

**Natural Resources Conservation Service
Statement of Jason Weller, Chief
Before the Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural
Development, Food and Drug Administration,
and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of
Representatives**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the fiscal year 2015 budget request for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). I appreciate the ongoing support of this Subcommittee for voluntary private lands conservation and the improvement of soil, water, and other natural resources on the Nation's farms, ranches, and private forests. Before providing the Subcommittee details of the proposed NRCS budget, I would like to share some examples of the benefits delivered through conservation efforts.

Many customers begin their relationship with NRCS through requests for technical assistance that result in the development of conservation plans; these conservation plans then serve as the platform for taking action. The main program supporting conservation planning, our Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) Program, is the backbone of the Agency's conservation delivery system. In fiscal year 2013, NRCS provided technical assistance to over 640,000 customers to address natural resource objectives on almost 44 million acres of farm, ranch, and forest land, an increase of nearly seven million acres over the previous fiscal year.

Mission Delivery Highlights

To give you a picture of the scope of conservation delivery through the CTA Program, allow me to highlight a few of our fiscal year 2013 accomplishments. The CTA Program assisted producers in identifying and addressing resource concerns. Included in these plans are conservation practices covering:

- 22 million acres to improve water quality;
- 17 million acres to improve grazing and forest land;
- 8 million acres to improve wildlife habitat;
- 8 million acres to improve soil quality; and,
- Over 950,000 acres to improve water use efficiency, reduce groundwater withdrawals and surface runoff, while reducing costs to the producer.

NRCS field staff work with State agencies and local partners, as well as private organizations, to deliver conservation technical and financial assistance. In fiscal year 2013, these non-Federal partners contributed an estimated \$95 million of in-kind goods and services along with over \$150 million in financial assistance to address local resource concerns that support our goal of getting conservation on the ground.

NRCS employees continue to be proactive, innovative, and responsive in working with partners and customers to fulfill our mission and build on our nearly 80-year history of helping people help the land. A few recent highlights include:

- We have enrolled nearly 60 million acres into the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). This represents an area of nearly 94,000 square miles, larger than Alabama and Maine combined. CSP is aimed at producers who are already established conservation stewards and helps them both maintain existing conservation measures as well as take their level of stewardship to the next level.
- Delivering assistance to farmers and ranchers alongside partners to restore and enhance over one million acres of habitat for the Lesser Prairie-chicken since 2010. NRCS has also worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on an innovative effort to establish regulatory predictability for farmers and ranchers who work with NRCS to develop and implement a conservation plan to improve habitat on their operations. By voluntarily implementing conservation measures with support from NRCS, producers in return can be confident that they can continue operating their businesses over the long term and not be concerned about the listing of the lesser prairie chicken as “threatened” under the Endangered Species Act.

- Demonstrating our ability to respond quickly to natural disasters by moving swiftly to provide timely help to agricultural producers and communities in the wake of natural disasters. For instance, NRCS used the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program to provide assistance to Colorado communities in the wake of damaging floods in September 2013 to mitigate serious threats to public safety and infrastructure from additional potential flooding. NRCS also provided timely help to ranchers in South Dakota and Nebraska to dispose of thousands of livestock carcasses to protect water quality and public health in the wake of last October's early blizzard. More recently, NRCS has proactively assisted farmers and ranchers impacted by severe drought in California and other Western States.
- Working through diverse partnerships, NRCS has used its Landscape Initiatives to bring focused conservation assistance to bear on critical natural resource issues. As an example, NRCS has teamed with public and private partners to halt the loss of longleaf pine forests acreage in the Southeastern U.S. Just within four years, NRCS partnered with private landowners to restore and improve almost 200,000 acres of forest lands under the agency's Longleaf Pine Initiative (LLPI). The LLPI is designed to assist private landowners by leveraging financial and technical resources with other partners and accelerating conservation actions to protect, restore, and enhance longleaf pine forests in the Southeastern U.S. At one time, longleaf pine forests covered 90 million acres; by the 1990s, only about three million acres of longleaf pine forest lands remained. Through the LLPI, NRCS and the longleaf pine partnership are reversing the century long decline in longleaf pine acres. Improving the health and extent of these forests is important because they are vital to rural economies as they grow timber for an array of products. They also provide clean water for towns and cities and are home to a large number of important "at-risk" and game species.
- Partnering with farmers and ranchers to protect and improve water quality in priority watersheds in all 50 states. Under the National Water Quality Initiative, NRCS works with state and local organizations to identify rivers and streams that are listed as "impaired" or "threatened" under the Clean Water Act and where there are opportunities for agriculture to improve water quality by reducing the impacts of nutrients, sediment, and pathogens into surface waters. In fiscal year 2013, NRCS targeted nearly \$35 million

of additional conservation assistance into 165 small watersheds. As a result of voluntary conservation measures in these watersheds, water quality has improved and State water quality agencies have de-listed two water bodies, with a projection that four additional delistings will be proposed in the next five years. Our targeted assistance is making a difference in local communities to improve water quality.

With passage of the 2014 Farm Bill, NRCS has the authorities and resources to build on these successes and accelerate the adoption of conservation measures that improve both the Nation's natural resource base and farmers and ranchers' bottom lines. We are appreciative that Congress has provided a significant investment in private lands, voluntary conservation both through the 2014 Farm Bill and the appropriations provided by this Subcommittee. We take seriously our responsibilities to be excellent stewards of these programs and financial resources.

Improving Mission Support

One of the best ways we can ensure that high-quality conservation assistance is available to farmers and ranchers is to strengthen NRCS's business operations and administrative capabilities. NRCS is undertaking a number of key management initiatives related to agency and program administration.

The Future of Administrative Services

NRCS is working to improve and streamline its administrative functions – including our budget and finance, human resources, and procurement and property functions – in order to improve customer service and be more cost effective. Our new approach will provide high-quality support that will in turn deliver improved value for the taxpayer and better service to customers.

We believe this new approach will ensure both greater consistency and accountability in our administrative service operations.

Conservation Delivery Streamlining

NRCS has initiated the Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative (CDSI) to modernize our business, deliver more assistance to agricultural producers with less overhead, and ultimately provide better customer service. The initiative has three overarching objectives:

1. Simplify conservation for clients and NRCS employees;
2. Streamline business processes; and
3. Deliver high-quality, science-based technical assistance.

We have made significant progress toward these objectives. CDSI redesigns the conservation delivery and program administration underpinnings of the agency.

During fiscal year 2013, NRCS finalized CDSI's information technology architecture and software design and began developing the web-based Client Gateway, an internet portal that will allow our customers to conduct business with NRCS 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Through the CDSI Client Gateway, farmers and ranchers will be able to review their conservation plans and program contracts, request assistance and schedule appointments with NRCS, and track financial payments – all online and without having to travel to a field office.

The Client Gateway will be the first major CDSI information technology system deployed nationally and is scheduled to be released in August 2014.

Improving Financial Processes

Since 2002, the conservation programs NRCS delivers have grown significantly in scope and funding. Correspondingly, we must ensure we have strong financial management capabilities in place to protect taxpayers' investment in private lands conservation.

Over the past several years, NRCS has made significant improvements such as enhancing the agency's internal controls over financial resources, reducing potential information technology security risks, and strengthening the reporting of its financial obligations. In FY 2013, independent auditors found that NRCS had:

- Improved financial reporting processes and controls;
- Secured information technology systems, ensuring that the infrastructure is robust and data safeguarded;
- Gained control and an agency-wide understanding of financial data and accounting principles;
- Strengthened the ability to report on the condition and location of real property assets; and,
- Successfully completed a condition assessment of over 4.3 million acres of land under conservation easements managed by NRCS.

We look to further these successes in the coming year by focusing on training for finance professionals and standardizing financial management processes and procedures. As part of our administrative transformation, NRCS is improving many of our financial management activities. In the past month, for instance, we have implemented a new approach to our accounts receivable operations. Instead of having over 50 business units tracking these accounting transactions, NRCS now has one business team managing these transactions to ensure greater efficiency, accuracy, and timeliness.

Fiscal Year 2015 Budget

The President's 2015 NRCS budget proposal builds on the 2014 Farm Bill and focuses on supporting NRCS's technical operations while delivering its new and reauthorized programs to the Nation's farmers and ranchers. The request proposes a total of \$4.3 billion for NRCS conservation programs. This level includes both discretionary funding appropriated by this Committee and funding authorized by the 2014 Farm Bill. With these significant resources, NRCS will continue to focus on providing proactive and valuable conservation assistance to hundreds of thousands of farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners across the nation. The President's Budget is a reflection of the Administration's emphasis on focusing resources on critical conservation issues. It also reflects USDA's efforts to streamline, modernize, and better deliver conservation services to our customers.

The budget requests \$814.8 million for discretionary programs, including the following:

- \$28.6 million for the decentralization of General Services Administration (GSA) Rental Payments and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) payments;
- A decrease of \$35.6 million in the funding provided for program activities that are expected to be realized through administrative savings and efficiencies;
- \$5.1 million for a pay cost increase; and,
- Appropriation language to create a new Private Lands Conservation Operations account to display both discretionary and mandatory funds used for conservation technical assistance. The account shows a total of \$1.5 billion for fiscal year 2015, comprised of \$814 million in discretionary funds and \$733 million in mandatory funding.

In addition, as part of the Administration's Climate Resilience Fund, NRCS is requesting \$100 million to enhance support for private landowners to manage landscape and watershed planning for increased resilience and risk reduction.

Mandatory programs are funded at \$3.4 billion, which represents a significant investment in conservation. This request is based on reauthorized and newly authorized programs in the Agricultural Act of 2014 (Farm Bill).

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I believe that the President's fiscal year 2015 Budget reflects our commitment to focus limited resources on critical conservation issues, and to take responsible steps to streamline and modernize our operations while maximizing opportunities to get more conservation on the ground. Conservation remains an excellent investment in the Nation's present and future. These conservation programs and activities have demonstrated success in helping farmers, ranchers, and private forest owners achieve their operational and natural resource objectives while providing benefits for their communities and the nation as a whole. I thank the Members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to appear and would be happy to respond to any questions.