

**Testimony of Jimmy Bramblett**  
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**United States Department of Agriculture**  
**before the**  
**Conservation and Forestry Subcommittee**  
**of the**  
**United States House Committee on Agriculture**  
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**Introduction**

Chairman Lucas, Ranking Member Fudge, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) watershed programs. 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. Before I dig too deep into the NRCS watershed programs and activities, I want to briefly provide some introductory comments on our structure and mission that help to augment our critical watershed activities.

NRCS provides technical and financial conservation assistance to individual, private landowners. More than 70 percent of land in the United States is held by private landowners. Decisions those landowners make every day not only have an impact on their land, but that of their neighbors, their watersheds, and ultimately the entire U.S. population.

A series of programs (i.e. Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program) have been created and revised through the farm bill process to help NRCS facilitate its unique delivery system, carried out through local field offices that provide assistance to individual landowners across the Nation. Through these programs, NRCS has made tremendous strides in helping farmers, ranchers, foresters, and other private landowners restore and enhance our Nation's natural resource base in a voluntary, incentive-based fashion. Perhaps most importantly, the decisions surrounding the implementation and prioritization of these programs and funding are made on the local level, through Local Working Groups and State Technical Committees to ensure local needs are addressed.

**Proven Success**

Our latest science-based modeling under the Natural Resources Inventory (NRI) and assessment through the Conservation Effects Assessment Program (CEAP) continues to show voluntary, incentive-based conservation is effective. In the Chesapeake Bay, voluntary adoption of conservation practices has led to reductions in erosion and sedimentation by over 60 percent, and reductions in nutrient losses, specifically of nitrogen, approached 40 percent. Through a landscape focus to our conservation investments, some 80 percent of the Bay's critical cropland acreage has had conservation measures implemented. NRCS conservation investments in the Bay have resulted in a reduction of 15.1 million tons of sediment per year, enough to fill 150,000 train cars – which would stretch from Washington, DC to Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Improvements in water quality monitoring data and aquatic habitat identified by external parties also confirms the positive impact of these investments.

This science-to-solutions approach has been demonstrated to positively affect critical wildlife species as well. Through another targeted landscape initiative, our Working Lands for Wildlife Initiative, NRCS has helped private landowners install appropriate science-based conservation practices on over 6.7 million acres. Wildlife species targeted for listing on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Threatened and Endangered Species List have recovered to the point where a pending listing decision is no longer being considered. As a result, thousands of landowners will not face increased regulatory pressures.

The sound science that NRCS brings to the table not only improves our Nation's natural resources, it also directs policy development to ensure that taxpayers receive the greatest return on their conservation investments. The aforementioned accomplishments have been realized through our Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) Program, the backbone of our Agency's conservation delivery machine. Many customers begin their relationship with NRCS through requests for technical assistance that later evolve into conservation plans that may include financial assistance through one of the farm bill programs. Our CTA Program, in combination with our organizational delivery system, affords us the opportunity to visit with landowners on their property, to analyze their land, learn their objectives, and then collaboratively formulate a plan to help them meet their objectives, comply with federal, state, and local laws and ordinances, sustaining their operation for future generations.

Landscape-scale approaches are foundational to progress toward meeting today's challenges. In addition to the Chesapeake Bay, and Working Lands for Wildlife initiatives, NRCS is also collaborating with others in critical landscapes to address water quality concerns in the western portion of Lake Erie, water quantity efficiencies in California's Central Valley and the Colorado River Basin; fisheries improvements in the Pacific Northwest; acid mine drainage remediation needs in Appalachia and the Intermountain West; and flood protection for communities in the Central Plains and the Northeast.

### **Importance of Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations**

In addition to demonstrated success in larger landscapes, NRCS's Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations Program, authorized by the Flood Protection and Flood Prevention Act of 1954, as amended (Public Law 83-566, also known as PL-566) encourages focused conservation investments in smaller landscapes (i.e. watersheds) of 250,000 acres or less. PL-566 gained support from successes of a preceding program, the Flood Control Act of 1944 (Public Law 78-534). The Flood Control Act placed a primary focus on watershed protection by preventing floodwater damage and stabilizing stream channels, tributaries, and banks to reduce erosion and sediment transport. PL-566 extended the authorities of the Flood Control Act of 1944 to capitalize on NRCS's flexibility for delivering additional conservation investments beyond those focused solely on flood damages. Through PL-566, NRCS can offer conservation practices to individual landowners and work with local communities to create vital infrastructure protecting and restoring natural resources. The value of such an integrated approach has resulted in significant positive contributions to local economies and natural resources.

Since 1947, NRCS, through our watershed programs, has worked with our watershed partners to:

- Invest in over 2,000 projects within local communities for a cumulative total investment of \$6.2 billion
- Construct 12,000 watershed project dams
- Realize \$2.2 billion in average annual benefits. Such benefits come from:
  - 610,000 – homes protected
  - 46,000 – businesses protected
  - 180,000 – farms protected
  - 61,000 – bridges protected
  - 28,000 – domestic water supplies protected
  - 48,000,000 – people benefited

(Source: NRCS Program Operations Information Tracking System database)

Notwithstanding such success, both past and current, man-made infrastructure requires continued attention. NRCS has identified a current need of almost \$7 billion to address public safety concerns for some 2,000 structures that have been identified as high hazard. A majority of NRCS watershed dams are over 50 years of age. Investing in needed upgrades today may help mitigate against more expensive future investments as these facilities continue to degrade. This investment could also result in removal of public safety concerns and help to avoid losing a portion of the aforementioned benefits.

The cyclical nature of PL-566 related funding for NRCS watershed programs introduces a set of unique challenges for program management of projects requiring a multi-year commitment on behalf of eligible project sponsors, permitting agencies, and the private sector assisting with such work. For example, planning, design, and permitting requires significant upfront non-federal investments to conduct environmental assessments, secure necessary land-rights, complete requisite engineering designs, and obtain required permits. Non-federal partners have to make critical risk management decisions related to financial commitments in the face of budget uncertainty for project completion. For the past four fiscal years, funding for this program has been:

- FY-2014 = \$260 million,
- FY-2015 = \$70 million,
- FY-2016 = \$12 million,
- FY-2017 = \$150 million

Because public safety cannot be ignored, NRCS has worked with a number of organizations to develop tools and business practices intended to mitigate against risks from limited investments in capital improvements. One example of these efforts includes collaboration with state dam safety officials to develop Emergency Action Plans (EAPs) for high hazard structures. The plans identify potential downstream hazards and which emergency personnel are to be notified in advance of undesirable conditions at any given location. These plans are supplemented by annual emergency exercise drills for added preparedness. Finally, NRCS has recently released DamWatch, which quickly alerts essential personnel electronically through email, text message,

or pager when dams are experiencing a high rainfall or earthquake event. These efforts allow for the agency's limited resources to be directed to the right place at the right time.

### **Utilizing Watershed Funding**

While these efforts to remain vigilant for public safety have proven successful to date, Congress has also recognized the need for continued conservation, and capital improvement, investments as well. Through the FY-2015 appropriations process, Congress directed NRCS to establish a long-term, multi-year plan to guide needed investments in watershed surveys and planning, and watershed operations as authorized under PL-566. While completing the plan, NRCS determined a prioritized need to invest in 220 projects. These projects would address a variety of issues, ranging from flood prevention and watershed protection, to agricultural water management, to municipal and industrial water supply. The total cost of these 220 projects is estimated to be \$1.4 billion from FY-2017 through FY-2020.

During the current fiscal year, Congress provided \$150 million for necessary expenses in accordance with PL-566 and related laws relating to activities of the Department. This \$150 million is to remain available until expended, provided that \$50 million be allocated to projects and activities that can commence promptly.

NRCS is preparing to first address a project backlog, remediation of existing structures, and then focus on new projects. Our agency has done a good job of preparing for and prioritizing project work in the face of cyclical funding realities. We use a risk index to identify a combination of physical, economic, and social factors ensuring that taxpayer investments address the highest risks first. Currently, the following are in progress: 70 watershed plans, 80 engineering design efforts, and 30 ongoing construction projects.

### **Conclusion**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee, PL-566 enables NRCS to bring all of the agency's technical, scientific, and financial resources to bear at the appropriate geographic scale – the small watersheds of 250,000 acres or less – where we can have the greatest impact on our nation's resources. This program reflects our commitment to local leadership on critical conservation issues and has a reach that touches every Committee Member's District. NRCS continually seeks to take responsible steps toward streamlining and modernizing our operations, while maximizing opportunities to get more conservation on the ground. Protection of our Nation's small watersheds is no small task and when it comes to protecting lives through proper maintenance and upkeep, it is something USDA does not take lightly. I would like to thank all of you for continuing to invest in the safety and functionality of our small watersheds, voluntary conservation, and of course for the opportunity to appear before you this morning. I would be happy to respond to any questions.