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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

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee to discuss watershed activities of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), specifically the Small Watershed Program authorized by P.L. 83-566 and P.L. 78-534. The Small Watershed Program has served thousands of communities across the country, improving the natural resource base, preventing floods, and increasing economic development. We at NRCS are proud of what the watershed program has accomplished over the past five decades. In my remarks today, I would like to underscore the importance of the program, and our ongoing work in this area.

The NRCS watershed and flood prevention program represents the first and only national effort that helps local organizations plan and install watershed-based projects on private lands. The program provides site-specific technical expertise and locally-based watershed planning and financial assistance for plan implementation. It provides a process to solve local natural resource problems and avoid unnecessary regulation; empowers local people as decision-makers; builds partnerships; and encourages local and State funding contributions and ownership.

The Small Watershed Program embodies the principles of locally-driven conservation. Local governments and other sponsors initiate projects with the help of NRCS and local conservation districts. Local steering committees develop plans for the projects and help establish objectives and priorities. Also, local sponsors secure necessary land rights, secure federal, state and local permits, pay a share of construction costs, and assume responsibility for maintenance. NRCS assists in every step, but mostly serves as a technical advisor, bringing science and technology, and knowledge about the resource base and ecosystem of the watershed. The process is driven by the community.

It has been estimated that the Small Watershed Program yields annual benefits of \$500 million, but it would be impossible to capture fully what these watershed projects mean to communities across the nation. In many places in rural America, watershed structures really represent the security and viability of the local economy. They protect towns, factories, schools and housing. Farms depend upon them for irrigation; local economies are spurred by fishing and other recreational activities; and the quality of life for local residents is greatly enhanced. As a result, communities have responded to the program. We have a backlog of over \$1.5 billion in requests for financial and technical assistance for projects authorized under P.L. 83-566.

In 1996, NRCS initiated a major effort to review the watershed program to develop a strategy for the future. On April 23, 1998, we released the final report. Some of the actions recommended were:

- Prioritize implementation, based upon net environmental, social, and economic benefits.

- Strengthen technical capacity of NRCS and other program participants through increased coordination, planning, and training.
- Leverage financial resources.

NRCS is now considering ways to facilitate these actions and improve the Small Watershed Program.

Fiscal year 1998 (FY98) funding for P.L. 78-534 and P.L. 83-566 was \$101,036,000; the FY99 funding level is \$99,443,000; and the FY00 request is \$83,423,000. Under the proposed funding levels, nearly every state will receive funds for scheduled phases of their top priority projects. Approximately 60-70 construction/installation elements under the P.L.83-566 program will be funded. One example of a project on the waiting list is the Beaver Brook watershed near Dolgeville, New York. In addition to providing flood prevention for the village of Dolgeville, the project also protects a plant that produces slippers and is an integral part of the local economy. While the project is still in the design phase, it is a top construction priority for FY00.

Aging Watersheds

The funding request for FY00 also includes dedicating \$1 million to educate the public about the condition of the aging infrastructure installed under our watershed programs. Since 1948, NRCS and local sponsors have built over 10,400 small watershed dams in the United States primarily under the authority of P.L. 78-534 and P.L. 83-566.

Many of the structures built since 1948 are now reaching the end of their design life and, unless rehabilitated, may pose significant threats to human health, safety, and to the environment. The deterioration of these structures threatens to adversely affect the

estimated \$8.5 billion infrastructure of flood control, rural water supplies, and economic support established through these projects. In addition, many highways and bridges are designed to meet requirements associated with present downstream flow rates. That is to say, the integrity and viability of much of the nations transportation infrastructure is dependent upon the functions served by many small watershed projects. For businesses and communities dependent upon the structures for water supply, the economic effect of a failure could be devastating.

By the year 2000, approximately 1,200 structures will require significant restoration at an estimated cumulative cost of \$454 million. This is based only upon preliminary surveys and field reviews. The need could be much greater and the number of structures that will reach their design life will grow exponentially in the coming two decades. Because these structures are owned by local sponsors, NRCS is not legally responsible for their repair. However, NRCS does feel it is imperative that we inform communities of these issues now: the safety and stability of the structures, contaminated sediments, safe drinking water supplies, human health and safety, and the responsibility of local sponsors to inspect their watershed projects.

The Small Watershed Program final report also contained the following recommended actions for dealing with the issue of the aging watershed infrastructure:

- Support of state funding initiatives to meet state dam safety requirements and increasing maintenance needs.
- Support comprehensive planning in completed watersheds to address public health and safety needs as well as enhancement of other resources not addressed in the original projects.

Meeting the remedial needs of aging watersheds will be a significant task, as circumstances surrounding many of these projects have changed in recent decades. The

population of many communities has grown, land-use has changed, and environmental laws have been changed. However, continued deterioration of the projects constructed under P.L. 78-534 and P.L. 83-566 will have a major negative effects on economic and living conditions in rural America. Without action to sustain the systems by local sponsors, the magnitude of the problem will increase as the infrastructure continues to age.

I would like to take an opportunity to point out that none of the work we have accomplished, nor the challenges we face can be met without the expertise, hard work and dedication of the NRCS field delivery system, including conservation districts and state agency partners. Aside from work associated with the Small Watershed Program, NRCS provides assistance through its basic service to private landowners that directly relate to and benefit watersheds. Through Watershed Surveys and Planning, NRCS works with local sponsoring organizations to develop plans on watersheds dealing with water quality, flooding, water and land management, and sedimentation problems. These plans then form the basis for installing needed works of improvement. The agency also works cooperatively with State and local governments to develop river basin surveys and floodplain management studies to help identify water and related land resource problems and evaluate sound solutions. For FY00, we have asked Congress to appropriate for Watershed Surveys and Planning \$11.7 million, an increase of \$1.3 million over the FY99 appropriated level.

We have had many significant accomplishments in the Small Watershed Program over the past five decades and many parts of America are better off as a result. But there is still much more to do. We will continue to inform communities about the status and structural integrity of the existing projects. We will continue to work with local communities to recommend the best-planned watershed projects that our science and technology can develop and will continue 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.