

April Snell, Executive Director, Oregon Water Resources Congress

Testimony submitted to the United States House Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on
Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies

March 15, 2016

RE: FY17 Budget for USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service Programs

The Oregon Water Resources Congress (OWRC) strongly supports the FY17 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 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 FY17 in the President's budget, an increase of \$7 million from 2016 enacted levels, additional funding is still 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 February 2016, USDA announced that they received 265 applications requesting nearly \$900 million dollars, which was four times the amount of available funding. They were able to only fund 84 projects.

OWRC would like to thank the Administration for not cutting funding to Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), in accordance with the 2014 Farm Bill. As demonstrated by the huge demand for RCPP funding, programs like EQIP need to remain in light of the need for investment in conservation projects. While we applaud the continued existence of EQIP, \$1.65 billion is not enough to keep the program effective. It is essential the EQIP have at least \$2 billion in appropriations funding if Congress would like to see widespread results. 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 efforts nationwide.

While we recognize that the Administration has increased funding for some NRCS programs, the need for additional financial assistance still far outweighs the proposed 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. The effects of drought and climate change combined with ESA and CWA regulation has created a daunting set of circumstances for irrigated agriculture in the West. RCPP and EQIP have become an essential lifeline for farmers to adapt to climate change. It is critical to increase funding for new eligible RCPP projects that benefit the environment and economy and alleviate some of the negative effects of drought and climate change.

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 improves 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 water users to install conservation practices that utilizes limited surface water resources, improves water quality on flood

irrigated land by converting to more efficient irrigation systems, and applies irrigation water management to eliminate 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, reduces irrigation runoff, and improves 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 been authorized to receive funding for planning, design and construction of one of their dams and planning and design on the other. However, SWCD will still need considerable funding dollars to complete construction on the second dam.

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 over \$10 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 robust 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 FY17 budget for the USDA's NRCS Programs.

Sincerely, April Snell, Executive Director,

Contact: aprils@owrc.org; 795 Winter St. NE, Salem, OR 97301