center would serve many purposes including: research of the unique “Headwaters of the Great Lakes” St. Louis River Estuary and providing local educational and public outreach resources. The presence of this caliber of facility in Superior and Douglas County will help support other local high-level research and development activities and elevate the public importance of natural resources, such as the St. Louis River estuary, and all of the benefits people derive from these resources.

Conservation Districts in **New York**, like other Conservation Districts in the Great Lakes Basin, undertake projects through the Great Lake Basin Program for Soil Erosion and Sedimentation Control, managed by the Great Lakes Commission. The Yates County Soil and Water Conservation District received a grant from the Commission to address stormwater run-off from construction and development activities in the Seneca and Keuka Lake Watersheds. The National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System Phase II permit program includes communities with populations under 100,000 and through this grant a program was developed to outline the state’s Phase II regulatory framework. This included design and construction practices for stormwater management and aided in the understanding of the regulatory framework. Work included education, outreach and technical assistance for stakeholders in the area, including municipal governments and other conservation districts. Training was provided for Conservation District staff so they could provide assistance in their local areas. This project partnered with others in the communities to increase the understanding of the requirements, and practices to be utilized in the local area. *(Information provided by the Great Lakes Commission)*

New York also has an active state based program, the Agricultural Environment Management program or AEM. Conservation Districts work with local farmers in their community to become involved in the AEM program. Farmers are provided technical and financial assistance to adopt conservation practices as appropriate to their farming operation whether it is water quality or appropriate habitat. This program has been very successful in New York and includes over 10,000 farms in the state.

The Genesee County Soil and Water Conservation District undertakes efforts to work with individual farmers on the conservation needs of their operations. One example is their work with a dairy operation to install conservation practices with assistance from EQIP funding, Finger Lakes Lake Ontario Watershed Protection alliance funds and the New York State Partners for Fish and Wildlife Service. The practices included, the installation of over 2,000 feet of electric fence to exclude livestock from four acres of stream bank, stabilization of erosion that was leading into a nearby creek, a nutrient management plan for the operation, including manure, silage and soil samples to address the needs of the land.

Each of these efforts by conservation districts reduces pollution in streams and consequently improves water quality in the Great Lakes. These are a few examples of the work being done by conservation districts, with many more undertaking the same or very

similar efforts to improve and protect our natural resources. From comprehensive planning, to directly implementing conservation projects, to conducting outreach and education with landowners on proper resource management, conservation districts continue to work at the local level through a variety of approaches to protect soil and water resources. By working with a variety of partners and stakeholders, conservation districts are able to increase conservation benefits realized from the investment of federal funds by leveraging state and local dollars to maximize improvements to water quality. Through these efforts, conservation districts are continuing their 70 year legacy of protecting natural resources in the Great Lakes.