

STATEMENT OF THOMAS A. WEBER, DEPUTY CHIEF FOR PROGRAMS  
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BEFORE THE HOUSE AGRICULTURE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GENERAL FARM COMMODITIES, RESOURCE  
CONSERVATION AND CREDIT

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear today and discuss the “Upper Mississippi River Basin Conservation Act of 2000.”

I am Tom Weber, Deputy Chief for Programs, of the United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA/NRCS). NRCS shares concerns with the health of the Upper Mississippi River Basin. The Basin is not only a defining geographic feature for much of the Midwest region, but also has vast natural resource impacts for much of the North American continent. The Upper Mississippi River and its tributaries provide direct water supplies to more than 24 million people and is a vital part of our nation's transportation infrastructure, facilitating the shipment of agricultural products and other goods. The loss of nutrients and sediment in the basin has an enormous cost to the region. I want to commend Congressman Ron Kind for elevating this important legislation, and taking leadership on the issues.

NRCS shares the commitment to the conservation and protection of our Nation's natural resources, especially our soil and water resources. Reducing sediment and nutrients, along with other pollutants, that may originate as non-point source pollution on agricultural lands and woodlands is a primary goal of NRCS. For nearly seven decades, NRCS has served as the lead USDA agency for natural resource conservation activities on private working lands, working hand-in-hand with America's farmers and ranchers in addressing their natural resource concerns. Improving our soil resources and cleaning our surface and ground water resources has been a long and challenging, but sustained, effort since the Dust Bowl era of the 1930's. Through NRCS conservation programs we have made tremendous improvements in the health of our soil and the quality of our water. However, there is still more that must be done.

The Administration strongly supports many of the provisions of H.R. 4013; we especially appreciate the emphasis within the bill on expanding several of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) conservation programs. The conservation of our nation's natural resources is of great importance to USDA. H.R. 4013 would expand and increase funding for several USDA conservation programs. As you know, the President's proposed budget for fiscal year 2001 also requests similar increases in USDA conservation program areas in support of the Administration's Farm Safety Net Initiative. The Administration has strong reservations concerning Title IV of H.R. 4013, which we will discuss later.

For example, the bill proposes that the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which provides technical, educational, and financial assistance to eligible farmers and ranchers to address soil, water, and related natural resource concerns, receive an increase from a fiscal year (FY) 2000 funding level of \$174 million to \$300 million in fiscal years 2001 and 2002. The legislation proposes a funding increase for the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) of \$25 million. In addition, the Conservation Reserve Program and the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), which are acreage, not dollar driven programs, would receive acreage cap increases.

Although the increases proposed in the Upper Mississippi River Basin Conservation Act of 2000 are substantial and would help the overall conservation effort, it is important to note that many of these increases do not meet those in the President's 2001 budget proposal. For example, H.R. 4013 proposes an increase in the WRP acreage cap of 100,000 acres, increasing the cap from 975,000 acres to 1,075,000 acres. The President's request increases the program enrollment capabilities to 250,000 acres per year from FY 2001 to FY 2010. The President's budget also proposes to increase EQIP by \$25 million more per year than the H.R. 4013 proposal and provides \$50 million annually for WHIP. Finally, the President's FY 2001 budget proposes a new \$600 million Conservation Security Program to provide annual payments to farmers and ranchers who voluntarily implemented various conservation practices, many of which will benefit water quality.

H.R. 4013 calls for the creation of an advisory body established by the Secretary of Agriculture. The Advisory Council on the Upper Mississippi River Stewardship Initiative would consist of 15 members appointed by the Governors of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, Illinois and Missouri. These appointees would represent State, local, and private interests. This council would be responsible for information sharing and coordinating the efforts of the involved Federal, State, local, and private interests.

USDA's involvement in similar partnerships has proven to be successful and we believe that such an advisory body would assist in resource conservation efforts in the basin as well as in providing long-term economic sustainability for the region. Through a locally led process we have found that the best solutions to natural resource problems truly are those that are developed locally by the landowners and land users themselves.

The Department has two areas of concern with the legislation. First, the legislation requires the Secretary to establish a grant program, in conjunction with non-Federal efforts, to demonstrate new best management practices.

Second, no new funding has been requested for this activity, any financial support for them might have to be redirected from ongoing Natural Resources Conservation Service programs at a time when the agency is already experiencing significant budgetary and workload pressures. Achieving the objectives of H.R. 4013 should not come at the expense of other ongoing activities. An alternative solution would be to authorize EQIP spending at \$325 million, the level requested in the President's Budget, which would

allow NRCS to provide additional educational assistance through activities such as demonstration projects. Education assistance is an authorized use of EQIP funds, and we do not feel a new program is necessary.

The Administration opposes Title IV, which would prohibit the release or disclosure of information and data, collected pursuant to Federal conservation programs, to the public or any governmental agency outside the Department of Agriculture. Passage of Title IV would make coordinated implementation of the wetlands provision of the Clean Water Act and the Swampbuster provisions of the Food Security Act extremely difficult. For example, under Title IV, USDA would no longer be allowed to share its wetland delineations on agricultural lands with EPA or the Corps of Engineers, ending the coordinated implementation of these statutes and implementation of administrative reforms that provide a single point of contact to farmers. In addition, Title IV would undercut Federal and State programs designed to control the discharge of pollutants and the degradation of wetlands by routinely depriving government agencies and the public of critical information concerning wetlands delineations, land use, cropping histories, and prior crop land.

In summary, the bill contains concepts that the Administration supports and could significantly benefit the economic and environmental health of the region. We look forward to working with members of this subcommittee to address some of the concerns we have raised as well as working toward implementation of the Administration's FY 2001 budget target for the programs that would assist the Upper Mississippi River Basin.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to present this testimony. I will be pleased to answer any questions you and other members of the Subcommittee might have.