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SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, WILDLIFE, AND WATER

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Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear today and present views on behalf of the United States Department of Agriculture, regarding water supply issues in our nation. I am Tom Weber, Deputy Chief for Programs at the Department's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The mission of NRCS is to provide leadership in a partnership effort to help people conserve, improve, and sustain our natural resources and environment. Our agency was created in response to the Dust Bowl days of the 1930's, helping farmers and ranchers manage and conserve water resources has remained among our principal activities.

As most Members on this Committee are already aware , America's farmers are among the most productive in the world. They feed our population with the highest quality, safest, and most affordable food anywhere, while producing food for others all around the world. Today, farmers face new challenges, many associated with the use of natural

resources. These include the soil health, air quality, and wildlife habitat issues. But around the country, farmers and ranchers face ever increasing concern for the quantity and quality of water.

Persistent shortages of water and prolonged abnormal moisture deficiencies adversely and permanently affect vegetation, animals, and people. Recently, Secretary of Agriculture, Ann Veneman released, *Food and Agriculture Policy: Taking Stock for the New Century*. This document is our long-term view of the Nation's agriculture and food system, with emphasis on the conservation of natural resources. We propose that our policies not only build upon past gains in resource conservation, but also must prepare us to respond to emerging challenges such as the inextricable link between water supply and agriculture. Without question, the future of our farms and water supplies are interdependent and are exemplified by the following facts:

- Nationwide, agriculture accounts for nearly 80 percent of all water consumption.
- Three-quarters of all cropland in the Western United States is irrigated.
- The 16 percent of harvested cropland that is irrigated accounts for nearly half of the value of all crops sold.
- Nationwide, nearly 100 percent of all orchard sales and more than 80 percent of the sales of vegetables and potatoes are produced on irrigated cropland.

Throughout the country, demand for water is increasing, with added pressures from municipal use and urbanization. I would add that prior to coming to Washington, D.C. I

served with NRCS in California and also as State Conservationist in New Mexico. From my work in these states, I can attest that the experiences of the West on water supply issues may be a foreshadow of emerging conflicts in other regions of the country.

While we are not being able to control the precipitation, we do believe that agriculture is uniquely positioned to be part of the solution to water issues. From its inception, NRCS has helped farmers and ranchers with on-farm water management. Following are a few examples of ways we can help:

Conservation Technical Assistance

We believe that the best approach is to begin with a proactive conservation plan and then implement it. NRCS field conservationists provide technical assistance to farmers and ranchers to develop voluntary resource conservation plans. Conservation technical assistance does not regulate or compel farmers to accept practices, but instead encourages them by demonstrating the benefits of conservation. In addition, NRCS field staff identify opportunities for other forms of USDA incentives-based conservation assistance, including cost-share, conservation easements, and other opportunities.

Technology and Resource Assessment

NRCS also offers valuable resource information that assists with resource planning such as; Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasts -- The purpose of this program is to provide Western States and Alaska with information on the seasonal availability of water from melting snowpacks. NRCS field staff and partners collect data on depth and water

equivalent of the snowpack at more than 1,200 manually read mountain sites. The automated snow telemetry (SNOTEL) provides daily and hourly data from additional 650 locations. The NRCS Water and Climate Center provides weekly and monthly predictions of the resultant stream flows via web services. These forecasts are used by individuals, Tribes, organizations, and State and Federal agencies to make decisions relating to agricultural production, fish and wildlife management, municipal and industrial water supply, urban development, flood control, recreation, power generation, and water quality management.

The National Cooperative Soil Survey is a partnership effort to inventory the Nation's soil resources. The survey produces comprehensive soil maps, descriptions and interpretations. Land users employ this data to make resource decisions on their farms and ranches based upon water availability. Soils, especially high quality soils, resist degradation from drought and flooding, to quickly recover to agricultural productivity. We also conduct the National Resources Inventory. Through this effort, NRCS gauges the condition of natural resources at 800,000 sampling sites, and is able to provide analysis of the resource trends and impacts.

The Conservation Plant Materials Program identifies and distributes millions of native plants to address natural resource problems. As part of this effort, NRCS evaluates the drought-tolerance of plants, and works to develop new vegetation that can assist farmers and ranchers who face water supply shortages.

Program Assistance

NRCS also offers an array of opportunities to farmers and ranchers facing water-related concerns. Included in these, are the following programs:

Environmental Quality Incentives Program

This program provides technical, educational, and financial assistance to farmers and ranchers in high-priority regions for protecting soil, water, and related natural resources. Water conservation is one of the resource concerns brought forth from the locally led process that sets priorities for this assistance.

Wetland Reserve Program

This program provides long-term drought prevention by protecting the swamps and marshes that conserve water and water-loving plants and animals. Landowners establish 30-year or permanent conservation easements or sign restoration cost-share agreements. Wetland restoration provides many water conservation benefits such as to augment low stream flows and provide water critical to wildlife.

Watersheds and Flood Prevention Operations Program (Small Watershed Program)

The Watersheds program engages state and other public agencies (called project sponsors) in water and land treatment projects. These partners enhance flood control, watershed management, water conservation, municipal and industrial water supply, recreation, and fish and wildlife protection. Since 1944, conservation partners have built more than 10,000 flood prevention structures across the country. Many of these structures have provided communities with additional water supplies crucial during droughts.

Emergency Watershed Protection Program

This program is targeted to communities--as opposed to individuals--by relieving imminent hazards to life and property caused by floods, fires, windstorms, droughts and other natural occurrences. The Emergency Watershed Protection program is a recovery program. Other programs solve problems that predated the disasters or prevent future disasters. The Natural Resources Conservation Service provides technical assistance and pays as much as 75 percent of the costs for emergency repairs, such as removing debris from a stream. We also purchase easements from willing landowners on flood prone areas to prevent future crop losses.

There are many challenges facing America's farmers and ranchers on water quality and quantity issues. We believe that incentives and technical support for improved on-farm water management, and sound resource data and assessment, can make a real difference. In 1998, Congress enacted the National Drought Policy Act. The law established an

advisory commission to provide advice and recommendations on the creation of an integrated coordinated Federal policy designed to prepare for and respond to serious drought emergencies. The 15-member commission consisted of farmers, ranchers, and government officials from around the country and was chaired by the Secretary of Agriculture. The commission presented a report to Congress in May 2000 entitled, “Drought in the 21st Century”.

The Commission made several recommendations regarding NRCS including support for technical assistance and funding for voluntary programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. The Commission also recommended expansion of resource inventory and technology capacity of NRCS as well as encouraging accelerated work with tribes, states, counties, and towns to develop and maintain drought preparedness plans.

Congress is currently working toward reshaping agriculture policy for the future through reauthorization of the Farm Bill. Without question, water and agriculture will continue to weigh heavily into these discussions and consideration. One of the central themes is that future policies must square with today’s realities. Without question, the reality that many of our nation’s farmers and ranchers face is an increasingly scarce supplies of water, and increasing pressure and competition for the water. It is difficult enough to be productive and profitable today in agricultural production, and adequate and affordable production inputs such as water are crucial. I would conclude by reiterating that even if we are not able to control the weather, conservation programs can play an important role in helping

provide local people with the tools and assistance to mitigate the effects of water shortages.

I thank the Chairman, and would be happy to respond to any questions that members of the Committee might have.