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THE SENATE COMMITTEE
ON APPROPRIATIONS**

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

**Statement of Thomas A. Weber, Acting Chief, before the
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development and
Related Agencies.**

Mr. Chairman, it gives me great pride to represent the Natural Resources Conservation Service--NRCS--before the Committee, today. For over two decades I have had the pleasure of serving among what I would consider to be the most committed and invaluable group of public servants and conservation professionals in this nation. It has been said so many times that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. I feel this is especially true of NRCS. It has value far beyond the conservation programs, cost share dollars, or even the staff that comprise it. It is the unique combination of technical skills, partnerships, dedication to public service and commitment to working with people on the land that are the keys to its value. Therefore, rather than focusing on talk about numbers and budgets, I want to highlight leadership, partnerships, the accomplishments of our employees, and the challenges ahead.

NRCS has had the fortune of being led by a tremendous cadre of leaders who had a vision of natural resources for the future and the creativity and courage to see them through. Primary among them was Hugh Hammond Bennett who asserted that the solution to

soil erosion was to tailor conservation practices to fit the individual situation and needs of the landowner. In recent history, the leadership of Paul Johnson crystallized in our minds the importance of conservation on private lands and how the success of voluntary conservation is the key to ensuring the productivity and health of the land for future generations.

But meeting the enormous task of performing conservation work on the nation's private lands takes far more than the work of a single individual or even a federal agency. It is instead through a partnership of a federal agency, local conservation districts, state conservation agencies and others, and the hard work of local people that we are able to accomplish all we do. We refer to it as the Conservation Partnership. It is a unique and effective delivery system, it is geared to meeting the needs of local people, and it has literally changed the landscape of the nation.

Last year brought about many new responsibilities, many challenges, and of course, many changes. I am proud to say that the dedicated employees of NRCS and our conservation partners collectively applied their knowledge and abilities to start putting Farm Bill programs to work for our nation's land and people. But more than simply implementing these program, NRCS staff have strived to utilize these tools in creative ways to meet the resource needs of our customers. Just as Hugh Hammond Bennett originally asserted, we are using the programs to meet the greater needs of the

land and landowner. Likewise, more than ever, we have strengthened the locally led approach to conservation.

Last year, our employees shared responsibility for the largest Conservation Reserve Program sign-up in the Department's history. They also helped to officially launch the National Conservation Buffer Initiative, which will protect water quality, wildlife habitat, and provide many more environmental benefits and implemented the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) which has become one of the most popular conservation programs that is available. And more than its popularity among our customers, our field conservationists are finding it to be the useful tool to help landowners meet their conservation needs.

Thanks to your support and our employees efforts, landowners will share with people in their watersheds a future that has healthier land and cleaner water and air. We've seen tremendous progress where the conservation partnership have engaged communities in resource concerns and priority setting. Our employees and partners have also worked to improve outreach to underserved customers. That work is an example of what can happen when good people set out to achieve a common goal. We've made progress, but we need to accelerate our work with underserved individuals, communities, and groups and ensure that our legacy of conservation and stewardship includes everyone.

Nineteen ninety-eight is shaping up to be an exciting year in natural resource conservation. There are several programs being implemented -- Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) and Conservation Farm Option (CFO). There are a lot of issues of concern to be addressed, including animal agriculture and the environment, water quality, wetlands, natural disasters, air quality, and farmland protection -- to name just a few. We in NRCS are also putting a strong emphasis on continuing to enhance our technical capability. Our employees need to have the best technical skills available to provide quality service. As a result, we're providing additional training to employees and exploring new technology. It is important that as we focus upon new program activities and adapt to changes in producers needs, that we continue to address the needs of our employees. The goal is to make sure on all accounts that our staff have the best training and resources they need to serve our customers.

One of the goals of our agency-wide reorganization was to place a higher share of staff resources in the field to maintain and enhance service to our customers. This goal continues to be a high priority. We've recently given direction to agency leaders at all levels to maintain or, if possible, increase the number of field employees as positions become vacant elsewhere in the agency. We're also making every effort to reduce the administrative workload of our field employees to increase the time they devote to getting conservation on the land working directly with landowners.

Throughout the agency, our focus is to maximize conservation benefits with the funds that are available. Therefore, the FY 1999 budget proposes to increase support for the vital technical assistance that our field staff provide. You will note that the budget contains a renamed account entitled America's Private Lands Conservation. The funds for this program represent the support that is needed to get conservation activities on the ground. And while we have strived to give our field staff the tools they need to assist landowners, we also anticipate increased returns through cooperative efforts with federal and non-federal partners as well. Our participation in the President's Clean Water Initiative will help to improve the health of watersheds, restore wetlands, and help communities meet water quality goals.

The FY 1999 budget proposal for NRCS will help to ensure protection and improvement of our natural resources for future generations. As the Under Secretary outlined, we have made much progress and the success of our many conservation programs is a testament to the commitment of so many landowners across the nation who want to help themselves. It is also proof that the heritage left behind by our predecessors can become a legacy of land stewardship if we are willing to take on the task. I believe that we can take on this task, and I am confident that the employees of NRCS and its conservation partners can meet the challenges for 1998 and beyond.