

National Association of Conservation Districts
and
Georgia Association of Conservation District Supervisors

Testimony
of
Jim Ham
On behalf of the
Georgia Association of Conservation District Supervisors
And the
National Association of Conservation Districts
Before the
Senate Agriculture Committee
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Good Morning. I am Jim Ham, a middle Georgia farmer, a county commissioner in Monroe County and president of the Georgia Association of Conservation District Supervisors. I am also a charter member of the Two Rivers RC&D Council and serve on the Executive Board.

Across the United States, nearly 3000 conservation districts -- almost one in every county -- are helping local people to conserve land, water, forests, wildlife and related natural resources. We share a single mission: to coordinate assistance from all available sources -- public and private, local, state and federal -- in an effort to develop locally driven solutions to natural resource concerns. More than 17,000 volunteers serve in elected or appointed positions on conservation districts' governing boards. Working directly with more than 2.3 million cooperating land managers nationwide, their efforts touch more than 778 million acres of private land.

The conservation title has grown over the last decade to now represent significant funding and meaningful technical assistance to farmers and ranchers across the country. This commitment allows farmers like me to not only protect my soil and water but also be a better neighbor and citizen. The 2002 Farm Bill has also resulted in new participants coming to the conservation "table" and has created new partnerships, both at the local and national level.

I farm in an area that is changing. Our friends from the city are moving out to enjoy our open spaces, fresh air and wildlife. While most do want to live in the country, many are not ready to be neighbors with a chicken farmer. Applying nutrients on my farm land can be a...well a not so pleasant activity some times. My neighbors understand this but are also pleased that I use the latest technologies and best management practices to complete the application process as well other activities such as spraying.

I have an EQIP conservation contract that has allowed me to cross fence pastures to better utilize my grass, fence out ponds and streams to protect water quality, install stream crossings, and renovate heavy use areas to prevent soil erosion and manage animal waste. Row crop producers in Georgia have benefited from such practices as conservation tillage, pest management, and irrigation management plans under the EQIP program, resulting in better

management of land and other resources.

The districts believe that every acre of conservation counts, including row crop, range, forest or livestock operations, and the growing rural/urban interface. To meet the needs of all areas of agriculture, the committee should consider the impacts of the current regulations that restrict participation in conservation programs. The 2002 bill included new restrictions on participation that restricts applications based on adjusted gross income, regardless of their conservation needs.

According to the 2002 Census, while the number of farms in Georgia is about the same as 1997, the number of acres in farming has decreased by about 500,000 acres. Changes in land use such as fragmentation due to new friends from the city moving into the country adds pressure to farms and the services that conservation districts and the NRCS provide them through conservation programs. These new country residents do not have the same history with the land that I and other farmers do, and may require more assistance to understand the proper conservation practices and best management of their land.

The 2002 Farm Bill authorized increases in conservation funding that by 2007 will be double those of the last decade. About two-thirds of the new funds authorized in 2002 target programs emphasizing conservation on working lands that are still used for crop production and grazing, as opposed to conservation spending prior to 2002, in which the bulk of conservation spending was directed toward land retirement programs. We believe that a producer must have an economically viable farming operation to be able to make an investment in conservation practices on their operation. We appreciate the increasing awareness that there needs to be a balance of programs to address both lands that are in active production of food, feed and fiber as well as lands that are retired and protected. Landowners need and use both, and we hope Congress will continue to recognize that no one program meets the needs of all farmers and ranchers.

In many ways, conservation programs and policies help keep me on the farm. While I get other support from the commodity programs, the conservation tools, both technical and financial, have helped me and many others avoid regulation and allow me to continue farming in an ever changing environment.

We are discussing the need for updates or additions to EQIP and the CSP programs, as well as all of the programs in the conservation title. We hope the committee will look into increasing access to EQIP and other programs, evaluate whether consolidation of the numerous conservation programs makes sense, or if streamlining the application processes provides for smoother, more efficient program participation on the ground. We do, however, hope that any streamlining does not result in taking funding away from conservation programs. The next farm bill must balance programs focusing on land retirement with working lands programs, such as EQIP and CSP. EQIP is very popular in Georgia, and in fiscal year 2004, we funded 1175 contracts; in 2005 1281 contracts and in 2006 1084 contracts - all totaling \$42,705,562. For these three years there were 3619 unfunded contracts. As you can see in Georgia with the EQIP program alone there is high demand, and we only see that demand for conservation assistance increasing.

EQIP funding in Georgia has been put to use supporting manure management, water quality and water quantity issues. Our growing poultry industry has utilized EQIP cost-share dollars to create stackhouses to ensure that manure does not create a water quality problem in the local community. Without these cost share dollars, these facilities would not have been built, resulting in inadequate storage. There is also a growing need in Georgia for funding to address forestry concerns. Due to previous conservation programs, there is an over-abundance of timber that needs to be thinned in order to keep the land productive and in order to improve wildlife habitat. EQIP dollars have been used in Georgia to meet some of these needs, but the needs outweigh the assistance currently available.

The CSP program that resulted from the 2002 Farm Bill is a little different than we expected. We hoped for a program that was easy for producers across the country to understand, resulting in graduated support for increasing adoption of conservation practices. Unfortunately, the result was an extremely targeted program with complex implementation. The program is too complicated - both with general understanding of program design and application complexity by the producer, coupled with limited watershed-based availability and lack of additional assistance on the ground needed to implement the program. The watersheds selected in Georgia were very small with limited agricultural production, which has resulted in 37 contracts in 2004, 111 contracts in 2005 and 58 contracts in 2006 all totaling \$62,202,358. For these three years there were just 31 unfunded contracts.

The CSP self assessment tool is a step in the right direction to further improve this program. Due to the complexity of the CSP application process, USDA should place emphasis on educating producers about the recordkeeping and information required prior to the application process beginning. With the correct information in hand, landowners will be better able to respond and use the CSP Program.

While CSP has been well received in Georgia, EQIP continues to reach more landowners. This is perhaps due to EQIP being an established program and having the flexibility to meet the needs of landowners.

Conservation financial assistance provided through the Farm Bill programs is an important component in achieving agricultural sustainability both economically and environmentally. But in addition to talking about EQIP and CSP, I must stress the importance of technical assistance. Technical assistance allows NRCS staff at the local level to work with districts, landowners and state and local agencies to address local resource concerns. Technical assistance is utilized to work with landowners on conservation plans from design, layout, implementation, maintenance, helping landowners understand proper management of highly erodible land and necessary compliance for participation in farm bill commodity programs.

Funding for technical assistance allows NRCS employees to meet face to face with landowners, visit their operation and help them design strategies to the resources needs of their individual agricultural operation. Through these discussions, a comprehensive conservation plan can be developed and then financial assistance programs if needed such as EQIP, CSP or any other program in the conservation "tool box" can be utilized to help meet the goals of the conservation plans. Technical assistance must continue to be a fundamental element of the next farm bill; both as a stand alone program, and built into the delivery of every individual conservation program.

We all have a great opportunity in the 2007 farm bill to build on the good programs and policies that were advanced in 2002. Georgia conservation districts and those across the country want to be a constructive and active player in the development of the 2007 farm bill. We want to work with the committee to make sure the next conservation title provides meaningful assistance to producers and results that taxpayers can also appreciate and enjoy. In so doing, we believe that programs should balance efforts to achieve soil, water, air, plant and animal/wildlife goals, necessary to address the nation's agricultural natural resource needs.