WRITTEN STATEMENT OF MATTHEW J. LOHR, CHIEF
NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY
MAY 15, 2019

Chairwoman Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to testify about the United States Department of Agriculture's conservation programs administered through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). I appreciate the ongoing support of this Subcommittee for voluntary, private lands conservation and the improvement of our soil, water, and other natural resources. I come before you today not only as the Chief of the NRCS, but also as a farmer who is well aware of the agency's conservation programs and their benefits to landowners.

NRCS was first established as the "Soil Conservation Service" in 1935, to address the dust storms that ravaged the nation's farmland. This is a history many know well, particularly those who work in the agriculture industry. These storms stripped away millions of tons of topsoil that were carried all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. The massive soil loss was recognized as a national emergency. The agency was later renamed the Natural Resources Conservation Service in 1994, to recognize its broader mission of addressing the nation's important natural resources.

For more than 80 years, NRCS and its predecessor agency have worked in close partnerships with farmers and ranchers, local and state governments, and other federal agencies to maintain healthy and productive working landscapes. Through one-on-one interaction, we work with producers and communities on a voluntary basis with the goal of "helping people help the land."

Farm Production and Conservation Mission Area and the NRCS

Under the leadership and guidance of Secretary Perdue, the Farm Production and

Conservation (FPAC) mission area was established in 2017 with a focus on domestic farmer-facing agricultural issues. Led by Undersecretary Northey, the FPAC mission area consists of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, and the Risk Management Agency. This USDA mission area serves as the focal point for the nation's farmers, ranchers, and stewards of private agricultural lands and non-industrial forest lands. Together, the agencies work to support each other as we deliver our programs to serve our customers.

As an agency within the FPAC leadership structure, the NRCS has a key focus on conservation programs and technical assistance. The agency employs skilled employees in fields such as agriculture, agronomy, engineering, biology, soil science, plant science, forestry, and hydrology. We have more than 2,000 offices across communities nationwide with more than 9,000 employees dedicated to providing information, tools, and a delivery system to assist producers with conserving, maintaining, and enhancing their natural resources for the betterment of their individual agriculture operations and their communities. NRCS works in partnership with private landowners, communities, local governments, and other stakeholders to promote the sustainable use and safeguard the nation's private working lands.

NRCS Farm Bill Conservation Programs

NRCS offers a suite of working lands and easement programs that provide assistance to agricultural producers and others for addressing their natural resource concerns. The suite of working lands programs includes the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

(ACEP). Each of these programs assists producers with implementing land stewardship practices and activities. Under the easement programs, NRCS restores, protects, and enhances wetlands and grasslands and assists third parties in protecting agricultural lands.

For FY2018, NRCS programs provided:

- $245 million in ACEP financial assistance funding used to enroll more than 100,000 acres of farmland, grasslands, and wetlands. The agency also closed more than 440 ACEP easements, protecting a collective 140,000 acres.
- More than $1.3 billion in obligations for EQIP financial assistance covering an estimated 13 million acres.
- Approximately $24.6 million in financial assistance obligated to five states through the National Air Quality Initiative to help producers meet requirements of the Clean Air Act.
- More than $11.7 million in contracts with producers obligated in three states severely affected by drought. These producers were able to use EQIP financial assistance for watering facilities, prescribed grazing, pasture and hayland planting, and planting cover crops.
- More than $83 million in financial assistance for new enrollments provided through CSP to improve more than 7.5 million acres.
- The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) incorporates features from both the working lands and easement programs in coordination with the private sector and other non-federal partners. NRCS began the 2018 enrollment activities in January 2017 by issuing the 2018 RCPP Announcement for Program Funding (APF) for $252 million, which increased the number of training/outreach efforts to the public and partners about RCPP and improved program processes. In

the 2018 APF, the agency received 164 pre-proposals that requested a total of $683 million in program funds and provided a partner contribution of $1 billion in support of those projects.

Conservation Operations

The purpose of Conservation Operations is to provide technical assistance supported by science-based technologies and tools that help people conserve, maintain, and improve the nation's natural resources. Conservation Operations has four major program components: Conservation Technical Assistance Program (CTA); Soil Survey; Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting (SSWSF); and Plant Materials Centers (PMCs). CTA has been thought of as the backbone of the agency's conservation delivery system. The CTA discretionary funding provides for the development and delivery of a major portion of the products and services associated with four of the agency's five business lines: 1) Conservation Planning and Technical Consultation; 2) Conservation Implementation; 3) Natural Resource Inventory and Assessment; and 4) Natural Resource Technology Transfer. The fifth business line, Financial Assistance, is funded through the conservation programs listed above.

FY2018 Results through the Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) Program

- In 2018, NRCS developed conservation plans covering 27.5 million acres. In accordance with those plans, conservation practices and systems designed to improve soil quality were applied to 6 million acres of cropland.
- Owners and managers of grazing and forest lands applied conservation practices to improve more than 12 million acres.
- Conservation practices were applied to more than 16.5 million acres of agricultural land, as designed by the agency, to improve off-site water quality.

- Conservation practices were applied to nearly 325,000 acres to improve irrigation water use efficiency, which reduces producer costs, groundwater withdrawals, and surface runoff.
- Conservation practices and systems were applied on more than 7 million acres to improve wildlife habitat.

Mission Delivery Highlights

NRCS employees proved adaptable, innovative, and effective in working to address continuing and emerging natural resource challenges. A few recent highlights include:

- ***Responding to Natural Disasters:*** NRCS used the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program to provide assistance for hurricane recovery in Puerto Rico and the Southeast hurricane impacted areas, wildfires in the west, floods in the Midwest.
- ***Enhanced Nutrient Management:*** NRCS provides technical and financial assistance for the development and implementation of enhanced nutrient management plans. NRCS field staff are trained to provide nutrient management planning and implementation assistance to USDA clients using nutrient movement risk assessment tools and by implementation of practices to reduce agricultural emissions.
- ***Livestock***: NRCS actively works with producers in grasslands systems (pasture and range) as well as confined operations (feedlots and dairies). Practices such as prescribed and rotational grazing, range planting, and forage and biomass planting ensure that grassland areas are maximizing productivity, sequestering carbon, and increasing resiliency to conditions such as prolonged droughts.
- ***Improving knowledge of soils, ecological sites, and land-use:*** NRCS Soil Survey, Natural Resources Inventory (NRI), and Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) Programs build the foundation of knowledge to better direct land-use decisions.

Through these efforts, we better understand land and soil characteristics, land use trends, and impacts of conservation practices on water, soil, and air quality.

Success through Initiatives

Landscape Initiatives are a way to maximize the conservation impact achieved through NRCS programs. We find win-win solutions that address conservation problems in a way that meets the needs of the agriculture sector as well as the broader public. Landscape Initiatives allow NRCS to effectively and consistently address resource concerns that occur on a scale that crosses boundaries to achieve meaningful conservation outcomes. We target resources to effectively address important conservation problems and work in partnerships to build on the strength and investments of engaged stakeholders.

Examples of NRCS initiatives include:

- ***Joint Chief's Landscape Restoration Partnership***: The U.S. Forest Service and NRCS are working together to improve the health of the forests where public forests and grasslands connect to privately owned lands. Through the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership, the agencies are restoring landscapes, reducing wildfire threats to communities and landowners, protecting water quality, and enhancing wildlife habitat.

- ***Longleaf Pine Initiative*:** Longleaf pine forests once encompassed more than 90 million acres across the Southeast, stretching from eastern Texas to southern Virginia. These forests represent some of the world's most biologically diverse ecosystems and are home to nearly 600 plant and animal species, including 29 threatened and endangered species. Over the past two centuries, development, timbering, and fire suppression reduced the ecosystem's range by almost 97 percent. Since 2010, NRCS has worked with agricultural producers and conservation partners to restore longleaf forests through this initiative.

- ***Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI):*** States within the Mississippi River Basin have developed nutrient reduction strategies to minimize the contributions of nitrogen and phosphorus to surface waters within the basin, and ultimately to the Gulf of Mexico. MRBI uses a small watershed approach to support the States' nutrient reduction strategies. Avoiding, controlling, and trapping practices are implemented to reduce the amount of nutrients flowing from agricultural land into waterways and to improve the resiliency of working lands.
- ***National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI):*** Now in its eighth year, the National Water Quality Initiative is a partnership among NRCS, state water quality agencies and the Environmental Protection Agency to identify and address impaired water bodies through voluntary conservation. NRCS provides targeted funding for financial and technical assistance in small watersheds most in need, and where farmers can use conservation practices to make a difference. Beginning this year, the scope of NWQI has been expanded to include the protection of drinking water.
- ***Western Lake Erie Basin:*** This initiative expands conservation and financial assistance opportunities available to farmers in the Western Lake Erie Basin who want to take additional steps to improve water quality.
- ***Working Lands for Wildlife:*** Through Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW), NRCS uses a win-win approach to systematically target conservation efforts to improve agricultural and forest productivity, which enhances wildlife habitat on working landscapes. Target species are used as barometers for success because their habitat needs are representative of healthy, functioning ecosystems where conservation efforts benefit a much broader suite of species.

Conclusion

As we look forward to the work that is before us, our goal is clear: to continue "helping people help

the land." This goal remains consistent each day as we serve our customers, whether in the field or in Washington, D.C. In the short time that I have been with the agency, I can assure you that the workforce is operating full steam ahead as we carry out our objectives and work to implement our respective provisions of the Farm Bill as quickly as possible. Madame Chairwoman this concludes my statement. I will be happy to answer your questions and those of the other Subcommittee Members.