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NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
BEFORE THE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER RESOURCES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

March 4, 2010

Ms. Chairwoman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide a written statement to discuss water resource program activities of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Through the water resource programs that NRCS administers, our employees work in partnership with local leaders to improve the overall function and health of our Nation's watersheds. Our goal is to improve the quality of local water resources, while providing protection from floods and mitigating the effects of natural disasters.

I will describe our ongoing work in this area, and discuss our proposed budget and priorities for fiscal year 2011. I will specifically address three programs: 1) Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations, 2) Emergency Watershed Protection, and 3) Watershed Rehabilitation.

The Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (Public Law 83-566) established the foundation for the Agency's water resource programs. This statute, along with the Flood Control Act of 1944 (Public Law 78-534), provided NRCS with the authority to complete work on approximately 2,000 watershed projects nationwide, through which we have helped local communities construct approximately 11,300 flood control structures. The structures and other water resource program measures implemented through these watershed projects provide more than $2 billion in local benefits every year by controlling floods, conserving water, controlling soil erosion and sedimentation, and improving community water supply.

NRCS assists with the planning and implementation of watershed projects, and serves as a technical advisor, bringing science, technology, and knowledge about the natural resource base and ecosystems of the watershed, and has served as a source of funding, to implement these projects. The local sponsoring organizations submit an application for Federal assistance, assure public participation, make project planning and implementation decisions, obtain land rights and permits, provide local cost-share funds, operate and maintain project measures, and carry out all phases of the project installation according to NRCS policy. Once completed, the projects are owned by the local sponsor, and local sponsors are responsible for project operation and maintenance.

Fiscal Year 2011 Budget Proposal

The President's fiscal year 2011 budget includes $40.5 million in funding for the Watershed Rehabilitation program, a small increase over the fiscal year 2010 requested funding level; does not recommend new funding for the Emergency Watershed Program; and does not include funding for the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations program. In recent years, Congress has earmarked virtually all of the latter program, meaning that NRCS is unable to prioritize allocation of these funds or direct funding to projects that are cost effective. In addition, most benefits from these projects are highly localized and we anticipate unfinished projects will continue to receive local support from project sponsors. Summaries of the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations, Emergency Watershed Protection, and Watershed Rehabilitation programs are as follows:

Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations

The Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations Program consists of projects authorized under two authorities: the Flood Control Act of 1944 (P.L. 78-534) and the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (P.L. 83-566).

The Flood Control Act of 1944 authorized the Secretary of Agriculture to install watershed improvement measures to reduce flood, sedimentation, and erosion damages; further the conservation, development, utilization, and disposal of water; and foster conservation and proper utilization of land. Flood prevention work is authorized in the 11 watersheds designated in the Flood Control Act.

The Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (P.L. 83-566) provides for cooperation between the Federal Government and the States and their political subdivisions in a program to prevent erosion, floodwater, and sediment damages; to further the conservation, development, utilization, and disposal of water; and to further the conservation and proper utilization of land in authorized watersheds.

The P.L. 78-534 and P.L. 83-566 programs have similar authorities. The planning criteria, economic justifications, local sponsorship requirements, cost-sharing criteria, structural limitations, and other policies and procedures used in P.L. 78-534 projects generally parallel those used in P.L. 83-566 projects. Three examples of successful projects include:

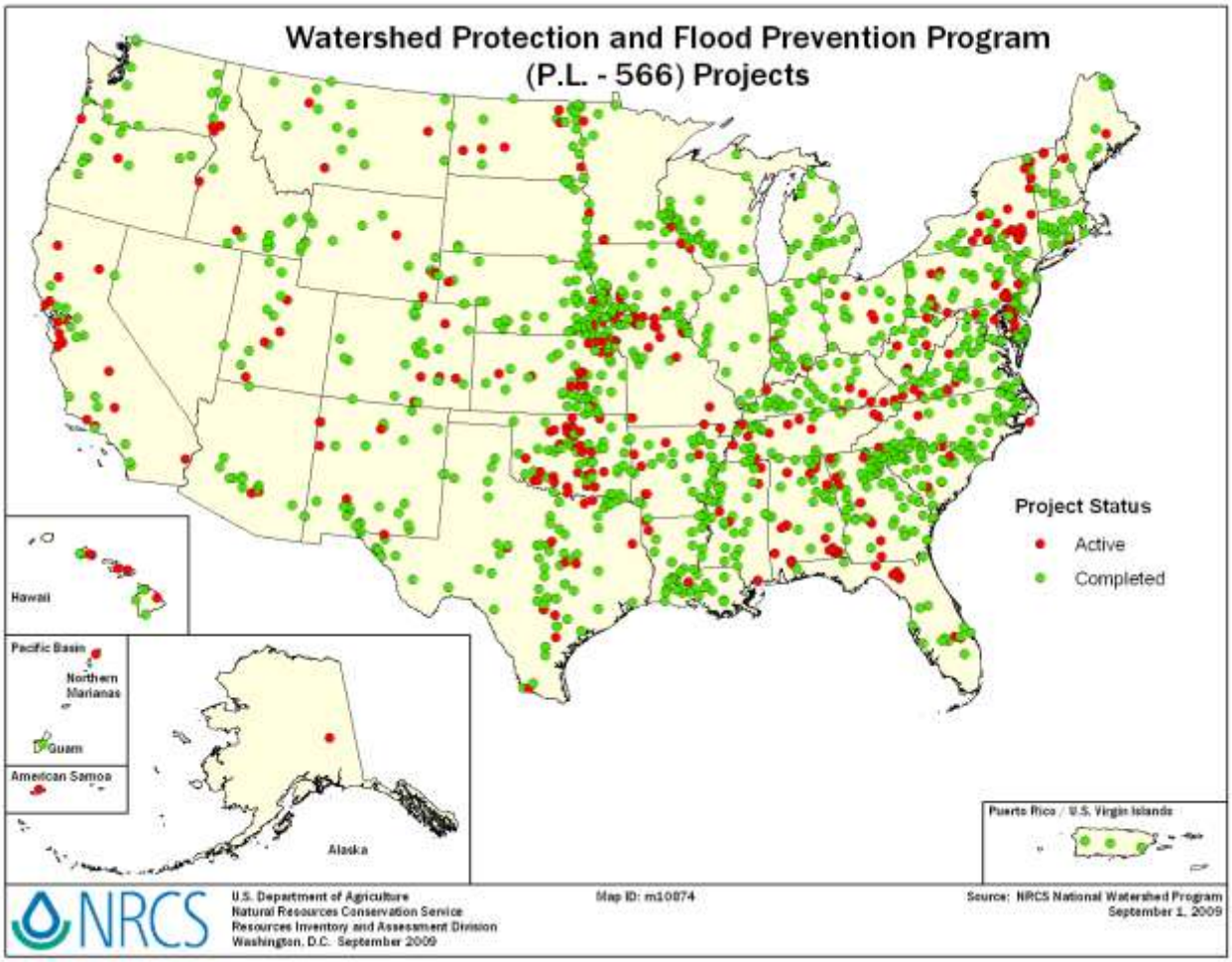
Hawaii: Lower Hamakua Ditch Watershed. The Lower Hamakua Ditch Watershed Project is located in the Hamakua coast area of the Island of Hawaii. Authorized in 1999, the project is sponsored by the State of Hawaii Department of Agriculture, the Mauna Kea Soil and Water Conservation District, and the Hamakua Soil and Water Conservation District. This project will increase the availability and reliability of agricultural water to diversified farmers and ranchers along the Hamakua coast through the repair and restoration of the Lower Hamakua Ditch. Since 2001, design and construction have resulted in the installation of two water storage reservoirs, two pipeline distribution

laterals, repair or replacement of 31 flume structures, modification of 3 intake structures, realignment of the Hakalaoa Falls Tunnel, and reconstruction of 2 historic redwood flumes. Remaining construction elements include the repair of ditch linings, exclusion fencing, a Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition system, eight distribution lateral systems, and on-farm land treatment practices. Full project completion is anticipated in 2017. This project will help to expand the diversified agricultural base in Hamakua and promote economic revitalization of the Hamakua coast.

Kentucky: Pigeon Roost Watershed. Kentucky NRCS in cooperation with the local sponsors (City of McKee, the Jackson County Fiscal Court, and the Jackson County Conservation District) recently completed construction of the Pigeon Roost Flood Retarding Structure No. 3 (FRS 3) in Jackson County, Kentucky. Pigeon Roost FRS 3 is the 200th floodwater retarding structure built in Kentucky under the PL-566 and the Pilot Watershed Programs. FRS 3 is also the fourth flood protection structure built in the Pigeon Roost Watershed that reduces flooding of residential and businesses properties in the City of McKee, Kentucky. This watershed structure provides over $167,000 of annual agricultural flood damage reduction benefits, over $685,000 of annual non-agricultural flood damage reduction benefits, and provides floodwater protection to over 850 residents of the City of McKee.

Wyoming: Allison Draw Flood Control Project. Average annual benefits of $359,600 are being realized on the Allison Draw Flood Protection Project located in Wyoming's southeast corner, near Cheyenne. Allison Draw, which is not a perennial stream, drains a small watershed of 11,500 acres fed by groundwater in the lower section. Years ago, since the drainage does not have water year around, developers constructed housing and provided business locations in the draw. Eventually, the shift in land use closed the stream channel. While normally the stream is dry, a significant rain storm would place up to 289 homes and businesses at risk of flood damage. Starting in 1993, NRCS helped the local sponsor develop a plan and an Environmental Impact Statement for the Draw. The final phase of the project, which constructed an environmentally friendly water conveyance measure, was completed in 2009.

The map below shows the completed and active watershed projects across the United States:



For a number of years, NRCS has had little ability to actively manage the Watershed Flood Prevention and Operations program because it has been nearly 100 percent earmarked through the annual appropriations process. This prevents NRCS from using its merit-based criteria to select projects that address national priorities and accrue the greatest environmental benefit. For this reason, the FY2011 budget does not request any funding for this program.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 provided $145 million for Watershed and Flood Prevention and Operation projects. This funding has been used to approve 87 projects, in 26 states, that provide land treatment, erosion control, water conservation, water quality improvements and flood mitigation for high priority watersheds. These projects when completed will provide the following benefits:

- $431 million annual monetary benefits for the next 50 to 100 years from reduced flooding
- 9,749 farms and ranches benefited
- 997 bridges benefited
- 102 domestic water supplies protected

- 4,484,658 tons/year reduction in sediment
- 892 miles of streams enhanced and protected
- 75,213 acre-feet of water conserved
- 17,202 acres of wetland enhanced and restored
- 13 sites in which threatened and endangered species benefited.

Eight new Watershed Operations projects have been authorized for federal funding since the beginning of the Obama Administration.

Six of the projects were of the size and scope that they could be authorized without Congressional action. Those projects are as follows: Colorado-Beaver Creek Watershed; Idaho-Southern Washington County Water Quality Project; Louisiana-Red Bayou Watershed; South Carolina-South Darlington Watershed; Virginia-North Fork Powell Watershed; and Wyoming-Kaycee Flood Prevention Project.

Two of the eight projects were of a size and scope that approval by the House and Senate Agriculture Committees was required. One is the Cape Cod Water Resources Restoration Project, in Massachusetts, which will result in the restoration of 7,300 acres of shellfish beds; the creation of 4,200 acres of migratory fish runs; and improvement of 1,500 acres of degraded salt marshes.

The other large project is the Dunloup Creek Watershed Project, in West Virginia. Through a voluntary buyout program for threatened properties, buildings, houses and other facilities will be removed from up to 203 acres of the 100-year floodplain, and it will be restored to more natural conditions.

The fiscal year 2011 budget request does not include funding for the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations program because most benefits from these projects are highly localized, and thus we anticipate unfinished projects will continue to receive local support from project sponsors. In some cases, NRCS can provide non-structural land treatment assistance through other programs it administers, including the Conservation Technical Assistance Program and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

Emergency Watershed Protection

The purpose of the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) program is to undertake emergency measures, including the purchase of floodplain easements, for runoff retardation and soil erosion prevention to safeguard lives and property from natural disasters. The typical process for delivery of this program starts with the local sponsor requesting assistance for a disaster recovery effort. NRCS then conducts a damage assessment to identify if the project is eligible and develops an estimated cost. Typical work under this program ranges from debris removal from clogged streams caused by flooding; installing conservation measures, like reseeding native grasses, to prevent soil

erosion on hillsides after a fire; or replanting and reshaping stream banks because of erosion caused by flooding.

Here is a recent example of the kind of work we accomplish through EWP.

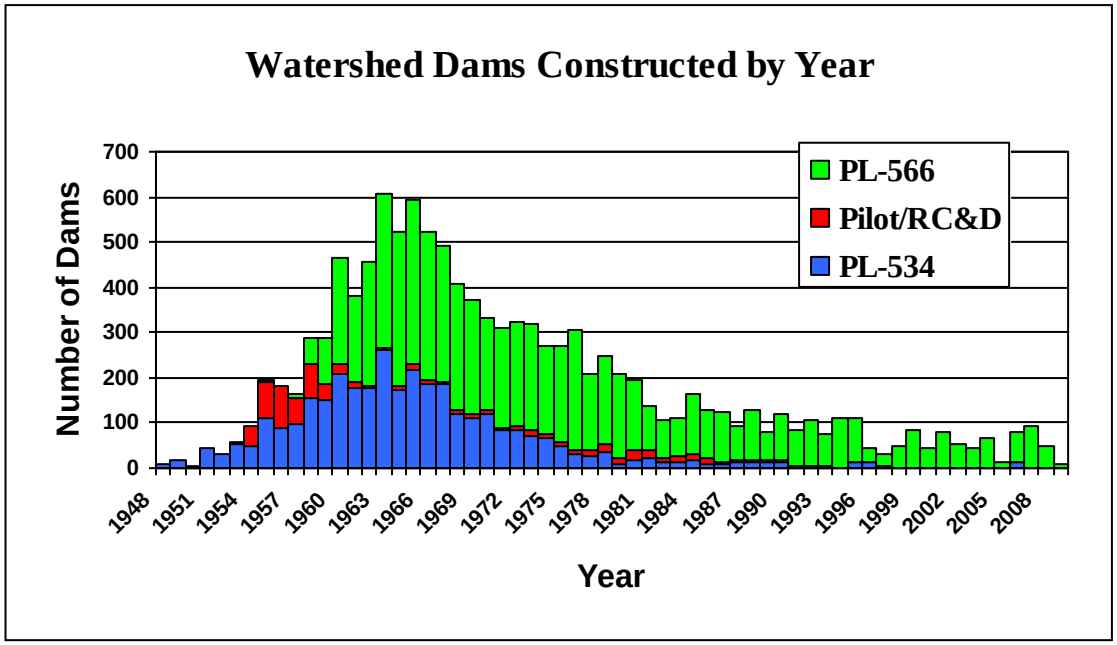
- In the fall of 2009, immediately after the very large Station Fire event in Los Angeles County, California, NRCS worked with sponsors to implement an EWP project installing 10,000 linear feet of K-rail and over 4,000 feet of sandbags, as well as enlarging the storage capacity of 3 debris basins in the area at a cost of about $900,000. In addition, NRCS provided exigency funding to carry out work in areas where there was an immediate threat to life and property.

In each of these situations, NRCS designed all the necessary engineering solutions, surveyed the area for potential impacts to unknown archeological resources, consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to avoid impacts to threatened and endangered species, and provided onsite construction inspection.

EWP received $490 million in supplemental funding in fiscal year 2008. Supplemental appropriations bills are the customary source of funds for EWP, and thus the FY 2011 President's Budget does not propose funding for this program.

Watershed Rehabilitation

Since 1948, over 11,300 flood control dams have been built in the 2,000 watershed projects across America. Many of these dams were designed for a 50-year life span and now are at or near that age. The following graph illustrates the years and the programs in which these 11,300 structures were built:



Since enactment of the Watershed Rehabilitation Amendments of 2000 and subsequent amendments in the 2008 Farm Bill, NRCS has either completed or initiated construction on 139 aging dams. NRCS is actively helping local communities rehabilitate aging dams, with the average dam rehabilitation costing roughly $1.8 million. These dams were originally constructed with NRCS assistance but are owned, operated, and maintained by local sponsors.

Two examples of successful rehabilitation projects include:

- Alabama Choccolocco Creek dam 11 was originally constructed for flood control and water supply. Over the years, population growth and urban sprawl have occurred upstream and downstream from the dam. Rehabilitation of the dam will ensure a safe water supply and provide increased safety to occupants of 23 homes and a multi-million dollar water treatment plant. The Water Works and Sewer Board of Anniston, Alabama performed the contract services for construction and also used their own staff to upgrade the auxiliary spillway and build the concrete parapet wall to raise the top of the dam by five feet.
- Second Creek Dam 12 near Natchez, Mississippi was constructed in 1968 with a low hazard classification. Since then, several homes have been built downstream, raising the hazard class to high. Local sponsors requested technical and financial assistance from NRCS to help rehabilitate the dam to meet the dam safety design criteria for high hazard structures. The rehabilitated dam will provide 100 years of continued flood protection, reducing threat to loss of life from sudden dam failure for the residents in the Second Creek Watershed.

The President's budget request for fiscal year 2011 includes $40 million in discretionary spending for Watershed Rehabilitation, a small increase from the 2010 enacted funding level. This funding would be used both for planning and assessments of high hazard dams, as well as on-the-ground structural rehabilitation work. The President's budget request proposes no mandatory funding for this program in 2011; $165 million currently available would be permanently cancelled.

The 2009 Recovery Act provided $50 million for Watershed Rehabilitation. Twenty-five projects in 11 States have been selected to receive Recovery Act funding.

Summary

In summary, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has accomplished much through the water resource programs over the past 50 years. Economic, social, and environmental benefits from these programs have been significant for both agricultural and urban communities, which will continue to enjoy reductions in erosion, improved water quality, flood mitigation, greater productivity of cropland and rangeland, and many recreational opportunities. However, in the context of the budget request for FY 2011, we need to prioritize limited resources to ensure that we are well positioned to address more pressing challenges ahead, and to meet our budget deficit reduction targets.