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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: FY16 Budget for USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service Programs**

The Oregon Water Resources Congress (OWRC) strongly supports the FY16 budget for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs. It is crucial that the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) has adequate resources and we request a minimum of \$200 million to leverage partnerships and tackle the complex natural resources conservation issues facing the nation. Furthermore, we are strongly supportive of coordinated federal agency watershed planning and request increased funding for the Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program, a minimum of \$250 million.

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 Benefits & Needs**

OWRC strongly supports the RCPP, and while we are encouraged by the request for \$100 million in FY'16 in the President's budget, an increase of \$7 million from 2015 enacted levels, additional funding is needed. The RCPP is a critical tool for districts and other agricultural water suppliers in developing and implementing water and energy conservation projects in Oregon. In the past, the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (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 Endangered Species Act (ESA) and Clean Water Act (CWA) issues in watershed basins and sub basins.

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. For example, in 2014 NRCS received over 600 pre-proposals requesting over 2.8 billion from RCPP and of those, only 115 were selected for \$370 million.

Furthermore, with the numerous new and potential listings under ESA and increased water regulations under the CWA, there is a dire need for additional funding to support conservation nationwide. OWRC urges USDA to restore some of the funding that was cut from the 2014 Farm Bill, specifically, \$373 million for EQIP, reverse the 3 million acre reduction from CSP (which will cause a \$486 million cut over 5 years) and continue to build upon the success of the EQIP, CSP and RCPP programs. By cutting EQIP and CSP, RCPP, which relies on 7% of those programs funding, will be cut by \$60 million over the next 5 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 be 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 AWEP Projects in Oregon**

Oregon has had several successful AWEP 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. Two of our members, Sutherlin Water Control District (SWCD) and Middle Fork Irrigation District (MFID) have dams that were built under PL-566. SWCD and MFID have received funds to begin the long and expensive process of updating their 50 year old dams to today's standards for safety, however; both districts will need continued funding from the Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program to fully update their infrastructure.

SWCD has two dams built under PL-566 and while they were built to seismic standards 50 years ago, they do not meet today's standards for earthquakes. SWCD's dams serve as multi-purpose storage for the community; providing flood control, irrigation water, municipal water and recreation. Additionally, it is important to note that even a small earthquake has the potential to severely damage the dams and cause intensive flooding and damage in the surrounding area. To date, SWCD has received \$310,000 out of a possible \$1.8 million.

MFID is responsible for the management and maintenance of Clear Branch Dam, a PL-566 dam within the Hood River watershed, which provides a clean, dependable water supply and distribution system for the irrigation of pears, apples, cherries and other crops. Rehabilitation of the dam is needed to protect the public from flooding, for access to a clean and dependable water supply, and to maintain agricultural productivity. Additionally Laurance Lake, which is formed by Clear Branch Dam, and its tributaries are the primary spawning and rearing habitat for Hood

River basin bull trout, a threatened species under ESA. Rehabilitation of Clear Branch Dam will improve fish passage connectivity for bull trout and improve water temperature for spawning, rearing and migration.

Once planning and design studies are complete, both MFID and SWCD will know what the costs will be to make the necessary improvements to their dams, which is currently estimated at \$3-6 million for both SWCD dams and \$9.8 million for MFID. In light of the high costs to fix just 3 of the PL-566 dams, a minimum of \$250 million is needed to address and repair high priority dams like the ones here in Oregon.

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 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 on the proposed FY16 budget for the USDA's NRCS Programs.

Sincerely, April Snell, Executive Director

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