Testimony of
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Dewey County Conservation District
Taloga, Oklahoma

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MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

Good Morning, my name is Jimmy Emmons, I want to thank the Committee, Chairman Lucas and Ranking Member Fudge for the opportunity to speak to you today. It is an honor and an opportunity I do not take lightly.

I am a farmer and rancher from Dewey County in Western Oklahoma where my wife Ginger and I farm 2,000 acres of cropland and run cattle on 7,000 acres of rangeland. The Emmons home place has been in our family since 1926. I'm speaking to you this morning because I serve on the Dewey County Conservation District board.

We are local sponsors of two USDA Watershed Program projects (Barnitz Creek and Quartermaster Creek Watersheds) and the 22 project dams and the multiple land treatment practices associated with these watershed projects. I live and farm in and around these projects. Six of the 22 flood control dams in Dewey County are considered high hazard dams with the threat of loss of life if the dams were to fail. The Dewey County Conservation District with the assistance of NRCS has currently rehabilitated four of these dams. (Barnitz Creek Watershed Dams No. 1,5,11 and 14).

There are more than 600 of these flood protection dams within a 75 mile radius of my farm. I am also deeply involved and committed to soil and water conservation issues at the local, state and national levels. I am passionate about stewardship and conservation as it relates to our soil and water resources. I also currently serve as President of the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts.

Watershed Rehabilitation Program

Watershed Dam Rehabilitation is a critical component of the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program. NRCS and its local sponsors are responsible for over 11,800 flood control structures nationwide. This flood control and conservation related infrastructure affects 2,000 watersheds and they represent nearly one third of all dams ever built by the federal government. Every year this system saves an estimated $2 billion through flood damage prevention. Another way to view these benefits is by the number of people and communities who benefit directly from watershed projects. The existing projects are protecting over 610,000 homes, 46,000 businesses, 180,000 farms and ranches, 61,000 bridges, and 28,000 domestic water supplies. As a result, over 48 million people across the United States benefit from the Watershed Program every year.

Many dams today are in a far different setting than when they were constructed. Population has increased; residential and commercial development has occurred upstream and downstream from the dams; land uses have changed; sediment pools have filled; and concrete and metal components have deteriorated. Many of these dams do not meet current State dam safety regulations that have been enacted and revised with more stringent requirements than when the dams were built. In addition, many of these structures built by NRCS had a design life of only 50 years. Since most of this construction occurred from the 1940's to the early 1970's, many of these dams are now past their design life and are in need of rehabilitation.

Chances are as you travel in my area whether on county roads, State Highways or Interstate 40 some portion of the road you travel receives flood protection from an upstream USDA Small Watershed Program Flood Control dam. The local economy that is driven in part by grain, cattle, oil and natural gas relies daily on this protection. The roads and bridges that carry our children to and from school are protected. In several cases the school itself along with other key elements of community are protected. Just as it is across much of the nation, the water that these flood control lakes collect is also essential to our economy and quality of life in Western Oklahoma.

Many of our most productive farms and our healthiest soils are located in these protected watersheds. There are many less obvious benefits that come in the form of the prosperity and opportunity made possible by these projects. The partnership between USDA and local sponsors that brought us this protection is extremely important in keeping it in place. 2018 will be a milestone year for the Watershed Program when more than 50% of the 11,840 dams engineered and constructed by SCS/NRCS will have exceeded their original evaluated life.

Nine out of 10 Oklahomans live or work within 20 miles of a Watershed Program dam. These folks may be unaware of the Watershed Program, but if we let this investment in protection slip away it won't take long for them to be affected. I'm sure a similar statement could be made for our neighboring states. The Watershed Program needs Congressional attention if current and future Americans are to enjoy the same safety, protection, benefits, and productivity the Watershed Program has given us.

Rehabilitation is necessary to ensure dams continue to protect lives, businesses and homes. Failure to provide rehabilitation of these dams could result in dam breaches which would have catastrophic consequences. The flooding crisis and potential failure of the Oroville Dam in California this past February illustrates the need for infrastructure operation, maintenance and repair of dams. While Oroville Dam is not an NRCS dam its does show what could happen when dams are not properly repaired or maintained.

In 2000, Mr. Lucas led the development of rehabilitation legislation that ensured the Nation's investment in the watershed program had the opportunity to continue into the future. Under the Dam Rehabilitation Program, dams are selected for rehabilitation through a competitive grant process and federal are funds are limited to 65% of a project's cost. This commitment from state and local partners is necessary to ensure that sponsors are fully committed to a project. This legislation gave us the pathway and the procedure for reinvestment.

As the significantly invested local sponsors of watershed projects, state and local partners have felt that we have suffered from an inadequately funded federal partner for much of the past decade. In my opinion, Congress has taken a step in the right direction by wisely investing through the 2014 Farm Bill and the 2017 Omnibus Appropriations bill. Local sponsors and state watershed program partners have responded with O&M dollars, rehabilitation matching funds, technical and financial assistance. I cannot over emphasize the importance of Congress and the USDA-NRCS as full partners in the watershed program. We hope these recent investments are a signal to USDA about the importance of these programs.

It would be easy for me to spend my time before you this morning talking about the rich history of the Watershed Program in my part of the world because Western Oklahoma and the Watershed Program go way back. I could recount the story my grandfather shared about a small drainage ditch across our farm that in 1934 became a gash in the landscape 40 feet wide and 25 feet deep literally overnight. Folks in the area still talk about the deadly Hammon Flood that killed 17 Oklahomans. That flood, that piece of our history, is just one of the reasons that Oklahoma is now covered with 2,107 Watershed Program Dams and countless conservation practices. The USDA Small Watershed Program changed the face of Western Oklahoma and when it did…it also changed our future.

When I became a grandfather it sure sharpened my thinking about the future. My four and a half year old grandson, a budding farmer and rancher in his own right, is my motivation to talk to you about the present and the future as it relates to the benefits the Watershed Program continues to bring to our Nation. The program represents an estimated 15 billion dollar investment in conservation infrastructure. As responsible citizens and local project sponsors, it is essential that we are good stewards of this previous investment. This requires a robust federal, state and local partnership that brings administrative, technical and financial assistance to bear on matters relating to this infrastructure created by the Watershed Program. From routine operation,

maintenance and repairs to full-fledged dam rehabilitation each of the partners has an important and specific role.

In closing, where I live there's something we call "Farm Sense". Farm sense is a good thing. Some folks have it, some don't. A day or two on the farm quickly reveals who has a good measure of farm sense. A person with farm sense wouldn't invest $750,000 in a new tractor and tillage equipment and then refuse to grease the equipment every time it goes to the field, fail to change belts, hoses, filters and fluids regularly or leave it parked outside where the tires can dry rot in the sun and the mice and packrats can devour the wiring. Knowing they depend on that equipment and have lots of capital tied up in it they would take care of it and do everything they could to hold its value and protect the investment. A $15 billion investment in conservation infrastructure is no different. Farm sense tells us its time for the partnership to reinvest.

As the Subcommittee moves toward the next Farm Bill and the 2018 budget bill comes into focus I encourage you to support and provide adequate funding for new watershed projects and for the rehabilitation of aging watershed dams. Thank you.

Flood Control Dams in Dewey County

Oklahoma has 2,107 flood control dams in 61 counties. These dams have been constructed through local watershed project sponsors with financial and technical assistance from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) authorized through Public Law 78-534 (Washita River Watershed) and Public Law 83-566 Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program. Twenty-two of these dams are in Dewey County.

The primary purpose of flood control dams is to reduce flooding. The secondary benefits of the dams address a myriad of public needs such as water supply, water quality, soil health, water management, wetland enhancement, fish and wildlife habitat, and recreation. Flood control dams improve public safety, contribute to a healthy economy and support a strong nation.

Watershed projects also include the installation of natural resource conservation practices such as terraces, waterways, ponds, gully repair, and pasture and rangeland plantings. These conservation practices improve water quality and soil health and reduce sedimentation into the lakes formed by the dams.

Operation and Maintenance of Dams

The annual operation and maintenance of dams is the responsibility of project sponsors (local units of governments such as conservation districts).

Operation is the administrative and management activities necessary to ensure the dams function as designed and remain safe. Operation work includes annual dam inspections and inspection immediately following heavy rains.

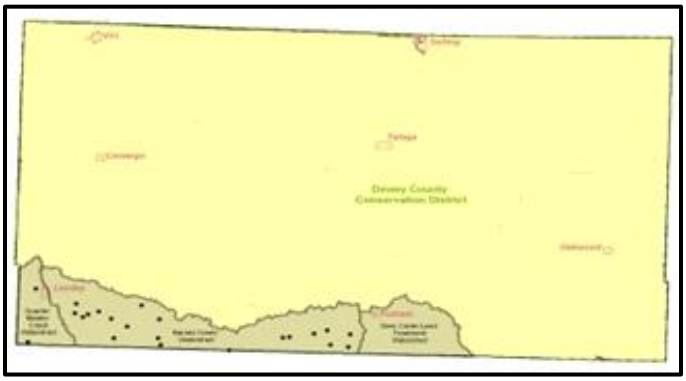
Maintenance work includes removing trees from dams and spillways, repairing erosion damage, repairing damage to the spillway and dams after heavy rainstorms, and keeping the principal spillway inlet towers cleared of debris.

Operation and Maintenance Needs

Operation and maintenance of dams can be expensive and labor intensive. $4 million is needed to operate and maintain all 2,107 flood control each year. Only through continued investment in operation and maintenance will future generations enjoy the promise of safety these dams offer.

Annual Benefits

The 2,107 flood control dams and conservation practices in watershed projects provide $91 million in average annual benefits. The table on the back of this page lists the annual benefits provided by watershed projects in Dewey County.



Rehabilitation and Dam Safety

As dams age some will need rehabilitation to remain safe and protect the people that live or work downstream.

At the conclusion of 2016, 260 flood control dams in the state have been classified as high hazard. Of these 115 do not meet current state or federal safety criteria. Approximately $300 million is needed to upgrade the 115 dams.

Six of the 22 dams in Dewey County are classified as high hazard and have the potential for loss of life if they should fail.

The number of high hazard dams will continue to increase as long as residential and business development is allowed downstream of the dam in the breach flood area.

NRCS can provide 65 percent of the rehabilitation costs and technical assistance to rehabilitate high hazard dams. Local project sponsors provide 35 percent of the cost and obtain any needed additional land rights.

As of December 2016 thirty-five dams in the state have been rehabilitated and 18 others are in various stages of planning, design or construction.

Average Annual Watershed Benefits (Entire Watershed)

Watershed Name	Dams in Watershed	Dams in Dewey County	*Monetary Benefits	Farms/ Ranches Benefited	Bridges Benefited	Wetlands Enhanced/Created (acres)	Reduced Sedimentation (tons of soil)
Barnitz Creek	76	20	$716,340	225	25	1,734	520,184
Quartermaster Creek	36	2	$666,760	134	19	743	154,228
Total	**112**	**22**	**$1,383,100**	**359**	**44**	**2,477**	**674,412**

*Monetary benefits include reduction in flood damages to crops, roads, bridges, fences, etc. and may include other benefits such as irrigation, municipal and industrial water supply and recreation.

Conservation Districts are a primary sponsor of most watershed projects in Oklahoma. Listed below is the conservation district located in Dewey County that has watershed projects and other conservation agencies that can be contacted for more information about the watershed program.

Dewey County Conservation District
306 S. Broadway
Taloga, OK
deweyccd@conservation.ok.gov

The Oklahoma Conservation Commission is the lead state agency for upstream flood control programs and provides assistance and guidance to conservation districts.

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is the federal agency that administers the watershed program and provides technical and financial assistance to the local project sponsors.

Oklahoma Conservation Commission
2800 N. Lincoln Blvd. Suite 160
Oklahoma City, OK 73105-4210
(405) 521-2384
Web Page: http://www.ok.gov/conservation
Twitter: https://twitter.com/conservation_ok
Facebook: https://facebook.com/conservationok

Natural Resources Conservation Service
100 USDA, Suite 206
Stillwater, OK. 74074-2655
(405) 742-1204

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OKLAHOMA CONSERVATION COMMISSION