

**Statement by
Jason Weller
Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service
Before the Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry
Committee on Agriculture,
U.S. House of Representatives
June 11, 2015**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss implementation of the conservation programs authorized by the Agricultural Act of 2014 (2014 Farm Bill). The continuing support of this Subcommittee for voluntary private lands conservation is making a critical difference. Farm Bill conservation programs provide America's farmers, ranchers and others with technical and financial assistance to enable conservation of natural resources while protecting and improving agricultural operations. Seventy percent of the American landscape is privately owned, making private lands conservation critical to the health of our nation's environment and ability to ensure our working lands are productive.

Farm Bill Implementation

The 2014 Farm Bill was signed into law on February 7, 2014. The new Farm Bill delivered a strong conservation title that makes robust investments to conserve and support America's working lands and consolidates and streamlines programs to improve efficiency and encourage participation. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has the privilege of administering many of these programs, including the: Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP), and Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP).

Enacted in early 2014, the 2014 Farm Bill initially allowed NRCS to continue to serve customers using existing program rules. As a result, FY 2014 service proceeded seamlessly and NRCS enrolled approximately 20 million acres in voluntary conservation programs and obligated nearly \$3 billion. At the same time, NRCS moved swiftly to draft rules, program guidance, and policies to support full implementation of the new and modified programs. The following provides an overview of 2014 Farm Bill implementation activity:

- Since the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) started in 2009, the program has become a major force for agricultural conservation, and it continues to inspire action to enhance America's natural resources. In FY 2014 NRCS enrolled about 9.6 million acres and now CSP enrollment exceeds 60 million acres, about the size of Iowa and Indiana, combined.

The CSP Interim Final Rule was published in November 2014, reflecting statutory changes to the acreage enrollment cap, stewardship levels, contract modifications, and

CRP and certain easement land eligibility. Public comments were accepted through January 20, 2015. NRCS received nearly 500 individual comments; most related to access to the program, minimum payments, contract rates, and stewardship thresholds. We are working to address the public comments and expect to publish the final rule in Summer 2015.

- Through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) producers addressed their conservation needs on over 11 million acres in FY 2014; over \$928 million was obligated in nearly 40,000 contracts to support this conservation work.

The EQIP Interim Final Rule was published in December 2014, reflecting the statutory changes to incorporate the purposes of the former Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program and address the payment limitation and waiver authority, advance payments for historically underserved producers, and preferences to certain veteran farmers and ranchers. Public comments were accepted through February 10, 2015. NRCS received over 330 individual comments; most related to the irrigation history, confined animal feeding operations, EQIP plan of operations, program administration, payment rates and limitations, application selection, and funding levels for wildlife practices. The final rule is targeted for completion in early Fall 2015.

- Conservation Innovation Grants – In September 2014, NRCS awarded \$15.7 million in CIG to 47 organizations that will help develop and demonstrate cutting-edge ideas to accelerate innovation in private lands conservation. The FY 2015 Funding Announcement was released in January 2015 offering up to \$20 million. Project selection is targeted for late Summer 2015.
- Landowners participating in the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) enrolled an estimated 143,833 acres of farmland, grasslands, and wetlands through 485 new ACEP easements (88,892 acres in Ag Land Easements, and 54,941 acres in Wetland Reserve Easements) with the \$328 million in FY 2014 funding. These easements will help preserve important agricultural lands and agricultural viability while they create and protect habitat for migratory birds and other important species.

The ACEP Interim Final Rule was published in February 2015, reflecting statutory changes to consolidate the purposes of FRPP, GRP (easement component only) and WRP and address the certification process for ACEP-ALE; authority to subordinate, modify, or terminate an easement; grasslands of special environmental significance; and the agricultural land easement plan. Public comments were accepted through May 28, 2015. NRCS is evaluating public comments presently and developing recommendations for the final rule.

- The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) created a new platform for engaging partners and leveraging the federal conservation investment. The first RCPP announcement of over \$370 million in program funding was rolled out on May 27, 2014. Following a rigorous two-stage competitive process, 115 high-impact projects across all 50 states and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico were selected in January 2015. Partners

brought forward an estimated \$400 million in their own contributions for a total investment of nearly \$800 million that will go to improve the nation's water quality and supply, support wildlife habitat and enhance agricultural production and the environment. The FY 2016 funding announcement was released in May 2015, making available up to \$235 million for new agreements. This round of RCPP will have an even greater emphasis on partnerships, leveraging, and diversity to achieve innovative solutions to locally identified issues.

- The Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentives Program (VPA-HIP) assists States and Tribes to increase public access to private lands for wildlife-dependent recreation, such as hunting, fishing and hiking. In FY 2014, NRCS made \$20 million available for VPA-HIP awards and was able to fund 10 of the 30 proposals received. In February 2015, NRCS announced the availability of \$20 million for VPA-HIP projects. Project selection is targeted for Summer 2015.
- The Mitigation Banking program provision will be implemented directly through an announcement of program funding. The implementation approach is being finalized with an expected announcement in Summer 2015.

In addition to the major rule changes discussed above, minor statutory changes to Technical Service Providers; State Technical Committees; Healthy Forests Reserve Program; Small Watershed Program; Regional Equity; Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentives Program, and Agricultural Management Assistance were published in a consolidated Interim Final Rule in August 2014. The few public comments received were addressed in the final rule published in April 2015.

Farm Bill Conservation Programs Deliver

With the tools and resources provided through the 2014 Farm Bill, USDA and its partners are positioned to help agriculture make a major difference in the lives of farming and ranching families and the quality of natural resources. While these programs work well independently, they are a family of tools that are providing comprehensive landscape-scale solutions and benefits. Below are a few highlights of how Farm Bill conservation programs are achieving natural resource results in balance with productive agriculture.

The right conservation practices put in the right places are an effective means to achieve cleaner more abundant water for farmers, ranchers, communities, and wildlife. Using Farm Bill programs through the Mississippi River Basin Initiative (MRBI), NRCS has invested significantly in high-priority water quality projects in the Basin delivering on the ground benefits. For example, as a result of MRBI conservation efforts, Arkansas was able to remove two stream segments from the State's Clean Water Act 303(d) impairment designation. Working with partners and using Farm Bill tools, farmers, ranchers and other landowners have helped remove nine more streams from Oklahoma's 303(d) list of impaired streams in 2014. Oklahoma ranks second in the nation for EPA-recognized water quality success stories. And in the region overlying the Ogallala Aquifer in the Central Plains, Farm Bill programs have allowed NRCS to partner with farmers to install water conservation practices that conserved an estimated 1.5 million acre-feet of groundwater over 4 years, or enough water to provide annual water needs for about 3.3 million households.

If the widespread drought has shown us anything, it is the value of crop resilience through good soil health management systems. Using Farm Bill programs, NRCS has been accelerating adoption of soil health practices and helping producers build resilience in their production systems. Soil health management systems help increase organic matter, reduce soil compaction, improve nutrient storage and cycle and increase water infiltration and water availability to plants. These benefits lead to greater resiliency to adverse conditions but also boost yields. For example, a national survey of farmers documented an increase in yields of nine percent for corn following cover crops and 10 percent for soybeans after cover crops.

The StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity initiative targets Farm Bill programs in persistent poverty communities to assist farmers and ranchers achieve economic and environmental objectives. Since 2010, NRCS and other USDA agencies have focused assistance and outreach in over 880 counties, parishes, boroughs, and census areas, and in Indian reservations in 22 states. In FY 2014 alone, NRCS invested \$286 million in partnership with producers in high-poverty communities to help their operations be more economically successful and environmentally sustainable. For example, NRCS in partnership with Tuskegee University has invested about \$1 million to help nearly 40 producers in Alabama Strike Force counties to incorporate innovative practices on their farming operations, including retro-fits for current irrigation systems, new wells, solar powered wells, and drip irrigation systems that will make their operations more productive and sustainable.

Farm Bill programs and conservation efforts of farmers and ranchers have had major positive and measurable impacts on wildlife species. For example, the August 2014 decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to not list the arctic fluvial grayling under the Endangered Species Act was a direct result of voluntary conservation work done by 30 landowners on more than 150,000 acres. The February 2015 decision to delist the Oregon chub is another success story, with Farm Bill programs helping producers improve their operations at the same time delivering benefits to fish habitat. In April 2015, USFWS announced its decision to withdraw the proposal to list the Bi-State population of greater sage-grouse in California and Nevada as threatened under the ESA, based on the success of voluntary conservation efforts to recover this species and its habitat.

Voluntary conservation efforts are improving air quality in California's San Joaquin Valley. In April, EPA published a revision to California's State Implementation Plan that for the first time credits producer actions in clearing the air. Farmers and ranchers, with assistance from NRCS, have replaced aging diesel engines used for agricultural purposes with new, lower exhaust-emitting engines. Since 2008, NRCS has co-invested more than \$100 million in this effort with producers and offset the equivalent of emissions from one million cars. The agriculture sector achieved its air quality improvement target three years ahead of the schedule mandated by State regulations – the only regulated sector to do so. Farm Bill Programs are demonstrating how the voluntary actions by producers can translate to quantified air quality improvements in California's San Joaquin Valley.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee let me conclude by saying that our nation's

farmers and ranchers have a tremendous track record of success in conserving our nation's soil and water resources. Through the work of this subcommittee in providing the programs of the 2014 Farm Bill, NRCS has the tools to continue assisting these stewards to achieve their production and operational goals in balance with natural resource objectives that benefit rural communities and the nation as a whole. Voluntary conservation is working, and the programs and authorities provided through The Agricultural Act of 2014 are providing the programs and services that help strengthen agriculture, the environment, and rural economies. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today and update the Committee on our Agency's efforts to effectively implement the 2014 Farm Bill. I would be happy to respond to any questions at this time.