

**Natural Resources Conservation Service  
Statement of Dave White, Chief  
Before the Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,  
Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies**

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Administration's 2013 Budget proposal for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

NRCS staff and partners had a record year in conservation program delivery in 2011. Over 190,000 customers received assistance with conservation planning and implementation. More than 27 million acres were enrolled in conservation programs administered by NRCS. We stepped up landscape-scale conservation initiatives that are delivering results in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, the Mississippi River Basin, and the range of the Greater Sage Grouse. New science helped us to focus work in areas where we will generate 3-to-5 times the natural resource benefits of more general approaches and improve our conservation tools in the coming years. As we continue this important conservation work in 2012, we are looking to 2013 and opportunities to sustain conservation gains in concert with a responsible budget.

**The President's 2013 Budget – Discretionary Funding**

The President's 2013 Budget was developed considering all of NRCS's programs and operations and prioritizing limited resources. It reflects a number of difficult decisions made to support the President's goals of reducing the budget deficit and improving program delivery.

## **Conservation Operations**

Conservation Operations (CO) provides technical assistance supported by science-based technology and tools that help people conserve, maintain, and improve natural resources. The major program components are Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA), Soil Survey, Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting (SSWSF), and Plant Materials Centers (PMC).

The President's 2013 Budget for CO proposes funding of \$827.5 million – \$728.8 million for CTA, \$80 million for Soil Survey, \$9.3 million for SSWF, and \$9.4 million for PMCs. The 2013 Budget also proposes collection of fees to cover some of the costs of planning assistance through CTA. In 2013, estimated collections from this proposal are \$22 million, which could reduce appropriation needs in future years.

## **Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations Program**

The Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations (WFPO) program authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to assist State and local governments and Tribes in planning and installing watershed projects. The 2013 Budget does not include funding for the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations Program, or Watershed Operations (P.L.78-534) and Small Watersheds (P.L.83-566).

## **Watershed Rehabilitation Program**

The Watershed Rehabilitation Program brings aging dams into compliance with applicable standards or decommissions the dams so that they do not pose a threat to life and property. NRCS assistance for the planning, design, and implementation of rehabilitation projects may include upgrading or removing the dams. Operation and maintenance of dams built under

WFPO is the responsibility of the project sponsors. In 2011, 15 dams were rehabilitated and 14 rehabilitation projects are currently under construction. There were 654 ongoing assessments of the condition of high hazard dams and rehabilitation alternatives for those dams that do not meet Federal safety standards. In 2012, \$15 million was appropriated for the Watershed Rehabilitation Program. The 2013 Budget does not include funding for this program.

### **Water Bank Program**

The Water Bank program objectives are to conserve water, wetlands, waterfowl habitat, and recreational and environmental benefits for the Nation. In 2012, \$7,500,000 was appropriated to the Water Bank Program, to remain available until expended. The 2013 Budget does not propose funding for this program.

### **Resource Conservation and Development**

The Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Program encourages and improves the capability of State and local units of government and non-profit organizations in rural areas to plan, develop, and implement programs for resource conservation and development. Following the 2011 termination of NRCS assistance for this program, NRCS closed all of its 375 offices; 140 employees opted for early retirement or voluntary separation, and all remaining RC&D employees received reasonable reassignment offers.

### **Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 – Mandatory Funding**

The President's 2013 Budget includes \$3.2 billion in funding for NRCS-administered Farm Bill programs and an additional \$108 million for Conservation Reserve Program technical assistance.

## **Wetlands Reserve Program**

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) provides technical and financial assistance to restore, protect and enhance valuable wetland ecosystems, including associated habitats such as uplands, riparian areas, and forestlands. The goal of WRP is to achieve the greatest wetlands functions and values on every acre enrolled in the program through easements and long-term agreements on eligible farmlands and 30-year contracts on Tribal lands.

During 2011, NRCS enrolled a total of 200,186 acres in WRP in 1,139 projects. Of these, the majority were easements (139,904 acres in 708 permanent easements and 59,230 acres in 30-year easements). Also in 2011, nearly 132,000 acres of wetlands associated with prior year WRP easements and contracts were created, restored, or enhanced.

The 2013 Budget includes \$224 million in mandatory funding for financial and technical assistance for the Wetlands Reserve Program to support monitoring, restoration and maintenance of easements and contracts enrolled before September 30, 2012. Authority to enroll new acreage expires at the end of 2012 and is not assumed to extend in the 2013 Budget.

## **Environmental Quality Incentives Program**

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers to help them address environmental challenges and maintain or improve the condition of soil, water, air, and other natural resources.

In 2011, EQIP financial assistance obligations by States reached over \$871 million in 38,352 contracts covering an estimated 13.2 million acres. These funds also supported projects in initiatives such as air quality, on-farm energy audits, migratory bird habitat, and the Mississippi River Basin Initiative, and projects that emphasize environmental protection and agricultural production as compatible goals. For example, NRCS provided \$34 million through the national Air Quality Initiative to help producers in nine states treat 168,000 acres in designated non-attainment areas to meet requirements of the Clean Air Act.

The 2013 Budget includes \$1.403 billion in mandatory funding for financial and technical assistance for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. The 2013 Budget also includes a legislative proposal to reduce EQIP funding by \$100 million per year from currently authorized levels, or about \$1 billion in budget authority over 10 years.

### **Agricultural Water Enhancement Program**

The Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP) promotes improved ground and surface water conservation and water quality by leveraging the Federal investment with services and resources of other eligible partners. AWEP addresses serious surface and ground water shortages as well as water quality concerns in many agricultural areas.

In 2011, NRCS obligated \$59 million in 1,300 contracts to implement conservation practices on nearly 250,000 acres of agricultural land. Partners exceeded the Federal investment by providing nearly \$90 million in technical and financial assistance. NRCS approved eight new project areas in 2011, and continued support for 91 project areas approved since 2009.

The 2013 Budget includes \$60 million in mandatory funding for financial and technical assistance for the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program.

### **Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program**

The Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) promotes protection and improvement of wildlife habitat on private agricultural and nonindustrial private forest land, and Tribal land. By prioritizing specific geographic areas, WHIP is able to target financial and technical assistance funds to habitats to benefit specific declining wildlife species such as the Greater Sage Grouse.

In 2011, NRCS obligated almost \$61 million in financial assistance to enroll almost 850,000 acres in WHIP. Forty-six of these contracts at over \$4.4 million are with American Indian and Alaskan Natives participants to benefit habitat for culturally important species.

The 2013 Budget includes \$73 million in mandatory funding for financial and technical assistance for the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program.

### **Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program**

The Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) provides assistance to keep productive farm and ranch lands in agricultural uses. Agricultural lands enrolled in FRPP are protected from conversion to non-agricultural uses, and remain productive and sustainable sources of food, feed, and fiber for the Nation. FRPP also supports the President's *America's Great Outdoors*

initiative by preserving the natural landscape features and encouraging the continued agricultural uses of the lands.

In 2011, approximately 82 new FRPP cooperative agreements were entered into with partners.

NRCS and its partners enrolled 301 parcels with an associated 212,668 acres through cooperative agreements.

The 2013 Budget includes \$200 million in mandatory funding for financial and technical assistance for the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program.

### **Conservation Security Program**

The Conservation Security Program provided financial and technical assistance to producers for the conservation, protection, and improvement of natural resources on tribal and private working lands. Under the 2008 Farm Bill, NRCS is not authorized to enter into new Conservation Security Program contracts but continues to make payments to producers with contracts from prior years. The 2013 Budget includes \$183 million in mandatory funding for the Conservation Security Program to provide program payments under prior contracts.

### **Conservation Stewardship Program**

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) provides technical and financial assistance to help producers go beyond existing conservation and deliver new environmental benefits in an environmentally beneficial and cost-effective manner. CSP is available through a continuous sign-up process, with announced cut-off dates for ranking and funding applications. Applications

are evaluated relative to other applications addressing similar priority resource concerns to facilitate a competitive ranking process among applications that face similar resource challenges.

In 2011, NRCS obligated more than \$508 million in financial assistance funding, of which \$190 million was for new CSP contracts. In total, CSP contracts cover over 37 million acres, which will lead to more productive working lands, improved water quality and energy efficiency.

The 2013 Budget includes \$972 million in mandatory funding for financial and technical assistance for the Conservation Stewardship Program to enroll 12 million acres and support the existing enrollment.

### **Grassland Reserve Program**

The Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) helps landowners and operators restore and protect rangeland, pastureland, and other grassland while maintaining the land's suitability for grazing. Participants limit future development and cropping uses of the land, and conduct common grazing practices and operations related to the production of forage and seeding. During 2011, 202,362 acres were enrolled in the program with about \$70 million in financial assistance funding. Approximately 60 percent of funds went to easements and 40 percent to rental contracts.

The 2013 Budget includes \$5 million in mandatory funding for financial and technical assistance for the Grassland Reserve Program for acreage enrolled before September 30, 2012. The program's authority to enroll new acres expires at the end of 2012.



### **Agricultural Management Assistance**

The Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) program provides financial assistance to agricultural producers to adopt conservation measures that improve water management, water quality, and control erosion. In 2011, approximately \$6 million was obligated in 275 contracts covering 7,869 acres. The 2013 Budget includes \$2.5 million in mandatory funding for the Agricultural Management Assistance program.

### **Chesapeake Bay Watershed Program**

The Chesapeake Bay Watershed Program (CBWP) helps agricultural producers to improve water quality and quantity, and restore, enhance, and preserve soil, air, and related resources in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. NRCS implements CBWP through the various conservation programs authorized by subtitle D, Title XII of the Food Security Act of 1985. In 2011, NRCS approved more than 1,700 contracts for more than \$60 million in financial assistance to treat an estimated 243,544 acres of high priority agricultural land.

The 2013 Budget includes \$50 million in mandatory funding for financial and technical assistance for the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Program.

### **Healthy Forests Reserve Program**

The Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) assists landowners in restoring, enhancing, and protecting forest ecosystems to: 1) promote the recovery of threatened and endangered species;

2) improve biodiversity; and 3) enhance carbon sequestration. During 2011, NRCS received 215 HFRP applications. Of these applications, 43 were enrolled, encompassing 22,995 acres.

Authority for mandatory funding for this program expires at the end of 2012. The 2013 Budget does not include funding for the Healthy Forests Reserve Program.

### **Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program**

The Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) provides grants to state and tribal governments to encourage private landowners to make their land available for wildlife-dependent recreation, including hunting or fishing under a program administered by State or tribal governments. Authority for mandatory funding for VPA-HIP expires at the end of 2012.

The President's Budget requests \$5 million in funding for NRCS to administer VPA-HIP.

### **Conclusion**

The President's 2013 Budget proposes funding to continue the Nation's important conservation work. It reflects difficult choices to prioritize limited resources that will allow NRCS to fulfill its mission for America's farmers, ranchers, and forestland managers.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss the 2013 Budget for NRCS. I am happy to answer any questions from the Subcommittee members.