

Testimony of Kevin Norton
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Introduction

Chairwoman Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the challenges and successes of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) conservation programs. This has been an unprecedented year with external influences applying unusual pressures on our staffs and adjusting, to some degree, the way we operate at the field level. The information I will share with you today will show the resiliency and dedication of the entire NRCS team, from field technicians and District Conservationists all the way through our State and National leadership teams, to ensure services are delivered to our customers. I appreciate the ongoing support and leadership this Subcommittee has provided for voluntary, private lands conservation and the improvement of our soil, water, and other invaluable natural resources as embodied in the 2018 Farm Bill and within our other authorities.

COVID-19 did have an impact on our operations. Our staffing levels have been impacted due to diminished ability to on-board employees and difficulty in completing relocations. We are working with the Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) Business Center's hiring team and continue making strides to bring people on board. For example, the FPAC Business Center

addressed issues we were having with fingerprinting requirements. They made adjustments that resulted in improved on-boarding timeframes. Even with these difficulties, our efforts are having a positive impact. In the fourth quarter of FY2020, we brought on board 639 employees. The total of new FY2020 on-boarded employees to fill vacancies is 2,943, which is higher than those on-boarded to fill vacancies in FY2019 by 1,331. This includes both permanent and non-permanent on-board employees. This demonstrates that NRCS has overcome the impediments to onboarding created by COVID-19.

We also had to rethink our methods for training our staff and partners who help us deliver our programs. We have evaluated our training needs and identified those that can be offered virtually and those that must remain in-person trainings. Some of the in-person trainings had to be postponed until sometime in FY2021.

Although we are at varying phases of reopening, our field staff have continued servicing our customers. From the early stages of the pandemic, we instructed staff to continue servicing producers in the field while following social distancing requirements. Consequently, programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Conservation Stewardship Program have seen little impact. A few challenges we experienced included:

1. Some impact in our easement programs due to courthouse closings impeding records search requirements.
2. A delay in installing Soil Climate Analysis Network stations for American Indian tribes due to travel restrictions on reservation lands. We'll be working with tribes to get these installed as soon as possible.

3. Collecting field data needed for our National Resources Inventory. COVID-19 has made collecting field data problematic. But we are working through these challenges to maintain the accuracy and consistency of the data.

NRCS does not have specific COVID authority, but we did see a need and moved to help producers who were adversely impacted by market chain disruptions and closed outlets. NRCS worked with the USDA-Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service researchers to offer assistance to impacted producers. We reached out to state producer organizations, national associations, and state agencies in calibrating our response to the needs of producers. For dairies who dumped excess milk, NRCS developed excess milk disposal guidance that outlined various approaches on how to safely dispose of milk. For livestock producers who had to depopulate inventory, NRCS developed guidance for disposal and offered assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Additionally, NRCS developed guidance for producers who were changing from a production diet to a maintenance diet. Through EQIP, over \$500,000 were obligated in eight states to help producers deal with facility closure impacts on their operations.

Though we had challenges, when I reflect back on FY2020 I see significant results. The 2018 Farm Bill included numerous references for agency outcomes reporting related to our conservation programs and to streamlining programs. In response, NRCS embarked on a historic change to amalgamate numerous business practices into one program-neutral conservation planning process through an information technology application known as Conservation

Assessment and Ranking Tool (CART). CART established a common quantitative framework for all of conservation planning and program delivery activities. This IT application was deployed in FY2020 and will revolutionize the way NRCS adopts and deploys technology to its 2,400-plus field offices and enhance our ability to report our outcomes.

We also, in 2018, established an Outcomes Team that is working closely with our Conservation Effects Assessment Project modelers and other staff to develop outcomes related materials to be shared in an interactive environment with the public. This year, we instituted a monthly webinar series that has shared outcomes information on various topics, including results from various Working Lands for Wildlife initiatives, measuring and understanding the effects of conservation within watersheds, results from tillage management and structural conservation practices effects and trends, and data available in the Natural Resources Inventory. The meetings are well attended and will be continuing throughout the year.

You also asked that we provide more useful data to the public that resulted from various Conservation Innovation Grants (CIGs) that were awarded either nationally or at the state level. Work on this database is on-going and we anticipate releasing information later in FY2021.

Another significant achievement was the update of our conservation practice standards. We evaluated and updated our conservation practice standards within two years of Farm Bill enactment. These reviews incorporated public feedback along the entire process, including initial feedback on practices needing to be updated followed by specific feedback requests for each specific practice, and, once updates were incorporated, the public had an opportunity to

provide feedback on the accepted updates. We released 47 conservation practice standard updates; 25 standards were updated and are being prepared for release; 23 standards have been reviewed and are ready for public review with a Federal Register posting; and 14 are still under internal review.

Further, we established the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production through collaboration with all USDA agencies whose missions included urban agriculture. Through this office we entered into grant agreements with those seeking to improve opportunities for urban agriculturalists. Interest was tremendous. Under the Farm Bill authorities, we received more than 500 proposals for the \$4 million funding provided for this purpose. Additionally, we are working with the Farm Service Agency to initiate the process of establishing 5 of the required 10 pilot urban county committees; and are working through the process to establish the Secretary's Urban Agriculture Advisory Committee.

Opportunities continue to grow with the Joint Chiefs' Restoration Initiative where we are working in concert with the USDA Forest Service (USFS) to address resource concerns where private lands join National Forest System lands. This initiative exemplifies the USDA shared stewardship model of bringing together federal, state, and local governments with Tribes, community groups, and private landowners to achieve landscape-scale conservation outcomes across different land ownerships. Over the last seven years, USDA (NRCS and USFS) has invested more than \$225 million in 85 projects across 40 states and Puerto Rico. A record 34 proposals were submitted in FY2020. Community interest has also expanded as people become

more aware of this collaborative means to fund conservation work addressing wildfire risk reduction, water quality and supply protection, and at-risk wildlife habitat improvements.

Another highlight is our strategic effort to increase the adoption of soil health management systems across the landscape. Every state now has a Soil Health Strategy focused on the goal of getting soil health management systems implemented. National and state strategic efforts include enhanced outreach and training across the agriculture community and within our staffs so they can provide better assistance to our customers. The agency launched a soil health management systems Key Performance Indicator in 2020 that will track cropland with multiple conservation practices installed representing a soil health management system. In FY2019, a baseline of 209,000 acres was established.

We responded to emergencies, including wildfire, hurricane, and flooding disasters. Our efforts in this area seem to be growing. In FY2020, we provided \$12 million for flooding in Michigan and \$7 million for tropical storm Cristobal. We are currently evaluating funding needs for other natural disasters. For Hurricane Isaias, we are evaluating damages in the Southeastern states to determine if there is a need for Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program-Recovery disaster assistance. For Hurricane Laura, we received an EWP assistance request from the Orange County, Texas, Drainage District and anticipate another request will come from Shelby County. For western wildfires, NRCS offices throughout the region are working with local communities to assess damages as conditions allow. We are also monitoring Hurricane Sally in the Gulf Coast to determine whether any assistance is needed for impacted states.

Other accomplishments in FY2020 include:

- Interim Final Rules for all major Farm Bill programs were published, public comments were evaluated, and final rules for each program have been developed and are in various stages of clearance;
- We provided transparency and more clarity to the conservation compliance provisions with our recently published final rule following public comment evaluation on the interim final rule that was published in December of 2018;
- Our Plant Materials Centers are developing vegetative solutions to protect coastal and estuarine areas that are feeling the effects of rising sea levels and increased storm intensity;
- We have offered funding opportunities in the amount of \$345 million for those who want to partner with us to address natural resource concerns through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), as well as funding opportunities for feral swine eradication projects (\$11.9 million), CIGs (\$37 million awarded in FY2020 and \$40 million subsequently announced as available for projects to be selected in FY2021, both on-farm and classic), Wetland Mitigation Banking Program (\$5 million), as well as offering opportunities through the Working Lands for Wildlife Initiatives.
- Entered into agreements with other Federal Agencies where it benefitted the agriculture community and our other customers, including with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.
- NRCS has addressed water quality throughout the history of the agency, but the 2018 Farm Bill made source water protection and collaboration with partners in the drinking water sector an explicit priority of NRCS conservation programs. NRCS state

conservationists, in collaboration with partners, have identified high priority areas for source water protection in each state, and at least 10% of most Farm Bill conservation program funding is dedicated to protecting source water.

Although we do not yet have final FY2020 enrollment information, we have provided preliminary information so you can see the volume of work our staff completed during this complicated year:

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP): Over 30,000 contracts providing nearly \$1.1 billion on 9.6 million acres.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP): In addition to the new enrollments described below, NRCS also renewed almost 1,000 contracts on 2.5 million acres.

CSP Classic: Over 4,248 contracts providing over \$260 million on 5.3 million acres

CSP Grassland Conservation Initiative: more than 5,000 contracts on nearly 400,000 acres providing \$35 million.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP): More than 1,300 contracts on 430,000 acres.

An additional highlight for FY2020 the US Fish and Wildlife Service **decided not to list**:

- the bi-state population of greater sage-grouse, (CA and NV) in part due to over 17,000 acres conserved through NRCS programs; and
- the arctic grayling Upper Missouri River population (MT and WY). Critical conservation measures implemented by partners, including NRCS clients, addressed threats and increased the number of breeding fish.

Other notable results of conservation programs include delistings of stream segments, which have been associated with National Water Quality Initiatives watersheds, as reported by the EPA this year. These include Bayou Grand Marais in Louisiana (total dissolved solids) and Rio Grande de Anasco (dissolved oxygen and turbidity) in Puerto Rico.

Though we made significant accomplishments in FY2020, including CART described above which will improve the agency's ability to assess performance and report outcomes, there is more to be done. NRCS will soon be rolling out:

- the opportunity for producers to enter into incentive contracts under EQIP,
- the soil remediation provision in the Farm Bill will begin implementation in October 2020;
- the Comprehensive Conservation Plans in the CSP as well as the Conservation Planning Assessment in EQIP; and
- developing capability for applications and contracts with individual producers through RCPP.

Conclusion

I am excited about the authorities, responsibilities, and opportunities you provided NRCS for delivering private lands conservation programs to the farms, ranches and forestland of our great country. We embrace the work with passion and will continue striving to deliver these programs to the benefit of our nation's natural resources. I thank you for letting me share our progress and

successes with assisting private landowners, producers, and others with implementing the agencies program authorities.