

As prepared for delivery...

**Remarks for Arlen L. Lancaster, Chief
Natural Resources Conservation Service
National Association of State Conservation Agencies
Annual Meeting
San Antonio, Texas
September 25, 2006**

Thank you, Gordon, for that kind introduction.

I want to point out that there was one thing Gordon didn't mention – this is the first speech I've delivered outside the agency since coming on as Chief of NRCS.

NRCS' partnership with state conservation agencies is very important to us. We have valuable work going on throughout the country. For that reason, I wanted to get out and connect with you and get a good dialogue going right away.

I am honored to be with you today, and it's a pleasure to be here.

CSP Announcement

To begin, I have an important announcement. You are among the first to know that later today Secretary Johanns will announce the 51 watersheds that are eligible for the 2007 Conservation Security Program sign up.

We're doing something special with CSP this time. For the first time in the program's history, watersheds in every state and Puerto Rico are eligible for a CSP sign up.

In addition to this, there are several watersheds in the 2007 announcement that cross state lines. This expands the program's coverage and extends CSP's benefits to even more people.

Here are some facts and figures for you about the 2007 sign up:

- It includes more than 64,500 farms and ranches.
- These watersheds cover more than 23.7 million acres.
- And that acreage is evenly split between cropland and grazing land.
- Watersheds in today's announcement bring us to a total of 331 CSP watersheds nationwide, covering nearly 248 million acres.

We expect sign ups to get under way early next year.

On behalf of Secretary Johanns, I tell you it's a pleasure for us to do as the CSP slogan says and "reward the best and motivate the rest" – this time, for the first time, in every state and in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

Biography

Right now, I'd like to tell you a few things about myself and my experience:

- Before President Bush asked me to become Chief of NRCS last month, I was USDA's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations.
- Before that, I was senior policy advisor for Senator Mike Crapo of Idaho.
- I was staff director for the Senate Subcommittee on Forestry, Conservation, and Rural Revitalization, and
- Prior to that, I was on the staff of Senator Robert Bennett of Utah, my home state, and...

- I helped craft the conservation title of the 2002 Farm Bill.

Despite what all that looks like, I want you to know that I can keep a job. Right now, I'm in my dream job. I can't think of anything I'd rather be doing than serving as Chief of NRCS. It's a great match, considering not only my professional interests and experience, but also with my interests as an outdoorsman. I look forward to making sure NRCS stays a good steward and a good partner with America's state conservation agencies.

NRCS and NASCA

My experience has taught me the value of partnerships. NRCS has great respect for the partnerships with enjoy with state conservation agencies, and we hold those partnerships close.

And partnership is at the heart of three points that I am going to talk with you about right now. These are forward-looking, and I'm confident that they will put NRCS and our partners on a productive course during the years ahead. I have one request. As I tell you about them, I'd like you to give serious thought to how NASCA and NRCS can work more closely together to make these things happen for the people we serve.

Expand Our Horizons

Point number one. We want to expand our horizons. This is one of the keys of NRCS' new Strategic Plan. If you haven't read the plan yet, please do so. There's a link to it on the front page of the NRCS Web site. Our Strategic Plan calls for expanding our traditional way of doing business.

But the plan also has something else: It addresses venture goals — things that our partners, our customers, and our employees say will take us to where we need to be to take on the challenges ahead.

Things like:

- Promoting renewable energy.
- Improving air quality in agricultural areas.
- Keeping more farm and ranch land in agriculture, and
- Getting our services to folks who grow non-traditional crops.
- These are visionary things that will benefit our
- Land,
- Public health, and
- Our economy.

We're already making advancements in these areas. In renewable energy, for example:

- We and our partners are doing research and development in biomass and wind power.
- We're helping people put in anaerobic digesters that turn manure into methane that generates enough electricity to power entire farms.
- And we've opened up the Environmental Quality Incentives Program to partners who want to adopt solar energy practices.

On air quality improvement, we and our partners are encouraging growers to control dust and run cleaner burning engines and chip field waste rather than burn it. This also is through EQIP.

One of these projects out in Fresno, California, brings in excellent outreach to minorities, which is something I believe in and will be sure NRCS builds on. It encourages Hispanic, Southeast Asian, and Punjabi orchard owners to put air quality improvement practices on their operations. One of our people did a news interview awhile back regarding this outreach. He told the reporter that "USDA is duty-bound to make sure all these groups are served." That's a powerful statement. And I couldn't agree more.

As we expand our horizons, we are going to build greater diversity into our customer base and into NRCS' staff, as well. We want everything we do to attract and involve all sectors of agriculture, and bring in conservation-minded folks from every location and every background. Conservation benefits everyone, and everyone should know what they can do to get involved.

Make Conservation Easier

Point number two. We want to make conservation easier. It's a common-sense way to get more people interested in conservation. We've already taken good steps in this direction.

We have an unprecedented amount and variety of information posted online and available to the public. Our Web Soil Survey, for example, has logged more than 74 million page views since August of last year. Our online energy estimators have helped thousands of producers decide how to save energy and money by switching to conservation tillage systems, cutting fertilizer use, and upgrading to more energy-efficient irrigation systems.

The technology we have put in the field in the past few years is the best we've ever had. We've designed it specifically to free our folks to spend more time with our customers and partners, and less time behind a desk.

We've extended deadlines to allow people who have had problems with high energy prices and the weather to complete conservation practices that are part of their participation in our programs.

Among things coming up, we're going to make the information we release to the public clearer and easier to understand. And we're going to make it easier for producers to avoid falling under regulation.

The idea behind all these things is to make conservation easier so that get more conservation gets done. Given the size of this country's conservation needs, this is imperative. We need to do all we can to get more people working with us.

Demonstrate the Benefits of Conservation

Point three. Accountability.

It is critical for us to account for how we use the resources entrusted to us:

- The money...
- The human capital...
- The in-kind services, and...
- All of the other resources we and our partners need to put conservation on the land.

When somebody asks us about what we do and what we've done, we have to be able to tell them accurately and with total transparency:

- This is what we had...
- this is what we did with it...
- this is what it's doing...and
- these are the benefits it's going to provide in the long term.

In my time on Capitol Hill, I saw how important this kind of accountability is. Odds are that an East Coast legislator won't have many opportunities to see a great cooperative conservation project that we've put on the ground out West.

But if we can provide hard data and other information about our programs and projects, we can win support for even more projects that bring the benefits of natural resources conservation to even more people.

This same accountability is important in our efforts at the state and local levels. It provides excellent selling points that can get more government officials, grassroots organizations, and individuals to join us in partnership.

2007 Farm Bill

Next year is a farm bill year. A lot of people have high expectations for the 2007 legislation, and I know for sure that Secretary Johanns is one of those people. With President Bush's encouragement, the Secretary had USDA conduct 52 farm bill listening forums across the country. He conducted 20 of them himself.

In our conversations about those forums, he's said that he can't "imagine any better opportunity for a Secretary of Agriculture." He appreciated the opportunity to connect with producers who are involved in different sectors of agriculture, and hear their comments on what they want in the next farm bill.

In all, we received more than 4,000 comments from the public, covering the entire spectrum of the next farm bill. Many of those comments focused on people's expectations for the next conservation title. If you've read some of those comments posted on the USDA Web site, you get a good idea about what a lot of people want to see for conservation:

- More funding for conservation programs.
- More incentives for making farms more productive and environmentally sound.
- More incentives for expanding production of biofuels.

And that's just a small sample of what people want and are talking about.

All of us at NRCS believe that the things that I've just talked about:

- Expanding our horizons,
- Making conservation easier,
- Demonstrating the benefits of conservation, and
- Our new Strategic Plan...

...are going to help us and our partners as the new farm bill comes together, and as we implement it after it's ready to go public.

In closing, I want to thank you for allowing me to be here with you today. This is an exciting day for me, and not just because of the excitement that always comes along with public speaking. It's because of all the ideas and the productive possibilities that can come when we come together like this. I know we're going to get a good perspective on many of the things that need to be done, and can be done, to expand and improve conservation in this country. I look forward learning what matters to you and to the people you serve back home.

Earlier, I asked you to think of ways that state conservation agencies and NRCS can work together in the future. I hope you've done that, and I'd like to hear your ideas. If you want to write them down and hand them to me later on, please do so. Or if you want, please send them to me in Washington by e-mail or regular mail.

Again, thank you to everyone who brought us here today and thank you to everyone here for your partnership.

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