

**STATEMENT OF DAVE WHITE, CHIEF
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**

June 3, 2009

Ms. Chairwoman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee to discuss water resource program activities of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Through the water resource programs that NRCS delivers, 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.

In my remarks today, I will describe our ongoing work in this area, and discuss our budget and priorities for fiscal year (FY) 2010. I will specifically address three programs: 1) Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations, 2) Emergency Watershed Protection, and 3) Watershed Rehabilitation.

In August 2009, NRCS will mark the 55th anniversary of the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act of 1954 (Public Law 83-566), which established the foundation for the Agency's water resource programs. This statute, along with the Flood Control Act of 1944 (Public Law 78-534), has provided NRCS the authority to complete work on approximately 2,000 watershed projects nationwide, thereby helping local communities construct 11,000 flood control structures. The structures and other water resource program measures implemented through these watershed projects provide more than \$1.5 billion in local benefits every year by controlling floods, conserving water, controlling soil erosion and sedimentation, and improving community water supply.

Through the NRCS water resource programs, thousands of communities across the country improve natural resources, restore fish and wildlife habitat, mitigate flood damages, and accelerate economic development. These programs are founded upon the principle of locally driven, watershed-scale conservation, which can best be solved by cooperative action above the farm and ranch level. Local governments and other sponsors initiate projects with the help of NRCS and conservation districts, and are empowered as decision-makers to build partnerships and acquire funding.

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 2010 Budget Proposal

The President's FY 2010 budget includes \$40.2 million in funding for the Watershed Rehabilitation program, a small increase over the FY2009 funding level; does not recommend new funding for the Emergency Watershed Program, which received \$490 million in 2008 supplemental funding last year; and does not include funding for the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations program. In recent years, Congress has earmarked virtually all of this program, meaning that the Natural Resources Conservation Service (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:

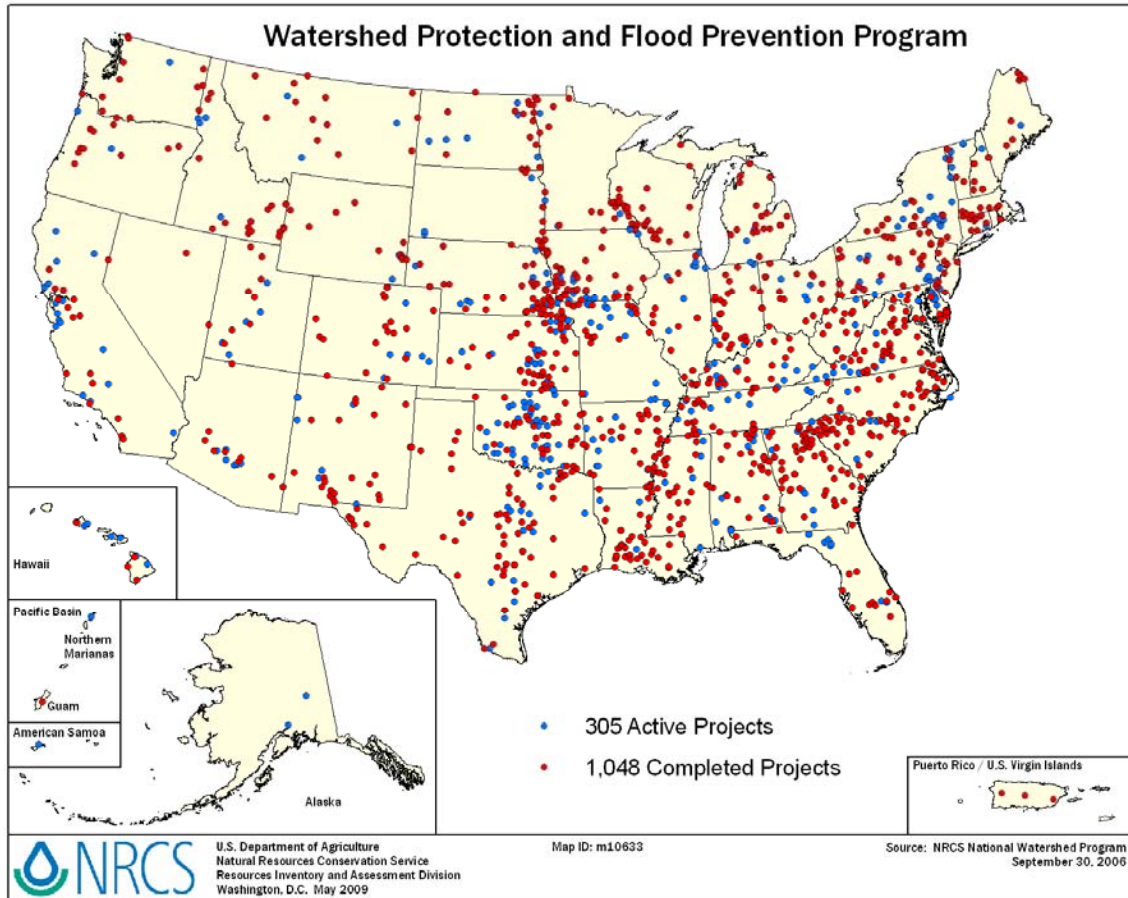
Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations

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 of 1954 (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 of 1954 (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. Below is a map showing 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 in recent years. This prevents NRCS from using its merit-based criteria to select projects that address national priorities and accrue the greatest environmental benefit.

In addition, 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. Using these programs for non-structural land treatment practices will lessen the impact of the elimination of funding for the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations Program.

For these reasons, and because most benefits from these projects are highly localized, the FY 2010 President's Budget does not include funding for this program. We anticipate unfinished projects will continue to receive local support from project sponsors.

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 streambanks because of erosion caused by flooding.

Allow me to offer a brief example of the kind of work we accomplish through EWP. On May 10, 2009, the Governor of Kentucky declared a state of emergency due to a devastating flood event that affected 12 counties. NRCS damage assessment teams entered the affected area on May 11 to complete initial damage assessments alongside county officials and emergency management personnel. By May 15, 2009, NRCS had completed damage estimates in seven counties for nearly \$5,000,000. In addition, NRCS provided exigency funding to carry out work in areas where there was a threat to life and property:

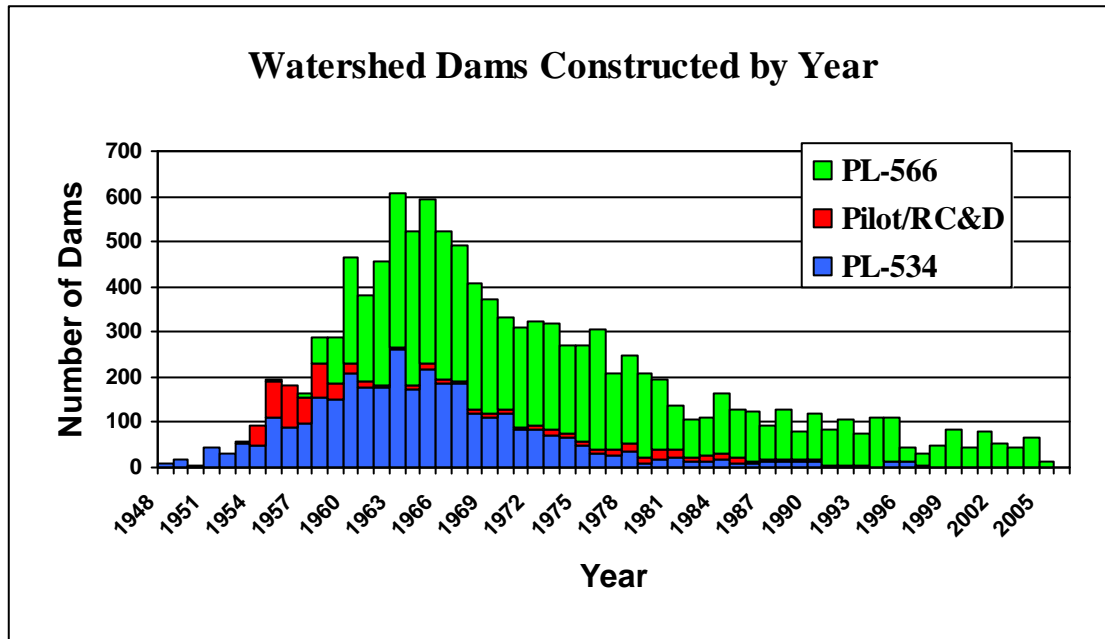
- In Pike County, a bridge had collapsed into the stream, and through EWP assistance, the debris was removed so the county could restore temporary access to allow families to get to their homes.
- In Pikeville, Kentucky, a road bank had washed away and caused the road to slip. This road provides access to over 500 homes, and the damage disrupted school bus and emergency rescue traffic. Through EWP, \$330,000 was provided to clear the mudslides, remove trees from the stream, and redirect the stream channel away from the road back to its original path.

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 FY 2008; as ample funding has been provided through emergency supplemental appropriations, the FY 2010 President's Budget does not propose funding for this program.

Watershed Rehabilitation

Since 1948, over 11,000 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 11,000 structures were built:



Since enactment of the Watershed Rehabilitation Amendments of 2000 and subsequent amendments in the 2008 Farm Bill, NRCS has 135 dams are completed or under construction. NRCS is actively helping local communities rehabilitate aging dams, with the average dam rehabilitation cost roughly at \$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:

- The Martinez Creek Watershed Dam No. 6A outside San Antonio, Texas. Originally constructed as a low hazard dam, the population growth around this structure caused it to be reclassified as a high hazard dam. Local sponsors requested assistance from NRCS to bring the dam up to high hazard safety standards. Rehabilitation of site 6A began in 2007 and was completed in 2008 at a cost of approximately \$2.5 million. The local sponsor provided 35 percent of the project cost, in accordance with statutory requirements.
- 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 FY 2010 includes approximately \$40.2 million in discretionary spending for Watershed Rehabilitation, a small increase over the 2009 enacted funding level. In addition, the President's budget request proposes \$135 million in mandatory spending in 2010. This funding would be used both for planning and assessments of high hazard dams, as well as on-the-ground structural rehabilitation work. No mandatory funding was provided for Watershed Rehabilitation by Congress in FY 2009.

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009

The Recovery Act provided funding for three NRCS water resources programs:

Watershed Rehabilitation Program	\$ 50,000,000
Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations Program	\$145,000,000
Floodplain Easements - Emergency Watershed Protection Program	\$145,000,000

Our goal is to obligate 50 percent of these funds by then end of June this year. We have made significant strides toward reaching that goal and toward the Administration's objectives of economic recovery and job creation.

For Watershed Rehabilitation, 27 projects in 11 States have been selected to receive \$45 million in Recovery Act funding. Eighty-one projects in 26 States and the Northern Marianas have been selected to receive just over \$127 million in Recovery Act funding under the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations Program. Priority for funding projects for these two programs was based on NRCS's merit-based project-ranking models which were used to identify and select the most cost-effective and highest priority projects to meet the objectives of the programs.

NRCS announced a nationwide sign-up for Floodplain Easements—Emergency Watershed Protection Program Recovery Act funding on March 9, 2009. The application deadline for North Dakota and Minnesota were extended until May 1st to allow additional time because of on-going flooding events. Over 4,200 applications representing over \$1.4 billion in requests for floodplain easements have been received from 46 States and Territories. On June 2, USDA announced the selection of 289 applications for Floodplain Easements funding. These easements will cover more than 36,000 acres in 36 states.

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 2010, 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.

I thank the Subcommittee for inviting me here today and would be happy to respond to any questions.