

Testimony of Mr. Earl Garber
President-Elect, National Association of Conservation Districts
Senate Agriculture Committee Hearing
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Good morning, Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Roberts, and Members of the Committee. On behalf of the National Association of Conservation Districts and our 3,000 member conservation districts across the country, I thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

As you know, I currently serve as President Elect of NACD. I own a rice, soybean and hay farming operation in Basile, Louisiana and work as a crop consultant for G&H Seed Co. I have served as a board member of the Acadia Soil and Water Conservation District in Southwest Louisiana since 1981. I know firsthand the value – and the necessity – of strong conservation on the land.

It's extremely important that we protect conservation funding – because, simply put, conservation works. Conservation is a tool that is available to *every* producer, and it helps producers avoid regulations. Producers already are faced with the challenge of doing more with less, and implementation of programs is further challenged with additional decreases in funding. While we understand the current economic climate, we must also acknowledge the investment of putting conservation on the ground. Technical assistance is critical in ensuring Farm Bill programs are implemented with accountability. Technical assistance dollars will be more important than ever to ensure we have adequate capabilities to get conservation delivered. We are in a situation where additional cuts to conservation programs, above the proposed levels submitted to the Super Committee last fall, will put the very viability of these programs at risk. Congress needs to determine whether conservation and protection of natural resources today is more important than the escalated costs of repair in the future.

In light of the budget situation, thank you for recognizing the value of drafting a common sense framework to submit to the Super Committee. You demonstrated strong bipartisan, bicameral support for locally-led conservation programs that streamlined and increased

efficiency wherever possible. For this reason, NACD supports consolidation of programs as an important part of the Conservation Title. Individual, private landowners will benefit from streamlining when programs are easier to access and manage. As we look at consolidation, we must be careful not to lose any of the critical program functions that help complete the cycle of resource needs on the land, for example, forestry practices in the EQIP program. As a small, private forest owner myself, I know that if I didn't have this assistance, a portion of my farm would lack the management it needs. Another example of consolidation includes farm bill easement programs. Easements retain working lands which over time include the operation and maintenance components that fee simple acquisitions do not. We must assure that the easement programs are maintained to provide for protection of our wetlands, highly erodible soils, and farmland. The easement programs provide a buffer effect to land use change which occur on many fronts of our society as the population grows and more demand is put on our natural resources. Thus, easements effectively secure the natural resource benefits, being protected by conservation practices, to achieve economic and environmental benefits for future generations.

In addition to supporting streamlining in the Farm Bill, we also support streamlining in the field. For instance, Chief White recently initiated USDA field services that increase the use of technology and ultimately result in a more complete planning process and delivery system. His Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative allows producers and private landowners to use fewer dollars, while ensuring greater accountability and scientific, merit-based systems for the federal investment. We look forward to working with NRCS to spend more time in the field implementing conservation.

Conservation programs provide a strong risk management tool -- mitigating risk for producers, landowners, homeowners and anyone who buys insurance. Locally-led, incentive-based conservation practices are the key to protecting our natural resources across the diversity of the landscape. Every acre counts. There are a variety of different conservation programs which work together to reach across the entire spectrum of resource needs. This past year, we have seen severe weather events. From intense drought to extreme rainfall, conservation allows us to protect our most precious resources that provide us with food, shelter, recreation, natural beauty, and economic benefit. Depending on location, the management of resources varies,

different regions have different needs. NACD understands and promotes the importance of locally-led resource management to address the diversity of these needs across the Nation.

In conclusion, these farm bill programs show a track record of success. Individual, private landowners' implementation of conservation practices remains critical to putting conservation on the ground. The availability of funding allows these practices to continue. By leveraging private resources, including money and time, we can get more conservation for the government investment. As a producer, I have used many of these programs on my own operation and know first-hand the tremendous value and return on investment they bring to the producer. I have had the opportunity to participate in the EQIP, CSP, and Land Treatment Watershed programs to implement conservation practices, addressing local resource conservation concerns on my farm. This concludes my testimony. Thank you, again, for allowing me the opportunity to be here today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.