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Testimony submitted to the United States House Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on

Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies

**RE: FY15 Budget for USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service Programs**

The Oregon Water Resources Congress (OWRC) strongly supports the FY15 budget for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the new **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)** in the recently passed 2014 Farm Bill. It is crucial that the RCPP has adequate resources to leverage partnerships and tackle the complex natural resources conservation issues facing the nation. OWRC also requests that the Columbia River Basin and Klamath River Basin be considered for inclusion in the Critical Conservation Areas (CCAs). Lastly, we are strongly supportive of coordinated federal agency watershed planning and funding for the Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program.

OWRC was established in 1912 as a trade association to support the protection of water rights and promote the wise stewardship of water resources statewide. OWRC members are local governmental entities, which include irrigation districts, water control districts, drainage districts, water improvement districts, and other agricultural water suppliers that deliver water to roughly 1/3 of all irrigated land in Oregon. These water stewards operate complex water management systems, including water supply reservoirs, canals, pipelines, and hydropower production.

**RCPP Provisions**

OWRC strongly supports the additional 7% on top of the \$100 million that is to be transferred from the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP) and other related conservation programs that are being combined into the RCPP. It is important to note that we are concerned about implications for program expenditures since the April 1<sup>st</sup> deadline

referenced in Section 2401 for any uncommitted funds returning to each covered program has now passed.

Additionally, as the Secretary of Agriculture considers recommendations regarding the new CCAs under the 2014 Farm Bill, OWRC requests that the Columbia Basin and the Klamath Basin be considered for inclusion. Both Basins are facing significant natural resources challenges, span multiple states, and would be excellent candidates to more efficiently promote soil, water and habitat conservation programs on a regional level. The Columbia Basin, which is the fourth largest watershed in the nation, continues to wrestle with implementing recovery efforts under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) while balancing other diverse resource needs. The Klamath Basin, which covers parts of Oregon and California, is also facing a complex set of ESA issues that have been further compounded by a devastating drought that has dire impacts for the both agricultural and environmental resources. NRCS funding and participation are an essential part of the cooperative conservation efforts for addressing the complex ESA needs in both of these basins.

### **RCPP Benefits & Needs**

OWRC strongly supports the new RCPP, which we see as a critical tool for districts and other agricultural water suppliers in developing and implementing water and energy conservation projects in Oregon. In the past AWEP has been highly successful in developing cooperative approaches on a basin-wide scale, and historically, the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) partnerships allowed Federal, State and Local interests to address ESA and Clean Water Act (CWA) issues in watershed basins and sub basins.

We are hopeful the RCPP will continue to allow districts and other agricultural water suppliers to partner with farmers to address regional water quantity and quality issues in local watersheds. It is our belief that water supply issues in Oregon and elsewhere in the nation can be resolved best at the local level, in cooperative partnership efforts that promote conservation with a more aggressive federal funding partnership as defined in RCPP.

Federal support of water conservation activities funded through NRCS programs, including the RCPP, is essential to the conservation of our natural resources and critical to protecting our food, energy and water supply. Financial assistance has diminished in recent years and there is a backlog of unmet need. We worry that a further decline of funding for FY15 will severely impact districts and other agricultural water suppliers. For example, in 2013, Oregon requested \$24.7 million in financial assistance for NRCS funding, but received approximately \$20 million. Because of the large unmet need, we are strongly supportive of providing additional allocations for FY15 to meet state requests that have been unfunded in recent years.

While we recognize that the Administration has increased funding for some NRCS programs, the need for additional financial assistance still far outweighs the budget. NRCS programs are essential to irrigation districts in developing and implementing conservation projects that benefit not only the individual farmers they serve but also the entire watershed and community as a whole. Furthermore, conservation projects also benefit the economy through job creation and ensuring the future viability of American agriculture.

RCPP helps fill a funding void for multi-partner conservation projects and allow farmers to pool together and leverage the dollars invested in the off-farm project with the addition of EQIP on-farm projects. USDA should continue to fund existing AWEP projects within the new RCPP program to finish out existing multiyear projects. It is important that the funding for these

projects not are interrupted and it is equally important to have funding available for new eligible RCPP projects that both benefit the environment and economy.

### **Examples of Successful AWEF Projects in Oregon**

Oregon has had several successful AWEF projects over the past several years, including three from our member districts (described below). Additionally, in Oregon, NRCS is helping develop the Save Water, Save Energy Initiative, a multi-agency cooperative effort to develop a clearinghouse of information on financial incentives and technical expertise to assist districts and their water users in implementing conservation measures. Additional innovative projects like these could be developed and implemented in Oregon if more funding is made available.

- The **Whychus Creek/Three Sisters Irrigation District Collaborative Restoration Project** focuses on irrigation water efficiency with irrigation improvements in the Upper Division of the Three Sisters Irrigation District, which is the project partner. The effort will improve stream flows and water quality for native fish while providing farmers a reliable supply of water. **FY13 Funding: \$180,000; FY12 \$251,300**
- The **Talent Irrigation District Project** works with agricultural producers to install conservation practices that will properly utilize limited surface water resources, improve water quality on flood irrigated land by converting to more efficient irrigation systems, and apply irrigation water management to eliminate irrigation runoff. **FY13 Funding: \$0; FY12 Funding: \$4,470**
- The **Willow Creek Project** helps landowners in the Lower Willow Creek Watershed portion of Malheur County convert to water-saving irrigation systems, reduce irrigation runoff, and improve water quality in Willow Creek and Malheur River. The project partner is the Vale Oregon Irrigation District. **FY13 Funding: \$180,000; FY12 \$251,300**

## **Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program and Watershed Planning Needs**

OWRC also strongly supports the Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program. One of our members, Sutherlin Water Control District (SWCD) has two dams that were built under PL-566. Both dams are reaching 50 years old and while they were built to seismic standards 50 years ago, they are no longer up to par. In 2010, SWCD received \$40,000 (\$20,000 for each dam) for a needs assessment that determined that both dams are high hazard and in immediate need of repair. A more thorough seismic study is needed to determine how to best fix the dams, but it is important to note that even a small earthquake has the potential to severely damage the dams and cause flooding and damage in the surrounding area. A minimum of \$250 million dollars is needed for NRCS to address and repair high priority dams, like the ones in the SWCD.

### **Conclusion**

Our member districts, the farms and other water users they serve, and the communities in which they are located benefit greatly from the NRCS programs described in our testimony. Oregon's agricultural community is actively committed to water conservation programs, but those programs require Federal participation if the agricultural community is to be able to continue its efforts to address Oregon's water supply needs through water conservation. Increasing the budget for NRCS programs is a strategic investment that will pay both environmental and economic dividends to Oregonians and America as a whole. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony for the record on the proposed FY15 budget for the USDA's NRCS Programs.

Sincerely, April Snell, Executive Director

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