

STATEMENT OF TOM WEBER, DEPUTY CHIEF FOR PROGRAMS
NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
BEFORE THE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER RESOURCES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

February 14, 2002

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee to discuss water resource activities of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). In my remarks today, I would like to describe our ongoing work in this area, and discuss our budget and priorities for FY '03. The President's budget sets clear priorities for this nation's security in response to the extraordinary events of September 11. These priorities have an impact on this year's budget.

The NRCS watershed protection and flood prevention program provides site-specific technical expertise, watershed planning and financial assistance for watershed plan implementation. It provides a process to solve local natural resource problems, primarily flood damage mitigation and some water quality improvements, and avoid that otherwise might be

necessary regulation; empowers local people as decision-makers; builds partnerships; and requires or encourages local and State funding contributions and ownership.

FY 2003 Budget Proposal

In the climate of changing budget priorities, emphasis has been placed in focusing assistance on the areas and activities of greatest need and, consequently, on reducing or eliminating under-performing or ineffective programs. Because of lower economic returns and environmental benefits, the President's budget for FY 2003 closes out USDA's flood mitigation projects, which struggle to achieve the required cost-benefit ratio.

The President's budget addresses the most critical needs on projects of greatest importance to protecting human life after natural disasters. The budget request for watershed funding through NRCS is \$111 million. This funding will address the most critical needs through the Emergency Watershed Protection Program. This account funds the actual implementation of projects that help people by relieving imminent hazards to life and property caused by floods, fires, windstorms, and other natural disasters, which have been approved and authorized under NRCS guidance. This funding addresses the most serious watershed problems facing communities left vulnerable after natural disasters. Our agency works directly with the local and state governments to repair and protect land and structures damaged during the event.

Emergency Watershed Protection funding has only been provided in recent years as part of emergency appropriations, an average of about \$110 million annually over the past 10

years. The President's budget has included Emergency Watershed Protection funding as part of the administration's budget.

The Emergency Watershed Protection Program also provides authority to help reduce future funding needs for flood damaged lands by purchasing floodplain easements. Under the floodplain easement option, a landowner voluntarily offers to sell a permanent conservation easement that provides for full restoration and to enhance the floodplain's natural functions and values. The landowners retain the right to control public access as well using the undeveloped land for recreational uses. NRCS has purchased nearly 1700 floodplain easements encompassing nearly a quarter million acres since 1996.

Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Operations

The Small Watershed Program was authorized by P.L. 83-566 and P.L. 78-534. The Small Watershed Program has implemented projects in thousands of communities across the country, improving natural resources, preventing floods, and increasing economic development.

The Small Watershed Program is founded upon the principle of locally driven conservation. Local governments and other sponsors initiate projects with the help of NRCS and local conservation districts. The watershed surveys and planning program develops plans initiated by local steering committees. Also, local sponsors secure necessary land rights, secure federal, state and local permits, pay a share of construction costs, and assume all responsibility for operations maintenance. Flood mitigation projects are 100% federally funded for construction costs. NRCS assists in every step, but primarily serves as a technical advisor,

bringing science and technology, and knowledge about the resource base and ecosystem of the watershed, as well as a source of funding to develop these projects. The community drives the process.

In FY 2002, the program provided \$106 million in funding. The funding request for FY 2003 does not include funding for this program.

Watershed Rehabilitation

The funding request for FY 2003 does not include funding for the watershed rehabilitation program to fund the costs of rehabilitating aging dams. P. L. 106-472 authorizes the Secretary to assist local communities with rehabilitation of dams and in FY 2002, \$10 million in funding is being used for rehabilitation on 42 projects in sixteen states.

The first and most important priority is to address the emergency needs of communities that have been victims of a natural disaster. We will continue to work with local communities to prioritize and evaluate our activities so that the financial and technical resources that are available can be placed where they are needed most.

I thank the Subcommittee and would be happy to take any questions that you might have.

