

Statement of Pearlle S. Reed
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U.S. Department of Agriculture
before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural
Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. For twenty-nine years I have served with the Soil Conservation Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. During the course of those years, I have had the opportunity to work with and meet many outstanding conservationists -- people who care greatly for the land and for the farmers and ranchers that they serve. That is why I am here today. I want to represent the conservationists who go to work everyday to try and help our farms become more productive, to assist our communities be stronger and more sustainable, and to also protect and improve our land, water, and other valuable natural resources.

Our people in the field are what NRCS is all about. They are some of the most capable and dedicated employees you will find anywhere in the government. However, these employees need our assistance, if they are going to be successful at what they do. They need us to help them spend time out on farms and ranches with the farmers, rather than performing administrative tasks in the office. They need us to provide the technical and financial resources that they can use to help farmers; they need us to tell their story,

so that folks here in Washington will understand our successes -- but more importantly, what their needs are.

I want to begin with the topic of accountability. It is something that members of this Subcommittee have expressed very strongly to us. We got the message. As a result, during the course of FY'98 we put several new accountability measures in place. One aspect is the Total Cost and Accountability System (TCAS). It measures, on a daily basis, the number of hours that employees spend on various functions, including conservation planning, watershed work, or assistance in Farm Bill program implementation. A second aspect of our accountability system is the Performance and Results and Management System (PRMS). This system focuses on measuring the results of our work and capturing accomplishments. Although PRMS is just coming on-line, we believe it will be a useful tool in meeting the objectives of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA).

A third component is the Workload Analysis. At the state and field office levels, data were collected about the expertise of our employees in geographic areas of the country, how programs were utilized to achieve objectives, and what our future projected workload would be. The Workload Analysis aids NRCS strategic planning, in that we can set targets and match objectives to realistic resources and staffing. Initial results suggest that we need more help in the field to assist with program implementation and meet the needs of farmers. As Chief, I have taken many steps to minimize administrative tasks,

and help conservationists spend time in the field. My “workload reduction team” has recommended and implemented many steps, such as eliminating unneeded forms and reports, that cost valuable staff time. For example, in Yolo County, California, commonly requested soil survey data is now available on the Internet and has reduced requests to the office; in New Mexico, many forms have been automated and streamlined, reducing staff workload; and in Texas, elimination of the Field Office Computing System (FOCS) has made more time available for field staff to meet with customers. We are pleased with the results of workload reduction, but regardless of the steps we take here in the leadership, we need sufficient resources to apply toward meeting the incoming workload.

We know the workload is great. For nearly 30 years, I have seen the people of NRCS eagerly and consistently go above and beyond the call of duty. We see every citizen who walks in an NRCS office as our customer. Some have criticized NRCS for this. I believe it is something to be proud of. NRCS staff are part of the communities they serve and the most impressive achievements of our agency, are where our field conservationist help people to help themselves. It is through the relationship that our field staff develop with individual farmers, or through the role they play in helping communities, that they have developed trust and a reputation for providing quality advice time and time again. Some call it “locally-led” or a “bottom-up” approach, but our work really comes down to “interactive assistance”. NRCS staff interact with customers: we want to know what the farmer’s objectives are; we gain an understanding for how the

operation is run; and we work with them to apply conservation practices that will achieve their goals. We also strive to achieve national goals of clean water, erosion control, nutrient management, among many others. We do all of this based upon sound science and utilization of the best technology available. It is an interactive process and it may take weeks, months or even years to put all of the pieces together and it is also very difficult to quantify.

Demands for NRCS' services continue to grow at an accelerating pace. In recent years, the need and demand for Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) has increased as resource problems have been identified, including those associated with nonpoint source pollution, misapplication of fertilizers and pesticides, and land use changes. NRCS has responded by developing new technology and conservation standards to address emerging challenges such as nutrient management, wetland destruction, global climate change, the aging watershed infrastructure, and soil erosion. While this has increased public and local awareness of natural resource concerns, it has also broadened the agency's customer base to include a growing list of customers. We estimate that the operators of livestock operations will require over 350,000 nutrient management plans in the coming decade for the estimated 450,000 AFOs addressed by the Clean Water Action Plan. In addition, almost 11,000 small watershed dams constructed under the authority of P.L. 534, and P.L. 566 will reach the end of their design life in this coming decade. These watershed structures represent the safety, economic viability, and economic sustenance of thousands of communities. In defense terms, we often speak of "military readiness".

What I would ask us all to do today, is think about the “readiness” of our conservation delivery system.

The people of NRCS have always given 100 percent of their abilities and will continue to do so. The 1985 Farm Bill asked them to concentrate more efforts on highly erodible lands, and they met that responsibility. The 1990 Farm Bill asked them to work harder for America’s wetlands, and they also met that responsibility. The 1996 Farm Bill asked them to work harder for wildlife habitat, farmland protection, animal agriculture and a host of other activities. They are working hard to meet that responsibility, but they need our help.

I want to suggest, in closing, that the reason that so much is being asked of NRCS is that so much is being asked of our nation’s farmers and ranchers. Everyday, they put their boots on and go out to bring us the lowest cost, safest, and most abundant food supply on this planet. At the same time, we ask them to be the caretakers of our water, guardians of our air, and the stewards of the soil. It is up to us to give them a hand.