

STATEMENT OF TOM WEBER, ASSOCIATE CHIEF
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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 27, 2003

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 2004. The President's FY 2004 budget sets priorities that have an impact on this year's budget.

The NRCS watershed protection and flood prevention program provides site-specific technical expertise for watershed planning and financial assistance for watershed plan implementation. It provides a process to solve local natural resource problems, including flood damage mitigation, water quality improvement, rural water supply, water conservation, erosion control, and fish and wildlife habitat improvement. These projects empower local people as

decision-makers, build partnerships; and require local and State funding contributions and ownership.

FY 2004 Budget Proposal

In the climate of changing budget priorities, emphasis is being placed on assisting the areas and activities of greatest needs. The President's budget for FY 2004 proposes to focus new planning efforts on the most critical water quality concerns to effectively utilize federal and state programs that target non-point source control efforts. It also recognizes that natural disasters are difficult to predict, but assumes funding made available for these programs could be used to address high priority disaster needs if necessary.

The President's total budget request for watershed funding through NRCS is \$55 million. This funding will address the most critical needs through Watershed Surveys and Planning, Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Operations, and Watershed Rehabilitation.

Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Operations

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

The Watershed Program is founded upon the principle of locally driven, watershed scale conservation. Local governments and other sponsors initiate projects with the help of NRCS and local conservation districts. The Watershed Surveys and Planning component 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 responsibility for operation and maintenance. Flood mitigation projects are 100% federally funded for construction costs. NRCS assists in every step of planning and implementation of watershed projects, 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.

In FY 2003, the Administration requested to eliminate the Watershed Surveys and Planning Program. The funding request for FY 2004 requests \$5 million for Watershed Surveys and Planning to help communities complete 25 plans or make progress on 37 plans already in progress.

The Administration's budget proposal requests \$40 million in funding for the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program to focus on developing and funding non-structural flood prevention measures. The 2003 budget proposed to eliminate funding for this purpose.

The President's FY 2004 budget reduces the Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP) funding by \$110 million from the 2003 budget request. Natural disasters are difficult to predict and emergency assistance will be evaluated and addressed as disasters arise.

Watershed Rehabilitation

The President's budget funding request for FY 2004 includes funding for Watershed Rehabilitation activities involved with rehabilitation of aging dams. P. L. 83-566 was amended in 2000 to authorize the Secretary to assist local communities with rehabilitation of their dams. These projects involve dams with the highest risk for loss of life and property. To address rehabilitation of the 20 highest priority projects in FY 2004, the Administration has requested \$10 million.

In summary, it is our priority to address the needs of communities for the most critical water resource concerns to effectively utilize federal and state programs and to meet immediate needs from catastrophic natural events. 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.