



# National Association of Conservation Districts

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**House Committee on Agriculture  
Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry**

***"A 2022 Review of the Farm Bill: Stakeholder Perspectives on Title II Conservation Programs."***

## **Introduction**

Chair Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and members of the subcommittee – thank you for the opportunity to join you today to discuss farm bill conservation programs.

My name is Michael Crowder and I serve as the President of the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD). I have been the General Manager of the Barker Ranch in Eastern Washington State for 22 years and graduated from Purdue University with a master's degree in wildlife science and a bachelor's degree in natural resources and environmental science. Since 2002, I have been a partner of my third-generation family farm in Indiana, as well as an owner of farmland and conservation easements in Illinois.

I have spent my entire career working on conservation, agriculture, and wildlife science issues. On the Barker Ranch, we work closely with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) on wetland conservation easements and wildlife habitat, as well as other practices such as prescriptive grazing, riparian fencing, and irrigation water management. I also served as an Adjunct Professor at Washington State University Tri-Cities for eight years and taught classes in wildlife science, ecology, and wetland restoration at both graduate and undergraduate levels.

## **National Association of Conservation Districts**

NACD represents America's 3,000 conservation districts, their respective state and territory associations, and the 17,000 men and women who serve on their governing boards. Conservation districts are local units of government established under state law to help administer natural resource management programs and are the essential local component of our country's conservation delivery system. Districts work closely with federal and state conservation agencies to help millions of cooperating landowners and agriculture producers protect land and water resources across the United States. NACD's mission is to promote voluntary, locally adapted conservation efforts and the responsible management of natural resources on all lands by supporting locally led conservation districts and their associations through grassroots advocacy, education, and partnerships. Working in close coordination with our national partners at NRCS, the National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA), the National Conservation District Employees Association (NCDEA), and the National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils (NARC&DC), we strive to empower and equip local conservation districts to be the leader and voice for conservation within their communities.

If there was one message I would want you to take away from my testimony today, it is that voluntary, locally led, incentive-based conservation works. USDA's working lands conservation programs have helped producers and private landowners across the country reduce soil erosion, enhance water and air quality, restore and protect land and wildlife habitats, reduce carbon emissions, and conserve water on millions of acres. These benefits extend well beyond the lands on which conservation practices are applied, and have improved the environmental health of entire communities and regions. Private



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landowners have taken advantage of the many different forms of assistance offered by these programs – including cost-share, land rental, incentive payments, and conservation technical assistance – to adopt and maintain effective conservation practices.

It is also important to recognize the demand for and availability of farm bill conservation programs. Currently, only about one-third of the applications producers submit for USDA working lands conservation programs are accepted and funded each year. That means approximately seven out of ten farmers who want to invest in the long-term health of their operations, maximize the efficiency of their inputs, increase profitability, and improve the environment in their communities are unfortunately turned away.

The recently passed Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) provides historic investments in these oversubscribed, voluntary, and incentive-based conservation programs. Although I do wish this funding could have been provided on a bipartisan basis, NACD looks forward to working with both sides of the aisle throughout the development of the 2023 Farm Bill to ensure that this funding is allocated appropriately and has a positive, long-term effect on conservation. The IRA currently provides substantial funding for USDA conservation programs over the next four years, which may pose administrative challenges for USDA and their partners. The 2023 Farm Bill provides Congress with an important opportunity to spread these conservation investments over a longer period of time, and to consider innovative ways to improve and modernize our conservation delivery system.

### **Conservation Technical Assistance**

Conservation technical assistance (CTA) is a bedrock of our conservation delivery system. While funding for NRCS programs is critical to helping producers implement effective conservation practices on working lands across the country, the successful administration of these programs relies on effective conservation planning, a strong conservation workforce, and other resources that are supported by CTA. In order to transform the historic IRA conservation investments into meaningful, on-the-ground conservation, CTA must now play an even larger role. It was critical that the IRA included \$1 billion for CTA to provide these important resources. Trained technical staff will also be critical to providing sound planning, guided decision-making, and support for the design and implementation of conservation systems and practices at the field level. These technical staff play an enormous role in helping landowners implement targeted practices to achieve meaningful, on-the-ground results.

While NRCS requires strong staffing capacity to administer conservation programs, we also believe that federal technical assistance funding can leverage state and conservation district resources to extend the reach of trained personnel with local expertise in agricultural operations and natural resource conservation. The 17,000 local conservation district supervisors across the country play a critical role in connecting landowners to federal conservation programs and providing technical assistance to guide program administration, facilitate conservation planning, and help producers implement the most effective practices. There are also additional conservation partners that can be leveraged to ensure that producers are provided with the technical support they need in all areas of the country.

### **Farm Bill Task Force**

Earlier this year, NACD began its 2023 Farm Bill policy development process by establishing a Farm Bill Task Force. I am proud to serve as the Chair of this task force. Like NACD, the Farm Bill Task Force consists of members representing a wide range of agricultural operations, social demographics, and regions from across our country. The diversity of the Task Force will help to ensure a comprehensive review of federal conservation programs and facilitate thoughtful consideration of policy changes to strengthen their administration. Overall, our mission is to help craft a 2023 Farm Bill that supports



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locally led conservation and supports producers in voluntarily implementing the best conservation practices on their lands.

In April, NACD's Farm Bill Task Force published a set of broad policy principles to guide the development of our farm bill policy recommendations. These principles are attached as part of my written testimony. Several of these principles are fundamental to NACD's mission. For example, our first principle; "The Locally Led, Voluntary Incentive-Based Conservation Model Works," reflects one of NACD's core beliefs. The task force also felt very strongly about including a principle focused on supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion in the upcoming farm bill. This principle reinforces our belief that farm bill conservation programs should be available to and accessible by people from all backgrounds and areas of our country. As producers continue to experience significant disruptions caused by market conditions, international conflict, and climate change, the Farm Bill Task Force also felt it was important to include a principle stating that agricultural operations need to be economically viable for our conservation model to be successful. With rising uncertainty, we also need to ensure that producers are provided a proper safety net.

NACD maintains a longstanding commitment to mitigate the serious threats posed by climate change and recognizes that conservation districts will continue to play a critical role in advancing solutions. Last year, NACD established a Climate Action Task Force to identify and support policies to expand the adoption of conservation practices that bolster resilience, reduce carbon emissions, and improve the health of ecosystems across the country. The task force found that providing additional support for conservation planning and technical capacity is critical to helping districts and landowners implement these conservation practices. To further support this goal, our Farm Bill Task Force adopted a principle supporting a 2023 Farm Bill that ensures farmers, ranchers, and forest owners are provided with the resources they need to implement and maintain practices that mitigate the impacts of climate change.

These principles also support an increase in conservation funding, a commitment to the working lands conservation programs, working to address climate change, effective education of and outreach to producers, and addressing administrative barriers in farm bill conservation program application processes, among other priorities. The Farm Bill Task Force has held nearly a dozen meetings, during which members have shared their perspectives on the administration and effectiveness of USDA conservation programs. Although the task force has not yet released final 2023 Farm Bill policy recommendations, I am happy to share some of the sentiments and suggestions that have been raised during our meetings, and outline some of NACD's existing policy positions. However, I will note that the perspectives I provide today do not represent the final, official positions of NACD's Farm Bill Task Force. NACD looks forward to providing comprehensive 2023 Farm Bill policy suggestions in the coming months.

## **2023 Farm Bill Policy**

Throughout our Farm Bill Task Force discussions, members often expressed that specific carve-outs and limitations of practices within USDA conservation programs pose challenges for locally led conservation efforts. From Maine to Hawaii, and Alaska to Puerto Rico, America's vast private lands differ greatly in respects to their natural resources, production systems, and environmental conditions. This diversity requires strong local leadership and the ability to adapt conservation programs to best fit producers' farms, ranches, or forestlands. Providing maximum flexibility to enable a locally led approach and limiting nationwide carveouts will best facilitate the success of federal conservation programs in all parts of the country.



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The task force also raised concerns with “one-size-fits-all” policies within federal conservation programs. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) allows producers to select between more than 150 eligible conservation practices. This allows Midwest row crop farmers to implement cover crops or no-till, while Louisiana rice farmers can adopt practices to increase irrigation efficiency. We need producers to have access to a comprehensive suite of conservation systems and practices that can facilitate incremental improvements across distinct operations and environments.

Members of the task force also expressed a desire for Congress to examine conservation practice payment rates, and the methodology NRCS uses to determine rates across all programs. With rising prices, we need to ensure that producers are compensated fairly and that payment rates reflect the real-time costs of implementing practices over the course of multi-year contracts. This is particularly important to consider in the context of supporting beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers.

Below, I have provided additional perspectives that reflect NACD’s existing policy and some of the Farm Bill Task Force’s preliminary suggestions regarding specific USDA conservation programs. Again, it is important to note that these views do not represent NACD’s final 2023 Farm Bill policy recommendations.

### **Environmental Quality Incentives Program**

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is currently the most popular and locally adaptable working lands program in NRCS’ conservation toolbox. Considering its importance, NACD encourages this committee to carefully consider any proposed changes to the program. We firmly believe that EQIP’s success can be largely attributed to the program allowing local work groups and state technical committees to prioritize local natural resource concerns and identify the most effective practices to address them. Carve-outs within EQIP – even those targeting important conservation concerns and other issues – often make the program less flexible for producers in different parts of the country. While these carveouts do help to address important resource concerns and can produce positive results, they often produce the unintended consequence of eroding the local decision-making process led by conservation districts. NACD strongly believes that local input and expertise must inform the prioritization of resource concerns within EQIP, as opposed to mandating nationwide priorities and requirements.

In the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress authorized Conservation Incentive Contracts (CIC) within EQIP, which have great potential to expand the adoption of effective climate-smart and drought resilience practices. While this new subprogram has only been fully available to producers this year, NACD believes that Congress should provide more direction for the program in the upcoming farm bill. Overall, we believe that the simplicity and on-farm scalability of the CIC program, paired with its longer-term contracts, provide great opportunities to help producers implement meaningful conservation practices.

### **Conservation Reserve Program**

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) has been an essential tool in USDA’s conservation tool belt for decades. Now, 37 years after the program was established, we believe Congress should evaluate its role to ensure that the program properly fits into a modern-day conservation title. Following recent economic challenges and disruptions to international food production, Congressional leaders have raised valid points regarding the inclusion of prime farmland in the program. While NACD does not support removing existing CRP acres, we must ensure that the focus of the program continues to be enrolling only the most environmentally sensitive land and buffers that facilitate continued agriculture production on adjacent farmland.



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NACD also believes that the program should expand producers' ability to utilize haying and grazing, and that emergency haying and grazing should be evaluated to ensure that it meets producers' critical forage needs in a timely manner, and without harming resources. We also need to ensure that the program is as locally led as possible, and that the enrollment supports producers' overarching conservation systems. CRP has been administered at the national level since the inception of the program and has provided a growing number of nationally defined administrative and statutory options for producers. Looking forward to the 2023 Farm Bill, we need to ensure that CRP provides adequate support for each state's unique needs.

### **Conservation Stewardship Program**

NACD is a strong advocate for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and has longstanding policy supporting the program. CSP plays a critical role in maintaining and improving existing conservation systems by encouraging producers who have already adopted conservation on their lands to implement additional conservation practices that complement existing efforts and improve the efficiency of their operations as a whole.

However, our members have heard from administrators, partners, and producers across the country that the program can be extremely complicated and cumbersome from both a producer standpoint and from an administrative perspective. While the program has many positive qualities – including rewarding early adopters with payments and eligibility – producers have also expressed that the effectiveness of individual state and local offices plays an outsized role in facilitating a producer's participation in the program. Considering, it may be worthwhile for Congress to explore simplifying CSP's application process.

### **Regional Conservation Partnership Program**

NACD and our Farm Bill Task Force members recognize the significant conservation benefits provided by the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). When the RCPP was first proposed, stakeholders expressed concerns that projects could lack local involvement, and that some projects may not address the most appropriate local resource concerns. Today, a significant number of conservation districts are involved in RCPP projects as both sponsors and core partners with other organizations. The program's ability to leverage non-Federal resources, including staff and funding, has also increased conservation opportunities for our agricultural producers across the country. However, many partners have expressed that the program needs to be simplified and streamlined to reduce complexity and improve administration. One common critique of the program is that it takes too much time for accepted RCPP projects to break ground. NACD looks forward to working with partners and Congress to explore ways to expedite project implementation.

### **PL-566**

NRCS' Watershed and Flood Prevention Program, commonly referred to as PL-566, authorizes local partners to plan and install watershed protection and improvement projects in watersheds across the country. The program has become an increasingly important tool in helping rural communities adapt to weather volatility, create climate resilience, and reduce risks posed by catastrophic weather events. The additional \$50 million in mandatory annual funding provided by the 2018 Farm Bill allowed NRCS and project sponsors to better plan and administer projects in many parts of the country. Conservation districts are an important partner in the administration of this program and have sponsored most of the PL-566 projects throughout the country. NACD supports the program and looks forward to working with partners to ensure that the PL-566 receives the funding and support it requires. As thousands of dams across the country reach or exceed their designed lifespans, it is also critical that we support NRCS' Watershed Rehabilitation Program in the 2023 Farm Bill.



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## **Conclusion**

The historic conservation funding included in the IRA has provided us with an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen agricultural operations, bolster resilience, reduce harmful emissions, and improve the quality of our water, land, and air. It is critical that we work on a bipartisan basis to develop a 2023 Farm Bill that supports strong and stable conservation policy, helps our producers, and protects the environment for all Americans. Farm bill conservation programs are critical to our nation's food security, biodiversity, and the sustainability of our farms, ranches, and forests. This farm bill provides a once in a generation opportunity to strengthen conservation efforts on our working agricultural landscapes.

The historic funding in IRA also raises new administrative challenges. Overcoming these challenges will require close coordination between USDA, Congress, states, producers, and partners, including conservation districts. These new investments will also necessitate strengthening our federal and local conservation workforces. As this committee and Congress work to develop the 2023 Farm Bill, I would like to reemphasize that voluntary, locally led conservation works, and is the most viable way to support America's producers and protect our environment. NACD looks forward to working with members of this committee and all stakeholders to find ways to enhance the delivery of USDA conservation programs through the conservation title of the 2023 Farm Bill.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.



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# NACD FARM BILL PRINCIPLES

## **PRINCIPLE 1: The Locally-Led, Voluntary Incentive-Based Conservation Model Works**

NACD strongly believes in the locally-led, voluntary, incentive-based model for addressing natural resource concerns; not a one-size-fits-all regulatory scheme. Farm bill conservation programs should be locally-led and resource-driven with sufficient flexibility to direct funding to local priorities and concerns. Program priorities, rules, and policies should be tailored and adapt to the natural resource needs of states and local areas. Local conservation district boards, local working groups, and state technical committees are essential to identifying local needs, maximizing conservation benefits, and setting priorities for program delivery.

## **PRINCIPLE 2: Increase Conservation Title Funding in the Farm Bill**

Farm bill conservation programs are key to addressing natural resource concerns like water quality and quantity, soil health, clean air, climate change, habitat protection, and more. Moreover, these locally-led, voluntary, incentive based programs increase the productivity of producers' operations and strengthen food security. Unfortunately, due to a lack of resources, these programs are unable to accept the vast majority of producers who apply to participate. Increased mandatory funding for the conservation title is critical to sustaining our nation's working lands and building a resilient food supply. NACD believes these proven, science-based programs need robust new funding.

## **PRINCIPLE 3: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

Technical and financial assistance should be available to all agriculture producers, and barriers that prevent historically underserved producers from accessing these tools should be addressed. The farm bill should help historically underserved farmers, ranchers, and forest stewards access these resources by supporting effective program outreach, advanced payments, increased payment rates, regulatory and programmatic flexibilities, and other tools that incentivize and encourage participation. Outreach, program rules, and program policies for underserved communities should be prioritized and tailored to these communities.

#### **PRINCIPLE 4: Commitment to Working Lands**

Landscapes across the nation vary in their resource concerns, and farm bill conservation programs must continue to meet the specialized needs of the agricultural producers who work these lands. Given that food security is directly tied to national security, programs must provide technical and financial assistance to implement or maintain conservation practices on working lands that produce much needed food, fiber, forest products, and fuel while at the same time protecting our natural resources.

#### **PRINCIPLE 5: Technical Assistance and Conservation Planning are the Bedrock of the Conservation Model**

Technical assistance and conservation planning are critical tools and the first steps in evaluating producers' resource needs. NRCS, with assistance from partners such as conservation districts, helps agricultural producers plan and apply conservation practices on the land. They develop conservation plans; plan, design, lay out, and install conservation practices; and inspect completed practices for certification. The farm bill must provide sufficient funding for technical assistance to deliver a full complement of science-based technical services to farm bill conservation program applicants and participants.

#### **PRINCIPLE 6: Agricultural Operations Need to be Economically Viable**

In order for the locally-led, voluntary, incentive-based model to be successful, NACD believes agricultural operations need a strong safety net, robust marketing opportunities, and supportive farm policy. Without viable agricultural operations, districts will not be able to help install conservation practices on the ground. The farm bill must adapt to the agriculture production environment and work for each facet of the nation's diverse agriculture industry.

#### **PRINCIPLE 7: Climate Change**

Climate change is threatening communities around the world and governments are prioritizing the development and implementation of policies to quickly address this serious issue. U.S. farmers, ranchers, and private forest landowners are on the frontlines of climate change. More frequent storms, longer droughts, larger wildfires, and more damaging floods pose serious threats to communities across the country, hurt producer's bottom lines, and threaten our food supply.

These producers, with the help of partners such as conservation districts, are uniquely positioned to be part of the solution and in many cases have already adopted conservation practices that promote resource sustainability, resiliency, carbon sequestration, and protect ecosystems. However, the vast majority of producers who step forward to implement these practices by applying to participate in voluntary USDA conservation programs are turned away because of insufficient resources. Congress should ensure that farmers, ranchers, and forest owners are provided with the resources they need to maintain and implement practices that mitigate the impacts of climate change.

## **PRINCIPLE 8: Farm Bill Education and Outreach is Necessary**

NACD believes conservation education is a necessary tool to drive more conservation adoption. If producers are not aware of the tools available to them, then the adoption of conservation practices will suffer. This is especially the case with beginning, socially disadvantaged, and limited resource farmers. NACD supports language within each Title II program directing technical assistance to advance local conservation adoption and outreach.

## **PRINCIPLE 9: Streamline and Simplify Conservation Programs/Application Process to Reduce Administrative Burdens**

Conservation programs and the application process should both be simple and easy to understand. Administrative burdens that disincentivize program participation and impair the timely adoption of conservation practices within the appropriate agriculture production cycle should be eliminated. Requirements that complicate the conservation delivery system, create lengthy approval processes, or take time away from NRCS staff, prevent producers with the greatest resource needs from applying for conservation programs.

## **PRINCIPLE 10: Forestry**

NACD supports a forestry title that addresses the unique complexities of forestry on nonindustrial, private forest land, and the effective management of federal and state forest lands. NACD encourages an expansion of technical assistance and outreach to nonindustrial private forest owners, especially landowners not currently engaged in conservation or implementing a management plan on their lands. Land managers require support to ensure the full suite of management tools are available to improve the health and sustainability of our nation's forests and mitigate the threats posed by wildfires across the country. NACD also supports addressing issues identified by state forest resource assessments and state wildlife action plans, and supporting agroforestry through the farm bill.

## **PRINCIPLE 11: New Approaches and New Technologies**

Working lands conservation is not a static concept, but is constantly changing and adapting as new technologies are introduced and partnerships are formed. As such, the farm bill should reflect new developments in conservation, including those made in urban agriculture, drone technology, water conservation, and precision application.